



Puck and Run (T-Town Tornadoes)

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Category: Sport

Description: One Night Together.

No names, no faces, no promises...

Matilda Flowers

I love hockey. My big brother is a hockey player so it's always been part of my life. Ryan's always been my favorite player —until Duke Hammond. Tonight's Halloween party is my chance to get him to notice me. My sister-in-law and her best friend are the only ones who know I'm here. If one night is all I have, I'll savor every moment.

Duke Hammond

No women during the season. I've always followed this rule, but everything changes as soon as I see her at the party. I knew it couldn't be anything other than one night, but days later I can't get her out of my head. If only I knew who she was and where to find her.

Total Pages (Source): 12

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Duke

The mix of voices and music fills my head as I stand against the wall nursing a beer. The masks everyone wears make it hard to tell who among everyone is but the players present. I didn't want to come tonight, but as the captain of the team, I'm expected and Ryan's wife, Paisley made me promise. I'm not pissing off one of the wives. Make one mad, they will all be mad. I don't have a woman of my own and the other guy's wives and girlfriends take care of me. I'm not messing that up.

Looking around the room, I smile at all of the women in their gorgeous costumes. Most of the guys are wearing black or white half-masks and capes, but the ladies have gone all out. There's a lot to admire about being a single man in a room of so many beautiful women.

If only it wasn't hockey season. My number one rule is —don't fuck around during the season and no one has ever tempted me to break this rule.

Then I see her. She's wearing a teal dress that hugs her body perfectly, and her mask, decorated with flowers and feathers on both sides, covers her face while accentuating her gorgeous green eyes. There's something about her —the way she moves, the laughter in her eyes— that draws me in.

I start to make my way over when she turns and our eyes lock. A spark ignited between us, electric and undeniable. She flashes a confident smile and begins to weave through the crowd, never looking away.

“Mind if I join you?” she asks, her voice soft and playful. The volume of the party

causing her to lean close.

“Not at all,” I reply, heart racing. What the fuck is happening here?

“Are you having a good time? You’re kind of hidden over here in the corner.” Her hand floats up my arm as she asks her question, and I can barely think straight.

“I am now that I’ve seen you,” I answer her truthfully. “That dress looks incredible on you.”

She giggles. “Are you always this charming?”

“I think it might be the mask.”

“The mask is working for you,” she smiles, “it adds a hint of danger and mystery.”

“Mystery, huh.” I take a risk and wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her close. “I can’t decide if I want to know your name or keep the mystery alive.”

Tilting her head, a playful smile on her lips, she says, “Right now, I’m more interested in what happens next.”

“I can’t argue with that. You’re definitely the most intriguing mystery here.”

“Intriguing, huh? What makes you say that?”

“It’s not every day you see a fairy princess standing across the room. It’s like you walked out of a fairytale.” The feel of her body against mine is making me lightheaded. I’m not even thinking about what I’m saying.

“Flattery will get you everywhere. If I’m a princess, does that make you my prince

charming?” She laughs softly.

“Maybe,” I answer, knowing that I want to tell her that I am her prince charming. That’s not what this is though. “Are you up for an adventure?”

She rises on her toes, leans close, and whispers in my ear, “Always.”

I’m so fucking hard and there’s no way she can’t feel it. I press against her and swear that I feel her body shiver.

“Then let’s make this night unforgettable. What’s your idea of a perfect adventure?”

She pauses, her eyes sparkling, “Maybe a little mischief, a dash of mystery, and a great kiss under the stars?”

“What if I told you I’m very good at all three?”

“Oh, really?” she smiles up at me.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” I ask her.

“Absolutely. Just remember, no names and no promises.”

“Deal.”

Our eyes lock, and the air is thick with anticipation, I lean down until our lips are just inches apart. Then our lips meet in a soft, tentative kiss.

It’s electrifying, a rush travels through my body. The kiss deepens, the attraction between us undeniable. I pull back, breathless and dazed.

“Do you want to get out of here?” she asks, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Definitely.” I want to explore everything with this woman. Fuck my rules.

We slip through the crowd, hand in hand, toward the exit. Our masks keep us anonymous. Several of my teammates laugh as they watch us walk out. I’m sure I’ll get a ton of shit from the team at practice, but I don’t give a shit.

Stepping outside, the cool night air feels refreshing and the stars twinkle overhead. I turn to my mystery girl and see her eyes glittering up at me.

“Where to?” she asks.

“Follow me,”

A car service was organized to drive everyone to and from the party so that it didn’t matter if anyone drank. We get into the back seat together and I give the driver the name of a close hotel. I would rather take her to my bed, but if we keep this anonymous then I can’t take her home.

She leans against me and our lips meet again. This kiss is sweet and lingering, full of possibilities. In this moment, nothing else matters. It’s just the two of us, lost in the magic of the evening. We might not know each other’s names, but this connection feels undeniable. And for tonight, that is more than enough.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Tilly

The hotel room is dimly lit, its atmosphere a blend of excitement and intrigue. As we step inside, my heart races. The soft glow of a bedside lamp table creates an inviting warmth. Duke walks behind me.

He doesn't know who I am. Beneath all of the banter and mystery, I know exactly who he is —Duke Hammond. The Captain of the T-Town Tornadoes, the same team my big brother plays on. The man I've had a crush on since I was eighteen.

Shivers travel down my spine at the thrill of being alone with him. I wonder how he'd react if he knew I recognized him. Would he still be so open or would he shut down? I know that he has a rule about being with women during the season. My sister-in-law, Paisley, explained it to me and also told me to ignore it.

Paisley and her best friend, Tuesday, are the reason I was brave enough to approach Duke at all. I just moved to town, and they've known about my crush forever. I think part of the reason this year's Halloween party was a masked party. They helped me disguise myself to the point where I walked in front of my big brother, and he didn't recognize me at all. He said hello, but there was no recognition.

"Are you okay, princess?" Duke asks as he shuts the door.

"Of course," I slowly answer, turning around to look into his eyes. The tension in the room is delicious. I feel caught between the reality of my anonymity and knowing his identity. I can admit that this knowledge adds an extra layer of excitement to our encounter. And it doesn't matter because we said no future, which is the only stain on

this perfect night.

A playful smile dances across his lips, “So, what now?”

I grin back, “I don’t know. What do you usually do when you bring someone back to a hotel room?”

The smile slips from his face. “I know this will sound like a line, but I don’t do this. I don’t bring women I just met back to hotel rooms to seduce them.”

“I believe you.” And I do, Paisley told me he doesn’t hook up with women during the season and I’ve never heard about him being a player off the ice.

“Thank you,” he says, leaning down and placing a sweet kiss on my lips. “Come here.” He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the bed.

Duke sits on the bed and pulls me into his lap. His strong thighs feel like stone beneath me. I move a bit to get comfortable and his arms band around my waist. “Princess, you have to stop moving.” I feel him move beneath. I feel powerful.

“What if I don’t want to?” I ask, breathlessly.

He moves closer, his breath mingling with mine. Everything feels electric, my heart is pounding as our lips meet. The kiss is soft, a gentle exploration, but quickly deepens into something more passionate.

I melt into the kiss, my hands running through his hair trying to pull him closer. Duke pushes my dress up on my thighs and turns my body so that I’m now straddling his waist with my thighs. I’m lost in the moment.

His hands roam my body, sending shivers down my spine. I arch into him, craving

more of his touch. The mask suddenly feels stifling, and I'm tempted to rip it off, to reveal myself to him. But I resist, clinging to the anonymity that makes this night so thrilling.

Duke's lips trail down my neck, and I tilt my head back, giving him better access. His touch is intoxicating, and I find myself grinding against him, desperate for more friction.

"God, you're incredible," he murmurs against my skin.

I run my hands down his chest, feeling the hard planes of muscle beneath his shirt. With trembling fingers, I start to unbutton it, revealing more of his toned body.

Duke pulls back slightly, his eyes searching mine. "Are you sure about this?" he asks, his voice husky with desire

I pause, my heart racing. Am I sure? This is everything I've dreamed of for years, but the reality is so much more intense than I imagined. I take a deep breath, stealing my resolve.

"I've never been more sure of anything," I whisper, leaning in to capture his lips again.

That seems to break the last of Duke's hesitation. He stands suddenly, lifting me with him, and I wrap my legs around his waist. In a few quick strides, he has me pressed against the wall, his body flush against mine.

His kisses become more urgent and hungry. I moan softly as his hands roam my body, setting my skin on fire wherever he touches. The thin fabric of my dress feels like too much of a barrier between us.

As if reading my mind, Duke's hands find the zipper of my dress. He pauses, his eyes meeting mine, seeking permission. I nod, breathless with anticipation. Slowly, he pulls the zipper down, the sound filling the quiet room.

The dress pools at my feet, leaving me in just my lingerie. Duke's eyes darken as he takes in the sight of me. "You're beautiful," he murmurs, his voice filled with awe.

I blush beneath my mask, suddenly feeling vulnerable. But Duke's gentle touch and admiring gaze make me feel desired, and cherished. He lifts me again, carrying me to bed and laying me down with surprising tenderness.

Quickly he takes off his suit and moves over me, his muscular body a stark contrast to my softer curves. I reach up, running my hands over his chest, marveling at the strength I feel beneath my fingertips.

I lightly touch his mask, hating that I can't see his whole face. He smiles at me. "Still no faces?"

I shake my head. "No faces." He still wouldn't know who I was, but we'd see each other again at games and family stuff. He won't know it was me he shared this night with, but I will.

He nods and begins kissing his way down my body. He stops at my breasts, first taking one and then the other into his mouth. His tongue tracing circles and then gently flicking my nipples. I've never felt anything so good.

My hips lift of their own volition and I hear a muffled laugh from Duke.

"Be patient, princess."

Duke kisses down my stomach, running that magical tongue around my belly button.

He comes to the edge of my panties and looks up at me. “May I?”

“Please—” I barely stop myself from saying his name.

He slips them down my legs and throws them over his shoulder. “Damn, princess, this is one pretty pussy.”

My body heats and again my body reaches for him. He lowers himself between my legs, spreads my thighs with his wide muscular shoulders, and leans into my body. I feel his breath against me and hear him inhale deeply before there’s a deep moan and his tongue finds my center. I almost come the second I feel his against my clit.

Duke pleasures me with the same intensity that he plays hockey. One hundred percent of his focus is on me.

“Princess, you taste so fucking good. Are you going to come for me?”

“I’m so close.”

He ups his game by inserting one of his long, thick fingers deep inside and I immediately explode. Duke doesn’t leave me until I come down, then he moves back up the bed and pulls me over on his body.

I can feel his cock hard against my stomach and I need him inside of me. He reaches behind me and I hear the crinkle of a wrapper.

“I had one in my wallet,” he says as I watch him put the condom on.

“Thank God,” I whisper.

He laughs, thrusts into me and I forget everything. The rhythm is hard and fast and

feels so good.

“Fuck, princess.”

“I know.”

“Gonna come...” he groans. “You ready?”

I feel his thumb on my clit and my orgasm hits, I bite down on his shoulder so that I don't scream out his name. My mask rises off my face, but I don't care. I want him to see how I am. I want this man again and again.

He comes with a shout and falls over me. Leaning on his elbows to make sure he doesn't put his weight on me. I wouldn't mind if he did.

“Um, my mask has come up. I'm gonna go to the bathroom and fix it. Promise you won't look?” He says in an odd voice and my heart plummets.

“Okay,” I answer in a voice I don't recognize. It's been a minute since we experienced something I thought was amazing and he's worried about me seeing who he is. He was inside my body. I have to get out of here.

I hear from behind the bathroom door, “There's a bathrobe in the closet if you want to put something on. Maybe we could get something to eat.”

I stand up and take the mask the rest of the way off. My hair still has a few feathers and flowers, but I just need to leave. I put my dress back on and pull the robe on over it. I don't have my phone, but I can use one downstairs.

I grab my shoes and as quietly as I can I leave the room, leaving my mask behind. I knew what was happening when I left with him. This is what I wanted. One night and

I need to be a fucking adult and live with the consequences.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Duke

Sitting on the edge of the bench in the locker room, still in my gear, the smell of sweat and ice clinging to me like a second skin. Sounds of laughter echo around, but I can't stop thinking about her. Her laugh echoes in my ears, bright and irresistible, and her eyes sparkled behind her mask.

We shared only a few hours of passion. We made a promise: No strings attached. It was supposed to be a one-time thing, something to savor without the complications of emotions. But, one week later, I'm still thinking about her.

"Hammer!" Ryan's voice cuts through the haze. He's leaning against my locker, arms crossed, a smirk dancing on his lips. "You gonna play today or just skate around?"

I roll my eyes, but he's not wrong. My mind has been somewhere else since the night of the party.

"He's daydreaming about his masked girl again." Simon chimes in, joining Ryan.

I glare at the two of them. They seem not to remember how they acted when they were falling in love with their wives —not that I'm falling in love with anyone.

"You need to focus on practice. We have a big game coming up, and we need you sharp."

I nod, trying to push down the emotions just thinking about her evokes. "I know. I'll get it together."

I try, I do, but practice sucks. I'm missing passes, fumbling the fucking puck, and can hear my teammates' laughing at me as I make mistake after mistake. What the fuck did this woman do to me?

After practice, I'm back in the locker room, with my mind reeling. I have to get it together. I'm looking for something in my bag and the mask pops out.

"Still hanging on to that thing, huh?" Simon calls out, smirking as he catches sight of the mask.

"Carrying it around can't be helping your focus, dumbass," Ryan adds with a chuckle.

"You need to let it go. There are plenty of other girls out there. Let's go out and have some fun. We can head to O'Connell's and you can meet someone else." Spike suggests.

"Or drink your problems away." Adds Ryan.

Laughing, I finish packing up my stuff and leave my teammates behind. I don't want to forget her. I want to understand what it was that made that night feel so special and why I can't get her out of my mind. Is it because she left me? Is this just an ego thing?

The guys are right about one thing. I need to get my shit together and focus on the game. This is the reason for my fucking rule. I've never focused on anything other than hockey. It's why I have the career I have.

Determined to let this go, I grab the mask and take it into my office. I take a picture and send it to our team chat.

HAMMER : Can you ask your wives and girlfriends if they know who this mask belongs to? If they don't, I'm throwing it away and letting this go. I can't do this anymore.

I walk away from the mask and head to my home gym. The last week feels like an out-of-body experience. The guys have made sure to pick up the slack at practices so I haven't been reamed out by Coach, but it's just a matter of time if I don't get my shit together.

I've been running on the treadmill for fifty minutes when I hear my phone ping with an incoming text. I run the last ten minutes with anticipation running through my veins.

When I check my phone the text isn't from the team chat. It's a new group chat I've been added to with Ryan, Simon, and their wives, Paisley and Tuesday.

PAISLEY : Do NOT get rid of that mask!!

TUESDAY : Do you know how much that thing cost? That mask was handmade.

SIMON : How do you know that? You better not have been wearing that mask.

TUESDAY : Simon, you moron, we were together at the party.

RYAN : Yeah, you fucked in my guest room.

PAISLEY : There was no reason to share that with the group, HG.

RYAN : They know what they did.

SIMON : So, how do you know so much about the mask? I've been bitching about

Duke and his shit playing all week because of that mask and this woman. If you know who she is, tell the man so he can start playing like an actual professional again.

DUKE : As much as I enjoy your wives calling you out, if someone knows who was wearing this mask that night, please tell me.

PAISLEY : We can't.

RYAN : What?

TUESDAY : We promised.

I take a deep breath. I cannot yell at the wives of two of my closest friends. Can I?

DUKE : Can you let her know that I want to know who she is? You can tell her who I am. I want her to know.

RYAN : Do you honestly think that she doesn't know?

PAISLEY : We'll talk to her and let you know what she says. Goodnight.

Could she have possibly known who I am? I knew who all of the guys were, but we spent all of our time together. If she was a fan or someone in the hockey world she may have been able to figure it out easily. That leads me down another rabbit hole of who she could be.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Tilly

I'm in my tiny kitchen, nursing a cup of coffee and trying to shake off the remnants of sleep when my phone rings. The screen lights up with Paisley's sweet face. I answer with a sleepy smile.

"Tilly! You'll never guess what happened last night," she says, her excitement palpable through the phone.

"What?" I ask, my curiosity piqued.

"Remember that talk, dark, and handsome man you left after banging senseless the other night? Leaving the very expensive mask I ordered for you behind?"

My heart starts pounding. "Yeah...Why?"

"Well, Duke's been asking about you. He's been moping around like a love-sick puppy according to Ryan. His focus is shot and he keeps saying there was something special between the two of you."

"Special? We made a promise there wouldn't be anything more." My mind races, trying to process this unexpected development. I hadn't thought he'd be thinking about me at all.

"What do you want to do?" Paisley asks, her tone shifting gently to something more serious.

“I...I don’t know. I didn’t expect this,” I admit.

“Honestly? I think you should see him. I could see the fireworks going off between you two from across the room.”

“You think so? What if he sees me and doesn’t recognize me? What if he does and loses all interest?” My heart races at the thought.

“It’s been a week and he’s still thinking about you,” she says, her voice firm and encouraging. “You should come to the game tomorrow night with Tuesday and me. I know you were going to come up with an excuse not to go, but you can just be near Duke and see what happens.”

“What about Ryan? He’s not going to be happy when he finds out I’m the mystery girl.”

“Don’t let worry about Ryan dictate your happiness. It’s about what you want,” Paisley gently reminds me. “If you’re feeling a spark between the two of you, you owe it to yourself to explore it. Plus, I’ve known Duke for a while now. He’s strictly a hockey player first and the fact you have him so rattled is going to be fun for me to watch.”

“So happy to provide you some entertainment,” I tell her wryly.

I try to imagine what it would be like for him to just instantly know that I’m his mystery woman the second he sees me. It would be like the second act of a fairy tale – like when the prince finally slides the shoe on Cinderella’s foot.

“But seriously, what’s Ryan going to think about all of this? You might have to work a little of your wifely magic to distract him for me.”

“I will do whatever is necessary so you can get your man,” Paisley laughs. “But, Ryan will get over it. He wants you to be happy and he knows Duke is a good guy.”

I’m not as confident as her that it would be easy to convince my brother not to punch Duke in the face, but Duke has to want to date me in the first place for any of this to matter.

With a mix of excitement and apprehension, I agree. “Okay, let’s do it. I’ll come to the game.”

The rest of the week passes in a blur. I try to focus on work and getting through each day, but thoughts of Duke creep in at the most inappropriate times. I just started a new job teaching high school math and teenage boys are terrible if they catch you not paying attention.

Finally, game day arrives. I wear a blue Tornadoes jersey that’s worn and comfortable. It has my brother’s name on the back and I have a quick daydream that maybe someday I’ll be wearing Duke’s last name across my back.

When Paisley picks me up, she and Tuesday are buzzing with energy, and I can’t help but get swept up in their enthusiasm.

As we make our way to the arena, my nerves spike. What if he doesn’t notice me? What if the connection I feel is one-sided? I know he’s been thinking about his mystery girl, but what if it’s just the idea he can’t stop thinking about, not me?

We enter the arena, the comforting sounds of cheering fans and the smell of popcorn and hot dogs engulfing me. I catch sight of the players warming up on the ice, and my breath hitches as I search for Duke.

“There he is!” Paisley shouts, pointing toward the ice.

And there he is, skating effortlessly, his strong frame gliding across the rink. He's so confident and focused. My heart races as I watch him and remember what it felt like when all that focus was on me.

Paisley, Tuesday and I cheer as the players take the ice. My focus is completely on Duke as he takes command of the ice. The team is playing like a well-oiled machine. Every time Duke's stick touches the puck I feel a rush of adrenaline. He's fascinating on the ice, a whirlwind of skill and determination.

As the game nears its end, the score is tight, and the tension in the air is palpable. The Tornados are playing hard, and I can see the players' intensity and focus as they push forward. Growing up in a hockey family, I'm used to this kind of nail-biting game, but this one feels different.

Then, it happens, Duke steals the puck, weaving through their defenders with ease. My heart races as he approaches the goal. Time seems to slow as he takes the shot, the puck soars past the goalie and into the net. The whistle blows and the game is over.

The whole arena erupts and I jump to my feet, joining in celebration. My heart swells with excitement and pride for the whole team. I see my big brother waving toward us, smiling at his wife. Simon is waving at Paisley and she blows him a kiss. I wave at both of them, but then I feel the heat of his glance. Our eyes lock and time freezes, the noise around me fading to a distant hum.

Instantly, I feel a spark —a recognition of the connection we shared the night of the party. It's electric, and I can see the surprise in his eyes as he processes my presence. He looks confused. But as quick as the moment began, he's swept away by his teammates, caught up in the euphoria of his goal and their win.

"Let's go down to the tunnel!" Paisley exclaims, tugging at my arm. "We can

congratulate the team.”

As we make our way to the lower level, my pulse quickens. Will he remember? I take a deep breath, trying to calm the whirlwind of emotions stirring inside me.

This is the first time I’ve been to a game here at their hometown arena. I’ve been to away games but always left before the end because of school. I scan the crowd, my heart pounding, and then our eyes meet again.

Duke’s gaze locks onto mine, and I feel the world around us fade away. He breaks into a grin, that same smile that’s captivated me from afar for years. He begins to make his way toward me, but suddenly I can’t do this. I turn and run.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Duke

“What the fuck!” I yell out, causing several of the reporters hovering around to put their cameras on me.

“Hammond!” Coach yells.

We just won and I should be riding high, basking in all of the post-game adoration, but all I can think about is her —my princess.

When our eyes met, everything else faded away. For that moment, it was just the two of us, a world apart from the chaos swirling around us. But the moment slipped away as quickly as it came and now she’s gone.

“Dude, great game!” Ryan slaps my back, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, thanks,” I mumble, looking for her, even though I know she’s gone. I feel a pang of disappointment mixed with urgency. I need to find her.

“Hey, you good?” Ryan raises an eyebrow, noticing my distraction.

“Just...looking for someone,” I reply, yelling over the crowd.

I hear him ask who, but I’m already walking away. I’m done. I know I’ll find her again, but right now I just need to be away from all of these happy people celebrating.

I rush through my shower, the hot water washing away the sweat and the noise from

the game but not the thought of seeing her. I dress quickly, pulling on a Tornadoes hoodie and jeans. My princess had been wearing our team jersey and she looked fucking amazing. I can't wait to see her in one with my number and name on the back.

"We've got press," one of the guys reminds me, but it barely registers. A fine doesn't matter right now. I need to get out of here.

Once I'm out of the locker room, I head toward the player's lot. My mind spins with questions. Who is she? Why did she run away? Did I scare her?

I approach the parking lot, slowing down and scanning the area. I feel the hair on the back of my neck rise. Then, I see her. She stands by the edge of the lot, her figure outlined against the fading twilight. Is she waiting for me?

I move closer, my heart thundering in my chest, each step feeling like an eternity. I finally reach her, the world around us fading into a quiet stillness.

She takes a tentative step forward and I pull her into me. Our lips meet in a sudden rush of heat and instant connection. It's electric, and for a moment, I forget everything else —my worries, the game, even the fact that I still have no idea who she is.

Her lips are so soft, and the kiss reignites the spark that's been smoldering since the night of the party. I pull back slightly, searching her eyes. "Princess..."

She's looking down, a mix of emotions flickering across her face.

"What's wrong?" I ask, concern creeping into my voice.

"I shouldn't have run away," she admits, her voice barely about a whisper. "I just—"

“Don’t,” I say, reaching out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I thought you were leaving for good.”

“No, I just panicked. It felt...intense, seeing you again.”

“I know what you mean,” I reply, my heart racing at the thought. “I’ve been thinking about you since that night. I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Matilda, but everyone calls me Tilly.” She looks up at me, and I can see the vulnerability in her eyes. “I didn’t know if you would recognize me.”

“How could I not?” I ask. “My heart knows you.”

Her gaze softens, and I can feel the tension between us shift. Someone walks up behind us and Tilly takes a step away from me.

“Hammond! What the hell? You need to get back in there and do press. You can’t score the game-winning goal and then skip out,” Ryan comes up behind us yelling.

Ryan looks between us. I’m about to introduce her to my friend, when Tilly says, “Hey, Ryan. I got overheated and was waiting out here. I told Paisley where I was going. I hope you weren’t worried.”

Ryan wraps his arm around my girl and I feel the urge to punch him in the face. “Have you met Duke?”

She slightly shakes her head. I don’t think it’s in answer to Ryan’s question, but to tell me not to give her away. “Hi, I’m Duke.” I hold out my hand to her.

She shakes it and quickly lets go. “Nice to meet you,” she says so quietly is almost impossible to hear.

“This is my little sister, Tilly. She just moved to town.” Ryan squeezes her. “We need to go back in Tilly. Text Paisley and tell her you’re ready to go. Stand under the light over there so she can see you when she comes out. It shouldn’t take her long. I’ll see you guys at home.”

“Ok,” she says with a smile.

There’s so much I want to say, but Ryan walks away and then turns back to make sure I’m following.

“This isn’t over,” I tell her and then I walk away. My princess being Ryan’s little sister might make this situation a little more complicated. She obviously didn’t want him to know we knew each other, but that doesn’t mean she won’t be mine. I just have to make a game plan.

I quickly answer questions in the press room and wait for my turn to give one last interview. I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn to see Tuesday, Simon’s wife, standing there. “Hey, can I talk to you for a second?”

I nod, “What’s up?”

“I know about you and Tilly,” she says her sing-song voice letting me know how much she’s enjoying this. “Paisley and I did a good job with her costume, huh.”

“What?”

“Nevermind. I’m texting you her number. Don’t fuck this up,” Tuesday says with a smile.

“I don’t plan on it.”

“You guys never do,” she sighs, “just don’t hurt her, okay.”

“I promise, Tuesday. I’m not going to hurt her.”

Tuesday looks me over and must believe what I’m saying. She pats me on the shoulder and walks off. I feel like I passed some sort of test. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out to check the message.

TUESDAY : Here’s her contact information. Go get her, Hammer!

TILLY INFO

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Tilly

I stare at my phone, a soft smile stretching across my face as I read Duke's latest message. It's another one of those sweet notes that make my heart flutter—he hopes I've had a great day and misses the sound of my voice. It's the little things. I reply quickly telling him that I miss his smile.

We've been texting back and forth for days. The team's been out of town and we haven't seen each other since that night in the parking lot. There have been lots of hours of video calls and texts between us though. He got home late last night and doesn't have a game or practice today. I've been waiting to see if he'll want to see me.

When he asks me to dinner at his house, I hesitate for barely a moment, excitement dancing through my body. The idea of spending time with him, just the two of us, feels both thrilling and terrifying.

The day passes in a blur of lesson plans and pop quizzes, but the anticipation of tonight keeps me floating. I'm nervous, though. What if it doesn't go well? I shake my head, banishing those thoughts. I grab a light jacket and make my way to my car, trying to focus on the road and not a thousand butterflies flying around my stomach.

As I pull up to his house, I can't help but admire the warm glow spilling out from the windows. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself, and knock lightly on the door. It opens immediately, and there he is, in a fitted black T-shirt that hugs his arms just right, a playful grin spreading across his face.

“Hey, beautiful,” he says, stepping aside to let me in. I blush, feeling a rush of warmth at his words.

“Hi!” I reply, trying to sound casual, but my voice comes out a bit breathless.

Delicious smells waft toward me as I enter. “It smells amazing in here!” I say, peering into the kitchen where I can see a pan sizzling on the stove.

“Steak and salad,” he says, his voice full of pride. “And a little surprise for dessert.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh, What’s that?”

He winks, and my heart skips a beat. “You’ll see.”

We settle into the cozy living room, chatting easily as he pours us each a glass of wine. I can’t but admire how his eyes light up when he talks about hockey —his passion is infectious. I share stories about my students, and how sometimes they surprise me with their brilliance and creativity.

“Teaching high school must be quite the challenge, he says, his tone earnest. “I can barely handle a bunch of guys on the ice.”

“It has its moments,” I reply, taking a sip of the rich red wine. “But honestly, it’s the rewarding moments that make it all worth it. Like when a student finally gets a concept they’ve been struggling with.”

He nods, his expression softening. “I get that. There’s something about knowing you’re helping others that makes you feel like you’re doing something important.”

The conversation flows effortlessly, and soon he disappears into the kitchen to finish dinner. I take the opportunity to look around his living space. It’s warm and inviting,

decorated with photographs of his hockey days and some art that suggests a creative side I'm eager to learn more about.

As I look at the pictures, I imagine him as a kid, dreaming of playing professional hockey and working hard to achieve his goals.

"Dinner's ready!" he calls, and I snap back to the moment. He plates our meals and I can't help but admire his cooking skills.

As we sit down at the table, I feel a flutter of excitement. The food is delicious —rich and flavorful. We clink our glasses together, and I can't help but laugh when he pretends to be a sommelier, describing the wine with exaggerated flair.

"I can't believe you're a math teacher," he says, teasingly. "What's your secret? I can barely add two and two without my phone."

I chuckle, leaning forward, enjoying the moment. "Well, it helps to love what you do. I always tell my students that math isn't just about numbers. It's about problem-solving and critical thinking. It's a skill for life." I lean even closer to him and whisper. "And sometimes your phone is dead and you need to know how to do it without a calculator."

He laughs, "You're amazing, you know that?"

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "Just doing my best."

After dinner, we move to the living room with our wine. I catch a glimpse of a beautiful cake —rich chocolate, gleaming with ganache. It's from my favorite bakery, something I had told Duke about in passing. "That's the surprise?" I ask, my eyes wide with excitement.

“Only the best for you,” he says, standing up to cut us each a slice. As he serves the cake, I can’t help but think how sweet he is. We talk and laugh, the wine lowering our inhibitions, and soon the conversation shifts to deeper topics—including what we hope for the future.

With every passing moment, I feel closer to him. The way he looks at me sends shivers down my spine. After we finish the cake, he moves closer, resting his hand on my thigh. I can hardly breathe.

“I love spending time with you, Tilly,” his voice low and sincere. “Especially without the masks on.”

I look into his beautiful face, a shy smile creeping onto my lips. “I feel the same way, Duke.”

He moves even closer and my heart races. His hand brushes against mine, and the air thickens with unspoken words. I lean in slightly, and he takes that as a cue to close the distance. Our lips meet softly at first, and I melt into the kiss. It’s sweet and tender, a promise of something deeper.

As the kiss deepens, I feel his warmth enveloping me. My hands find their way to his hair, and he wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me closer. It’s intoxicating, everything I’ve wanted and more.

After what feels like an eternity, we pull apart, our foreheads resting together. “Wow,” I whisper, breathless.

“Yesh, he murmurs, brushing a thumb across my cheek. “I’ve been waiting days to do that.”

“I can’t help but laugh softly, my heart soaring. “Same here.”

We share another kiss and it feels like a perfect moment suspended in time. Every touch ignited a fire inside me, and I realize just how much I've come to care about him. Each moment deepens our connection, and I feel myself falling, more and more.

"Tonight has been perfect," I say softly, feeling a sense of contentment wash over me.

"It doesn't have to end. I want you to stay with me, princess." Duke says, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead.

I didn't plan to stay with him tonight, but now I don't want to leave. I don't know what I'll do about Ryan and the connection between him and Duke. We haven't talked about it at all, but for tonight I don't care.

"I'll have to text Paisley, so she doesn't worry," I tell him.

He smiles down at me. "I know. You take care of that while I clean up the kitchen. Then we can go upstairs."

There must be something that crosses my face, because Duke leans down, kissing my forehead. "I know we rushed to the physical side of things at the masked party, but that's not who I am and I know that's not who you are. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do tonight. I just want to hold you in my arms. Sometimes I still feel like maybe it's just a dream that I found you again."

I wrap my arms tightly around his waist and place my head against his chest. "You can't say such sweet things, Duke, between that and the chocolate cake I may never leave."

"That's the plan, princess. That's the plan."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Duke

I wake slowly, the soft morning light filtering through the curtains, painting warm patterns on the wall. I feel her beside me, Tilly's warm body curled against mine. A rush of affection floods through me, and I can't help but smile.

Last night was a blur of laughter and kisses, the kind of night that leaves you feeling breathless. As I shift slightly, Tilly stirs, her eyelashes fluttering before she opens her eyes, blinking in the soft light. She looks beautiful, her hair tousled and a faint blush still lingering from our kisses.

"Good morning," I whisper, brushing a lock of hair away from her face.

"Good morning," she replies, her voice a little hoarse. She smiles shyly, and I can't help but lean in for another quick kiss.

After that, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stretch, feeling the tightness in my muscles from years of playing hockey. "I should make us some breakfast," I say, glancing back at her still lying in my bed. It's damn hard to leave her there.

"Are you sure? I don't want to be any trouble," she responds, propping herself up on one elbow.

"You're never trouble," I assure her.

I head to the kitchen and pull out eggs, cheese, and some veggies. I'll make us omelets.

I'm almost finished when I hear her footsteps behind me. I turn and she's leaning against the doorway, watching me with that sweet smile. "What are you making?" she asks, clearly amused.

"Veggie omelets," I reply, sliding the second one onto a plate. "I hope you're hungry."

"Starving!" she laughs, and my heart does a little flip. There's nothing this woman does that doesn't make me happy.

We sit at the table and start eating our breakfast. The conversation flows easily, punctuated by comfortable silences. We talk about everything and nothing —our plans for the day, the things that made us laugh last night, and what a great time we had last night.

"So, what's on your agenda today?" I ask as I push my empty plate away.

Tilly takes a sip of her coffee, her eyes thoughtful. "Well, I was planning on going to the game with Paisley," she says, her tone casual, but I can feel the weight of her words.

"That's great." Knowing she's in the stands will be a new experience, but I feel energized by the idea. "Want to wear my jersey at the game?" I suggest in a playful tone.

Tilly shakes her head, suddenly looking a little sad, "I can't do that, Duke. I'd never hear the end of it from Ryan."

"I get that, I guess," I say, a little deflated. "But, we're a couple now, right?"

The question hangs in the air, and I see her hesitate. "I want to be, but I'm not ready

to tell him yet. I don't want to cause problems for either of you."

I try to mask my disappointment. I don't want to pressure her, but I hate the idea of hiding the feelings I have for her. "I understand and for now I'll go along with it. I don't want to hide who we are to each other. You are important to me."

"I know. You're important to me," she replies earnestly. I just need a little more time. Let's enjoy what we have right now, okay?"

"Alright," I say, forcing a smile. "But don't think I'm giving up on this. I'm going to wear you down."

She giggles, and the sound brightens my mood. "I can't wait," she teases.

After breakfast, I head to the bathroom to get ready for practice. As I brush my teeth, I catch a glimpse of Tilly through the mirror, sitting on the edge of the bed, her gaze thoughtful. I finish getting ready and find her dressed in one of my T-shirts and her jeans from the night before.

I have to fight the urge to strip her naked and climb back in bed with her to spend the day wrapped up in our own cocoon. The outside world complicates things, but here we're golden.

She wraps her arms around me and I feel a rush of warmth through my body, "I'll cheer really loud for you today. You're gonna kick ass."

"Thanks, princess. It's gonna be different with my girl there," I say, my voice a little rougher than I intended.

"You're going to do great." She places a sweet kiss on my lips. "And I'll see you after the game."

“Promise?”

She nods and kisses me again. Then I walk her out to her car and help her get in. I know I’m dragging out every second and if I don’t get my ass up to the stadium soon I’ll be late for our pre-game meeting and practice.

“I’ll see you later,” I say as I shut her door and stand watching her as she drives away. My phone buzzes with a text from Simon telling me I have fifteen minutes to be at the arena. He’s always on all of us to be on time. Quickly I head in, grab my bag, and leave for the arena.

* * *

The drive to the rink is filled with a mix of anticipation and nervous energy. I try to focus on the game ahead, but thoughts of Tilly linger in my mind. The way she looked this morning, the of her kisses —it all fuels me.

As I walk into the locker room, my teammates are already buzzing with energy. Ryan glances over at me. “Duke, you seem like you’re in a better mood this morning. What’s up?”

I roll my eyes, laughing it off. “Just had a good night, that’s all,” I say, trying to sound casual.

Simon chimes in, clapping me on the shoulder, “Good for you.” He leans in closer, lowering his voice. “But serious, are you still hung up on that mystery girl?”

I pause, the words catching in my throat. I want to tell them about Tilly —how amazing she is, how she makes me feel —but I can’t betray her trust like that. She doesn’t want her brother to know about us yet. That doesn’t mean I can’t let the guys know a little. “I found her,” I say finally, and their interest piques.

“Dude, who is she?” Ryan asks, leaning in.

I shake my head, a smirk playing on my lips. “Not telling. Some things are just for me to know.”

“Come on,” Simon presses. “You can’t just drop that and leave us hanging!”

“I’m serious, guys,” I say, my tone firm. “It’s not like that. It’s just....complicated.”

They share glances, clearly intrigued, but I can see they’ll let it go for now. I appreciate their concern, but I’m not going to break Tilly’s trust. I don’t want to hide my relationship with Tilly, but I respect her feelings. The balance feels precarious, but I know it’s worth it —she’s worth it.

As my skates hit the ice for a mini before-game practice, I push all thoughts of the world away, focusing on the ice, the puck, and my teammates. Every shot, every pass —everything flows through me with a renewed energy. Tilly’s smile, her laughter, and the taste of her lips are my fuel.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Tilly

The atmosphere inside the T-Town Tornadoes' rink is electric, the kind of energy that pulses through the air and makes your heart race. I'm sitting in the stands with Paisley and Tuesday, the three of us wrapped up in scarves and team jerseys, cheering on the team. The crowd roars as the players hit the ice, and I can't help but feel a thrill of excitement wash over me.

"Look at them go!" Tuesday shouts, her eyes sparkling as she points at the ice. "I love hockey games!"

I laugh, glancing at Paisley, who's bouncing in her seat with enthusiasm. "Me too! I like watching my big brother live out his dream."

"It is pretty amazing, isn't it," Paisley says, pride lacing her voice.

It's funny to see these two so wrapped up in the hockey season. Paisley was almost a hermit before she met my brother and knew nothing about hockey. Tuesday, on the other hand, had actively detested the sport and its players. Now they are both die-hard fans.

Paisley and Ryan are expecting their first baby in January. It's one of the reasons I took the job here. I want to be close when my niece or nephew is born. Paisley has already bought a whole array of baby hockey jerseys and Tornadoes merch with Ryan's number. It's adorable and a little crazy.

When I see how happy they are I can't help but think about Duke. Last night was

incredible —intimate and sweet. Dinner was amazing and I learned so much about him. The memory of his lips on mine, the warmth of his body next to me, sends a shiver down my spine.

“Are you going to tell us about last night or just keep it a secret forever?” Tuesday nudges me playfully, her eyes glinting with curiosity.

I laugh, shaking my head. “I’m not hiding anything!” But I can feel my cheeks flush. “Okay, fine. We had dinner together and it was really nice. He grilled steaks and made a fabulous salad. We shared an incredible red wine and...” I pause for dramatic effect, “he had this amazing chocolate cake from my favorite bakery.”

“No way!” Paisley squeals, leaning forward. “That’s so sweet. Who knew the Hammer was so romantic? So, are you guys together?”

I nod, the weight of the truth sinking in. “I guess so. But I’m not sure what to do about Ryan. I mean, I want to tell him, but...I don’t know if now is the right time.”

“Why not?” Tuesday asks, tilting her head. “You’re a couple. Your brother should know, especially since you’re dating someone he spends a lot of time with. During the season they will spend more time together than you and Duke will.”

“I just...I want to keep it low-key for now. Duke has a lot going on with the season and I don’t want to add any pressure. Plus, I’m not ready for Ryan’s protective big brother routine.” I groan a little at the thought.

“Ryan’s going to find out eventually,” Paisley says gently. “And it’s better if you tell him. You know how he can be.”

“Yeah, but what if it changes everything? What if it gets weird?” I fidget with my scarf, trying to find the right words. “Duke and I are still figuring things out. I just

don't want to complicate anything."

Tuesday chimes in, "You know Ryan will just want to know that you're happy. He's going to want the best for you."

"I know," I say, sighing. "But it's hard. Keeping it hidden feels safer for now like we're in our little bubble. And honestly? I love that bubble."

Paisley nudges me with her shoulder. "You're being a little dramatic. It's not like you're hiding a crime. You're dating a guy. Yeah, it's a guy who happens to play for the team your brother is on, but he's a good guy that your brother respects and likes."

"Still..." I murmur, glancing to the ice where Duke is warming up with the rest of the players. He's so focused, his brows furrowed. I can't help but stare and admire the way he moves so effortlessly. "What if it gets messy?"

"Messy can be good," Tuesday says with a grin. "You just need to embrace it. Life's too short to worry about what-ifs."

"I can't argue with that logic, but the thought of telling Ryan gives me anxiety. "What if he doesn't approve?"

"Then he'll just have to get over it," Paisley says firmly. "You're an adult, Tilly. You can make your own choices. I know you look up to Ryan and want his blessing, but you have to follow your heart."

The players take their positions, and the crowd begins to settle down. My heart races as the puck drops and I cheer along with everyone else, but my thoughts keep drifting back to Duke. I steal glances at him throughout the game, noting how he plays with such intensity, and the way he interacts with his teammates. It's clear he loves what he does.

“Are you even watching the game?” Tuesday teases. “I think you’re more focused on Duke than the puck.”

“I’m multitasking!” I protest, but I can’t suppress my grin.

The first period flies by in a flurry of cheers and shouts. Ryan scores the first goal and the arena erupts in applause. I stand up, clapping wildly, and I catch Ryan’s eye across the ice. He grins, and I feel a sure of pride for my big brother.

“See? Nothing weird about this,” Paisley whispers, nudging me again. I’m going to have a bruise from sitting between her and Tuesday and all their nudging. “Just enjoy the moment.

“Yeah, I guess,” I say, but part of me still feels that nagging uncertainty.

As halftime starts I take a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll think about telling Ryan, but can you two promise to back me up if it gets dicey?”

“Absolutely,” Tuesday says, giving me a thumbs-up.

“Count on us,” Paisley adds, her voice full of encouragement.

The second period begins and the tension in the arena thickens. I try to focus on the game, but my thoughts keep drifting back to Duke and our situation. The chemistry between us is undeniable, but keeping it a secret feels both exhilarating and nerve-racking. I want to shout over the PA that he’s mine, but fear holds me back. I think there’s just a part of me that doesn’t believe this will last. That his attraction is still a hold-over of the mystery from the party and wanting something he didn’t think he could have.

As the game progresses, the Tornadoes take the lead, and I can’t help but cheer

louder. Duke scores a goal, and the crowd goes wild. I jump up, clapping and screaming, my heart racing with pride. He's incredible on the ice.

"Did you see that?" Tuesday shouts, turning to me with wide eyes. "He's amazing!"

"He really is," I agree, watching as Duke skates back to the bench, a grin plastered across his face. Our eyes meet, and for a brief moment, everything else fades away. I feel a connection that runs deep. It's just us —caught in our own world, even if we're surrounded by thousands of fans. It lasts for seconds, but it takes my breath away.

Tuesday and I decide to go get drinks and extra spicy nachos for Paisley. As we stand in line, I overhear some female fans chatting about the game and the players.

"Did you see Hammer's last goal? He's on fire!" One of them exclaims.

"Yeah, I hear he's dating someone. A mystery girl," another replies, a hint of envy in their voice. "I wonder who she is."

"That has to be a rumor. He never hooks up during the season. It's a well-known fact."

My stomach drops. The idea of our relationship being gossip sends a wave of anxiety through me. I look over at Tuesday who seems oblivious to the conversation.

"What if someone finds out?" I whisper, my heart racing.

"Then it's come out," she replies easily, handing me my drink. "You aren't doing anything wrong and you both deserve to be happy."

"Yeah, I guess," I say. "I just don't think I'm ready for that level of attention."

“People pay attention to you for a little bit when it’s new, but look at Paisley and me. We come and go as we please and no one cares. We get snapped when we’re out with the guys or if we’re doing something related to the team, but on our own no one cares much about what we do.”

“That’s true.”

“Just take it one step at a time, Enjoy the game, enjoy Duke, and then figure the rest out as it comes.”

I take a deep breath, trying to center myself. I just want to enjoy the rest of the game and stop obsessing over this.

We settle back into our seats as the game picks up again. Tenson rises as the Tornadoes maintain their lead, but the opposing team is getting more and more aggressive. I watch Duke closely, heart in my throat as he battles for the puck. He’s fierce and focused.

When the final buzzer sounds, the arena erupts in cheers. I jump up, clapping and shouting along with the crowd, feeling a rush of exhilaration.

“Let’s go wait in the family area. It will be a while before they’re done with all the post-game stuff, but I want to stay and see them tonight,” Paisley suggests, practically bouncing in her seat.

“Right behind you!” I say, excitement bubbling within me. As we make our way down to the area where family and friends are allowed to wait for players after the game, my heart races with anticipation. I can’t wait to celebrate their win.

After over an hour of waiting, the players begin trickling in. I spot Ryan first, his face flushed with excitement. I nudge Paisley and she jumps up, running to my brother

and jumping in his arms. They kiss and I have to look away. I'm so happy for my brother and Paisley, but don't need to see them make out.

I lose Tuesday next when Simon comes in the room. She repeats Paisley's run and jump. Their kisses might be considered publicly indecent in some places.

Paisley and Ryan finally pull away from each other and Ryan comes over to me and wraps me in a tight hug.

"Did you see that, Tilly Bug? We crushed it!" he exclaims, his voice full of adrenaline.

"I did, you were amazing," I reply, pulling back to give him a proud smile.

"Thanks, I saw you cheering like a maniac," he laughs, ruffling my hair affectionately, something I could very much do without.

Just then, Duke walks up, his expression brightening when he sees me. He looks so handsome in his after-game suit, his hair still damp from his shower. I bet he smells amazing. "Hey, Tilly," he calls, and my heart flutters at the sound of his voice.

"Hey." I wave, trying to contain my excitement.

"Great game," I add, stepping a little closer to him.

"Thanks, I couldn't have done it without the support of the fans," he grins, and I feel a warmth spread through me.

Ryan looks between us, a glint of suspicion in his eyes. "You two seem to know each other pretty well," he teases, but his tone hints at protectiveness.

“I cheer for the whole team, not just those I’m related to,” I say quickly, my heart racing. The weight of not being honest pressing down on me. “Duke played phenomenally tonight.”

“Thanks, Tilly,” Duke replies, his gaze steady and sincere. I can feel the unspoken connection between us, and for a brief moment, I wonder if I should just tell Ryan everything.

But then I catch sight of Paisley and Tuesday behind Ryan, their expressions encouraging. I can’t shake the uncertainty. “You played create too, big brother,” I say instead.

As the celebration continues, I stand beside Duke, feeling the heat radiating off him as we mingle with the other players. I watch him interact with his teammates, laughter filling the air as they joke about the game.

“Hammer, you were of fire out there. That last goal was epic,” Simon says, slapping Duke on the back.

“Yeah, man. You really brought you’re A-game tonight,” Spike adds, his smile joyous.

I get lost in the excitement as the night goes on. The warmth of Duke’s presence, the camaraderie of the team, and the joy of being surrounded by family and friends momentarily push my worries aside.

I know I have to tell my brother. The longer I hide this from him, the more complicated it will be. Duke leans closer, our shoulders brushing, and I think it may be time to start embracing the beautiful mess that comes with falling in love, no matter how scary it might be.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Duke

Three weeks of hiding our relationship and I'm about to crack. I'm doing this for Tilly though. We sneak around at the arena, she makes up reasons to stay at my house, and I hate every second.

The energy in O'Connell's is electric, a perfect continuation of the adrenaline still coursing through me after the game. I step inside, the noise enveloping me like a warm blanket. The place is packed with fans, friends, and teammates celebrating our victory, and I can't help but feel a rush of excitement. I scan the room, spotting Tilly at the bar, her laughter brightening the dim atmosphere.

She standing next to Ryan and Paisley, her hair catching the light just right, and for a moment my heart stutters. God, she looks incredible. The way she lights up a room makes me want to shout to the world that she's mine. But tonight, it's complicated.

I head toward the bar, making my way through the crowd. Ryan claps me on the back as I approach. "The Hammer actually came out with the team?"

My gaze flicks to Tilly, "Just felt like celebrating more."

"What's that about?" Ryan gestures to Tilly, a teasing smile spreading across his face.

I try to brush it off, but I can feel the tension building in my chest. "What do you mean?"

“You’re hovering like a hawk,” he laughs, glancing back at Tilly as she talks animatedly with Paisley. “Just because she’s young and beautiful doesn’t mean you have to be so protective. She’s an adult, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” I mutter, irritation simmering beneath the surface. I can’t help feeling jealous when I see other guys eyeing her. The way they lean in, trying to get her attention, makes my fists clench.

“Just relax,” Rayan continues, oblivious. “It’s just a celebration. Everyone’s here to have fun.

Tuesday rushes up then and pulls Tilly onto the dance floor. She happily goes and I can’t keep my eyes off her. The girls dance together for several songs and then Simon joins, turning Tuesday to him, leaving Tilly to herself. She doesn’t seem to mind. Her body keeps moving to the rhythm of the music, her eyes closed and an infectious smile on her face. It’s impossible not to watch her.

But then I see one of my teammates, Chase, sidle up to her, flashing a cocky grin. He leans in, saying something that makes her laugh.

My heart races in frustration. The last thing I want is for anyone to get too close to her. I glance back at Ryan, who’s completely unaware of the growing tension.

“Duke, chill out,” he says when he notices my intense stare. “She can handle herself.”

“Yeah, but I don’t like it,” I admit, my voice low.

Paisley rolls her eyes at Ryan, her expression both amused and exasperated. “You are clueless, HG?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks, frowning.

“Nothing,” she replies, smirking. “Just that Duke might care about Tilly more than you realize.”

I appreciate her support, but it only amplifies my frustration. I want to be the one Tilly’s dancing with, not some random teammate who’s trying to impress her.

Fuck this. The music shifts to something slower and I take the opportunity to push through the crowd. As I make my way to Tilly, I see her stepping away from Chase a look of mild annoyance on her face.

“Hey, can I steal you for a second?” I ask, my voice low as I reach her.

“Of course!” she replies, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

I lead her away from the bar, the noise of the celebration fading into the background as we find a quieter corner near the bathrooms. It’s dimly lit, but I can still see her features clearly. She looks perfect, her cheeks flushed from dancing, and I feel an overwhelming urge to kiss her.

“Tilly,” I begin, my heart pounding. “I can’t stand seeing other guys sniffing around you. It’s driving me crazy.”

She raises an eyebrow, a playful smirk on her lips. “You’re jealous, Duke?”

“Maybe,” I admit, stepping closer. The scent of her —sweet and warm— pulls me in. “I just don’t want anyone else touching you. I want everyone to know you’re mine.”

Her expression softens, and the playful teasing fades. “I like that,” she murmurs, a hint of vulnerability in her voice.

Without thinking, I close the distance between us, pressing her against the wall. My

lips find hers, and the kiss ignites something deep within me. It's heated and passionate, a release of all the tension I've been holding back. Her hands slide up to my shoulders, pulling me closer as she melts into me.

I break the kiss, resting my forehead against hers. "I can't keep doing this, Tilly. Hiding us—it's tearing me apart."

Her expression shifts, and I see the panic begin to rise. "What do you mean?"

"I think we need to take a break," I say, my voice heavy. "Just until you're ready to tell Ryan about us."

The words hang in the air like a thick fog, and I can see her processing them. "A break? She repeats, disbelief coloring her tone. "You want to just...stop?"

"It's not that simple. I care about you too much to keep pretending like we're nothing. I want to be with you, but I can't hide anymore."

Tears glisten in her eyes, and my heart sinks further. "Duke, please don't do this," she whispers, her voice trembling.

"I'm sorry, Tilly. I really am. But I can't keep pretending we don't exist in public. I can't be the guy you sneak around with. I want more than that."

Her face crumples, and I can't bear to see the hurt in her eyes. "I thought we were in this together. I thought you understood how hard this is for me."

"I understood in the beginning, but it's been over a month and you've never given me an actual reason why you're afraid to tell Ryan. I don't think he will care as long as you're happy. He loves you. I think you want to keep us a secret because you don't trust in what we have and you don't want people to know when it ends."

She gasps and I know I've found the real truth. She doesn't trust in me or us.

Tilly shakes her head, tears spilling down her cheeks. "You're just going to walk away."

"I have to," I say, feeling like I'm breaking into a million pieces.

The silence stretches between us, thick and suffocating. I can feel the regret seeping in, but I know that I will regret it more if I let this continue for one more day.

"I didn't want to hurt you," she whispers, her voice cracking.

"I know, princess," I say, my throat tight. "But I can't keep doing this. I'll be here when you're ready, but I need to step back until you decide what you want."

As I turn away, the sound of the bar fades behind me. I can't look back, it would break me. I step into the night, the chill wrapping around me like a cloak, a perfect companion to the ice forming around my heart.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

Tilly

The smell of freshly baked cookies fills Ryan and Paisley's house, but it does nothing to lift the heaviness in my heart. I sit on the couch, knees pulled to my chest, staring blankly at the wall. It's been a week since Duke told me we needed a break and the ache of it hasn't subsided. I feel broken like a part of me is missing.

"Hey, you want some cookies?" Paisley's voice pulls me from my thoughts. She walks in, a plate piled high with warm chocolate chip cookies. Her smile is bright, but I can see the concern etched in her features.

"No, thanks," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

She sets the plate down on the coffee table and sits across from me. "You've barely eaten anything for the last week. Talk to me."

"I just...I can't stop thinking about Duke."

Paisley's expression softens, and she leans in closer. "Why were you so determined to keep it a secret?"

I shrug, feeling the tears welling up again. "I don't know. Maybe I didn't trust it. I didn't trust us. When it didn't work I didn't, I didn't want Duke's relationship with Ryan to be damaged."

"Why didn't you trust your relationship?" she presses gently.

I swallow hard, the truth spilling out, “I’ve never seen a long-term relationship work out in my family. Not a single one. The odds just weren’t in our favor.”

Paisley nods, understanding washing over her. “But you and Duke have something special, don’t you? You can’t let fear keep you from being happy.”

“I thought I was protecting myself,” I admit. “But now it feels like I only made things worse.”

Just then, the front door swings open, and Ryan walks in, his energy filling the room. “Hey, ladies, you won’t believe how bad practice was today. Coach called Duke off the ice. I don’t think I’ve ever seen that happen.” He kicks off his shoes and heads toward us.

I freeze at the mention of Duke’s name, my heart racing.

“Hey, Ry,” Paisley says, glancing at me with concern. “Maybe tone it down a bit?”

Ryan looks from her to me, his smile faltering. “What’s wrong, Tilly?”

The tears spill over and I can’t hold back. “I messed up, Ryan. I kept Duke a secret and now he doesn’t want me anymore.”

Ryan’s expression shifts, confusion turning to concern. “What do you mean a secret? Have you and Duke been seeing each other?”

I nod, fresh tears streaming down my face. “It all started at that masked party at Halloween. We, um, hit it off. Then things just kept going. We were together and I didn’t want to tell you because I thought it would be easier.”

“You thought hiding it would be easier?” Ryan asks incredulously. “Tilly, that’s

ridiculous.”

“I know!” I sob, my heart breaking all over again. “But it felt safer. I didn’t want to risk losing you or making things complicated. Duke was always so understanding, but I could tell he wanted to be honest. And now he’s done with me.”

Ryan runs a hand through his hair, the frustration clear on his face. “Duke is a great guy, Tilly. I have no problem with the two of you dating and wouldn’t have if you had been honest with me from the beginning. You need to make this right with him.”

“I don’t know how,” I whisper, feeling lost. “He said he can’t keep hiding. He needs me to be ready to be honest about us.”

“You love him, right?”

I nod, the truth hitting me like a wave. “I do love him. But I don’t want to mess this up again. What if I fail?”

Ryan steps forward, his expression serious. “You won’t know unless you try. You can’t let fear hold you back. Duke deserves to know how you feel.”

I wipe my tears away, taking a deep breath. “But what if he doesn’t want me back?”

He will,” Ryan insists. “You need to talk to him. No more hiding.”

The weight of Ryan’s words settles in my chest. I don’t want to regret not fighting for Duke. He’s worth it. I take a deep breath, determination coursing through me.

“I’ll talk to him,” I say, my voice stronger.

Duke

As I drive around empty streets, trying to clear my head, every thought circles back to her. I miss Tilly like crazy. The memories of our time together flood my mind —the laughter, the kisses, the way she lit up a room. I chose to put distance between us, thinking it would protect us both, but now it feels like I'm suffocating. I've lost something precious, something irreplaceable.

I pull into a small parking lot, leaning back in the driver's seat, and stare out at the darkening sky. The sun is setting, casting a warm glow over everything, but inside I'm cold.

Finally, I head home, the familiar sights of my neighborhood offering little comfort. As I pull into my driveway I notice a figure sitting on my porch. My heart skips a beat when I realize it's Tilly, her sweet face lit by the glow of the light.

I park the car and step out, my heart racing. "Tilly?" I call out, disbelief washing over me. She looks up, and I can see the anxiety etched on her face.

"Hey," she says, her voice barely about a whisper.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, moving closer.

"I wanted to talk," she replies, taking a deep breath.

I can't help but feel a surge of hope mixed with apprehension. "About what?"

“About us,” she says, her eyes locking onto mine. There’s a weight in her gaze, an urgency that sends my heart racing.

I nod, gesturing for her to sit. “Okay, let’s talk.”

She takes a seat on the porch steps, and I follow suit, our knees almost touching. I can see the vulnerability in her expression, and it makes my chest tighten. “I’m sorry for keeping us a secret,” she begins, her voice trembling slightly. “I was scared, Duke. I didn’t trust that it would last and I didn’t want to risk your relationship with Ryan.”

I want to reach out, to hold her and tell her everything will be okay, but I hold back. I need to hear her out.

“I thought that if I kept it from him, I wouldn’t hurt anyone,” she continues, her eyes filling with tears. “But hiding it only made everything worse. I realize now that I don’t want to hide. I love you, Duke. I’ve loved you since the night of the party.”

Her words hit me and for a moment I can’t breathe. “Tilly...” I start, my heart swelling. “I—

“No, let me finish,” she interrupts, determination in her voice. “I’m done hiding. I’m done being scared. I want to be with you, no matter what.”

I can feel a smile breaking through the cloud of hurt that’s been hovering over me. “You mean that?”

“I do,” she insists, her voice steady. “I love you, Duke. I should have trusted that we could make it work. Ryan knows everything. I want the world to know.”

The relief floods through me and I can’t help but pull her into my arms. “I love you too, Till. I’ve missed you every second we’ve been apart. I know I pushed you away,

but it was the hardest fucking thing I've ever done.”

Tears spill down her cheeks, I wipe them away with my thumbs. “I didn’t realize how much I needed you until you weren’t there,” she admits, her voice cracking. “I was so scared of losing you, and now I see that I was just pushing you away.”

I lean in, capturing her lips with mine. It’s a tender kiss filled with promise.

“Let’s go inside,” I say, standing up and offering her my hand.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:24 am

6 months later

Tilly

I wake up with a smile on my face. It could be because of the man wrapped around me still sleeping, it could be because we are on our honeymoon in paradise or it could be because I have a little secret.

I know, I promised no more keeping secrets. This one isn't bad and I'm not keeping it because I'm afraid. I was just keeping it for the right moment. Which will be as soon as my dashing husband opens his eyes.

"Mmm..." Duke moans. "You keep wiggling around and I won't be responsible for my actions, Mrs. Hammond."

"I promise to let you have your way with me in a bit, Mr. Hammond, but I need you to look at something first."

He lifts his head and looks at the screen of my phone. "Why do you have the hockey season calendar out? It's summer, we have a break before we have to think about that again."

"Well, I just want you to be able to tell Coach that there will be a game in January that you might need to leave quickly or miss entirely."

He looking at me like I'm crazy. "Why would I leave a game?"

“Well, I hope that you would pick the birth of your firstborn over hitting a puck,” I answer with a smile.

Duke stares at me for a few seconds before the meaning of my words registers. “We’re having a baby?” His smile is wide and bright.

“Yes, sir.”

His lips attack mine with passion. I knew he would be excited about the baby. I’m so confident in our relationship now. Duke proves to me every day that I’m the most important thing in his world and always be.

“God, I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I say as I put my phone back on the nightstand. I wrap my arms around his neck and wiggle against his body like I was doing when he was waking up.

“I told you what would happen if you kept doing that, princess.”

“Promises, promises.”

Duke’s head falls back with a deep laugh, and then I feel his long cock slide against my opening. I’m already ready for him and when the head of his cock bumps against my clit, I almost come. I widen my legs, giving him more room, and he enters me in one swift thrust.

“Oh, Duke.”

“Feels so good, princess,” Duke says as he increases his tempo.

Soon there aren’t any more words between us, just the sounds of my body accepting

his. I stare into his eyes and see so much love reflected there. It's so hard to think that I almost missed out on this because of fear.

"Are you ready to come?" he grunts.

I nod, unable to form the words, as his thumb begins rubbing tiny circles on my clit. I find my release and yell out his name so loud our neighbors probably heard thanks to the open windows.

A few thrusts later, Duke comes with a yell and falls over me, landing on his forearms.

Soft kisses rain down on my face.

"I love you so much," he says.

I yawn and laugh. "Love you too."

"Did I wear you out?"

I nod and Duke rolls us back over. We are now lying together in the same position we were when I woke up, but it feels like the whole world has changed. Duke puts his hand on my belly and kisses my ear.

"I can't wait to watch our baby grow."

A tear escapes and I laugh. "Me too, Duke."

We drift off to sleep again, Duke's hand cradling our child and the rest of our lives to live happily together in love.