



# Pucks and Pups (Knoxville Bears #5)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Riggs McCoy

The last thing a Scottish man like me is accustomed to is perpetual sunshine. But Clara McDavid is a ray of light with a bright personality and an unstoppable smile who threatens to chase away all the clouds and gloom I prefer to surround myself with. And I need her. To watch my dogs, that is. Just that.

I thought I would be okay with her sleeping in my bed while I was out of town coaching my hockey team to a championship. But one look at her on the camera I forgot I set up, and I know immediately that I want to be right beside her. Forever.

Clara McDavid

I've always had a thing for older guys. And Riggs McCoy ticks every box on a list I didn't even realize I'd written. But he only wants me to dog-sit. Not make myself at home in his house.

Even after watching all four of my older sisters rush the ice for their hockey player lovers, I never thought I'd want the boys' grumpy coach for myself. But being wrong has never felt oh-so right.

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# Page 1

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## CHAPTER 1

Riggs

I swear that my life is a sweet virgin asshole, and the world is a Coke-can-sized cock, ready to ram right into me.

With no lube in sight.

Is it too much to ask for lube?

No, right? It's common fucking decency. But no, the world just wants to ram into me like I'm a porn star.

Rather rude, really.

I don't ask for much; I just want a simple life. I want to coach the Knoxville Bears, and I want to hang out with my dogs in this small little town where it's Christmas every day. I hate that they think Christmas is doable in the hot Tennessee summer, but whatever floats their boats, I guess. I just want to be left alone.

I want to walk my dogs in peace, eat some fried food, and maybe indulge in a little side of pussy here and there. Coach my boys and help them navigate life. Nothing too extravagant. I want to survive the rest of my days in peace. That's not too much to ask, I think. But fate has a different idea. It feels as if fate likes to fuck with me—in every hole imaginable.

Fate tricked me when I was growing up.

I had a good childhood, great parents, and I was happy. I think I ended up on fate's radar when I got drafted. I was so excited to follow in my da's footsteps. To be a great hockey player, but in America instead of Scotland like he did. I had every opportunity to stay in Scotland and play, but I wanted to make it in the NHL. I had the talent, I had the drive, but injuries plagued me. Between concussions, breaking my wrist three times, and a snapped tibia, I found it hard to keep coming back. During my recovery time, I couldn't stay off the ice, and that was when I started coaching. I needed something to do and quickly realized how much I loved molding players into winners. If I couldn't get my own body to do what I wanted, I had eager young bucks able and willing to do what I couldn't.

So maybe fate wasn't too much of a bitch during that.

I mean, it did give me a career in the sport I love, but fuck, if I don't wish it were me out there with the crisp air hitting my face. Sweat freezing to my jersey. The smell of the ice. The feeling of scoring. I miss it, but I do love how I am helping guys achieve their dreams. This may not have been my dream, but it fills my cup to know I am helping someone get to where they want to be.

Maybe I really got on fate's radar when Peppa came into my life. It was cruel to bring Peppa along. For her to show me what love is. To give me that sense of completion. God, how I loved her. More than I loved myself, hockey, and anything else. I worshipped the ground she walked on. I bent over backward to make sure she had everything she wanted and needed. I took care not only of her, but her whole family. I gave my life to her. I was hers, and I thought she was mine. But I wasn't. I was just a means to an end.

Fucking fate. I hate the bitch for sure, but it seems she hates me just as much, and right now is a perfect example of why I'm sure she does. I knew, fucking knew, I

shouldn't have come to the Knoxville Bears Puck and Pups event. I had a feeling I should have just stayed home and hung out with Gretzky and Gordie, but I couldn't once an email from Elliot McDavid came through.

You're the coach of our franchise, one of the most important members of the team. I need you to show your face and bring your dogs. We are in the middle of the play-offs. People are excited to meet you. You better be there. I'll unleash Alex on you.

She's a crazy lass, that Elliot McDavid.

So, I came, as she asked. But now, I'm cursing the McDavid name. I know that's wrong of me when three of the McDavid women are engaged or married to my players. They are good women, smart and sweet. Elliot is a damn good social media marketer, and I enjoy working with her. She does keep Alex Cruz, my goalie and a thorn in my side, on a short leash and doesn't let him bother me much, so it was hard to say no.

Add in the fact that the McDavid sisters are also the granddaughters of my boss, Dan Davenport, whom I respect and enjoy a drink with often. He is very protective of his girls, but there was no keeping them away from the many hockey players who came sniffing around them. He tried, bless, he did. But it didn't work. I heard one of his granddaughters is in Nashville, engaged to a player on the Nashville Assassins. So, really, he has had no luck in keeping them away from any of the players.

What I didn't realize was there was a fifth sister.

I don't know how I didn't put two and two together. All the McDavid sisters favor one another, but when I saw the youngest of the girls in a different setting, I didn't realize she was their sister. She is always off on her own when I'm around, and I assumed she was a friend or a cousin.

Once more, fate tricked me.

“Riggs, have you met my youngest granddaughter, Clara McDavid?”

I can't even hear Dan as he introduces his granddaughter to me. As I said, I've seen her around, and she's caught my eye more than once. I've never approached her because it's obvious she's much younger than my thirty-five. I don't know how old she is, but I know I'm too old. Not that I think she is attracted to me. It's more the fact that the spot in my chest that has been dead for the last fourteen years burns a bit when I see her. It's not beating again or tripping over itself, but it's warming a bit. A lot of a bit.

I've been attracted to women, which is why I end up in bed with them, but my heart has never warmed or even made itself known in the presence of anyone. Until her. I find myself breathless as she looks up at me, her navy-blue eyes shining under her thick, dark lashes. They remind me of the loch that surrounds our little cottage back home. Her lips are curved up in a wide smile, dimples appearing in her cheeks, making her seem even younger. She has the cutest little nose, like a wee fairy. Her dark-brown hair is pulled up in a messy bun, and her lips are glossed to perfection. She wears a pair of black shorts that flare along her toned thighs and a Bears tee that hugs her breasts in a way that leaves me jealous of the fabric touching her. I move my gaze back up to her eyes and find that she's blushing.

Her teeth are pressing into the cushion of her thicker bottom lip, and her eyes darken.

Shit, was I openly checking her out?

I'm a fucking eejit.

I can't stop staring at her lips, and my cock roars to life, pressing hard against the zipper of my jeans, leaving me not only uncomfortable but damn well in pain.

“Riggs?”

“Sorry,” I say quickly, looking down at Gretzky and Gordie. They whine beside me, their tails wagging as they gaze at me, hopeful. They want to greet her dog, who is hiding between her legs. I’ve never been one to be jealous of a dog, but damn, what I’d do to be between her sweet thighs.

Fucking hell, what is wrong with me?

I clear my throat. “It’s nice to meet you, Clara.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” she says, her voice reminding me of a lullaby. Soft and sweet. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. Peepaw said you’ve been having issues with dog care.”

I’m lost in her voice, the way her lips move, and I know I need to get away from her. What she says, though, is true, and I find myself saying, “Yeah, my last dog sitter has moved. I’d bring these two knuckleheads with me, but I wouldn’t be able to be with them the way I want.”

She nods eagerly. “I have a mobile dog care business. I come to your home and take the dogs on a trip to my dog resort out in my mobile dog van for the day, then come back and stay with them at night in your home so they’re comfortable since that’s what Peepaw said you prefer, or they can stay with me at my resort. When I have overnight guests, I stay the night in the resort with them.”

“They don’t do well in resorts, which is why I usually get a dog sitter. They’re spoiled.”

She beams, and fuck me, the way her face lights up has me wanting to preen for her. Drop to my knees. Beg her to never stop smiling. “So is my baby,” she says, rubbing

her pit bull behind the ear. “The best dogs are.” I couldn’t agree more, but I can’t say that. I need to get out of here. I need to get away from her. I cannot hire her. It won’t end well for me.

The last time my heart was beating, it was shattered, and I can’t go through that again. The reason I got Gretzky and Gordie was because their love is unconditional. They love me fully, as I do them. They don’t get distracted by other people or want to leave me. They are loyal; they are mine, and I am theirs. Women are trouble, and I can’t allow myself to get close to this one.

Not only do I want her, but she is way too young for me.

“Well, I think you two are meant to talk,” Dan says, clasp ing me on the shoulder. “I know this is a good fit for the pups.”

Yes, the pups. Not us.

Not that there is an us.

He walks away with an encouraging smile for Clara, but she’s not looking at him. She’s looking at me. With that blinding smile and those navy eyes shining just for me, she says, “I’d love to discuss this more and throw my hat in the ring to take care of your babies.”

My chest warms, and I know I should say no. I know I should run the other direction or let the dogs loose and chase them to get away. Problem is, my boys are trained and won’t run. But also, I don’t want to walk away.

“Aye, lass. Hit me with your hat.”

That was me talking, but I sure as shit didn’t want to say that.

And that's why fate is the ultimate cunt.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:44 am*

### CHAPTER 2

Clara

Each of my sisters has dropped like flies for six-foot, bulky, drop-dead-sexy hockey players. When I say drop, they dropped hard. Each of them fell head over heels in love with their forevers, and I've watched it all go down, beaming with pride and excitement for them. Now, because of my sisters' significant others, I have been getting my fill of gorgeous hockey players. All the same as my sisters' men—tall, yummy, and ready to bust doorframes with their wide shoulders.

But they don't do a thing for me. I thought maybe I just didn't get bitten by the need to be railed by a hockey player, but that's because my sights have been set on the coach.

Riggs McCoy.

Or, as I like to call him behind his back, Zaddy .

If you don't know what a zaddy is, when you Google the word, you'll not only be hit by the definition of a sexually attractive man, especially an older one, who is fashionable or charismatic, but you'll also see a photo of Riggs McCoy.

Coach of the Knoxville Bears, owner of two adorable pitties, and my wet dream on legs.

Good lord almighty, he is stunning. Strong jaw, large shoulders, dark hair that he

always has brushed to the side and shaved perfectly along the side of his head. It's tousled at the top, making me think he's run his fingers through it many times. I want to do the same. I bet his hair smells good too, of bergamot and pepper, like him. He has a dark beard that covers his jaw, but that is neatly trimmed and groomed. He's tall with a fit waist, massive legs, and wide shoulders. His eyes are the darkest brown I've ever seen in my life. They're like two pools of dark chocolate, and man, I want to be covered in his gaze. Badly.

I've been attracted to Riggs McCoy for a while now, and really, how could I not be? He's gorgeous and even has a fan page that objectifies his looks. Yes, I'm on that account daily, and no, I'm not ashamed. I can't help it. There is something about how he always looks like he wants to fight someone and glares at every turn. Even right now, as he looks down at me like I stink, I want him to rail me. I'd gladly drop to my knees for him, just to see if I could ease that furrow in his brow. To turn up those downturned lips and have him grinning at me. He looks as if he gets off on control with how he stands with his shoulders back and even how his dogs sit very prettily and well-behaved. I bet his whole life is totally planned out and he does the same thing daily.

Meanwhile, I don't even know what is happening in ten minutes or even ten years. I'm just living my best life, and my meathead, Darcy, is winding his leash around my legs like he has no sense. He is nothing like who he is named after. There is nothing regal about my pit bull. He is a meathead and sort of dumb, but he's all mine. I love him more than anything. And he loves me just as I am.

A walking dumpster fire of glitter and treats.

Now, if only Coach McCoy looked at me like I have all the treats...instead of like I'm holding a box of sardines. His eyes narrow, and I remember he told me to throw my hat at him.

I'd rather throw my clothes, but I refrain and flash him a wide grin.

"I am the proud owner of Dog's Day Out. I have a route where I go and pick up twenty dogs daily and take them out to the resort to play with their friends. I have over two hundred dogs on my roster, so my days fill up very quickly. But for you, I'd make sure to have a standing opening for your pups. What are their names?"

His face is unmoving as he says, "Gretzky and Gordie."

"Fun! Hi, boys! Aren't you the cutest boys ever! I love pittys, as you can tell, but I haven't seen two lilac-colored ones before. So gorgeous."

No reaction. I mean, the boys are dancing in place, but their dad only looks down at me. Anyone calls my dog pretty, I'm wiggling my ass like he does his tail. I'm a whore for nice words. "I actually got them in Texas."

His voice is so deep, a bit of a brogue to it, and has me squeezing my thighs together. I watch as his eyes travel down my body, zoning in on my thighs, before he whips his gaze back to my eyes.

Oh. My.

I clear my throat, almost choking on my spit before I go on. "So cool! I got Darcy here from the pound. He was a little baby, and I just adore him. Don't I, Darcy? Aren't you Mommy's baby boy?"

Darcy wiggles like a fool, and McCoy's dogs whine. But when he snaps his fingers, both of them quiet down. Both pups sit like two little statues, looking like perfection. I meet his gaze, which leaves me breathless.

Maybe I shouldn't watch his dogs?

I might hump his leg before Darcy can.

I swallow hard and grin even wider at him. “But yeah, you can add on baths, vet care on Thursday when the vet comes in, and even a stay-over if need be. I have two employees who stay at the resort overnight if I’m out dog-sitting, which since you said they don’t do well in resorts, I would be up for doing for you to watch the boys. I’d bring Darcy with me if that’s okay, but I don’t have to. He loves his peepaw and can go stay with him.”

McCoy says nothing as he stares down at me, making me feel self-conscious. I cross my legs at the ankles and wrap Darcy’s leash around my hand as I gaze up at the coach. I’m not sure if he can feel the tension between us, but it’s suffocating me, and whoa, I need to go. I press my lips together and then force myself to smile at him. “So yeah, here is my card.” I open my little card carrier that is attached to Darcy’s leash and hand it over to him, making sure not to touch his hand.

I don’t trust myself one bit.

“Please reach out. I’d love to watch your boys, so you don’t have to worry about them and can focus on the play-offs. We’re all on the same team, right?” He still doesn’t say anything, just nods as he looks down at my card. Unable to be in his presence anymore, I nod. “Okay, so yeah... It was great meeting you. Look forward to hearing from you?—”

I’m mid-step from turning and walking away when he cuts me off. “Is Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice* ?”

I beam up at him. “The one and only. Though, my Darcy isn’t very regal.”

“He needs training.”

My grin falters a bit, but I hold on to it tightly. I can't cuss out the coach of our team. My peepaw will have words, and I don't want McCoy bad-mouthing my business. He's lucky he's who he is, or I'd rip him apart for talking about my baby. "I spoil him a bit, but he is in school. He's only a year old, so he may end up a bit regal one day."

He nods. "He has beautiful coloring."

I preen. "He does. He's my baby."

I watch as his jaw works, his eyes twitching only slightly as he nods. "Were your parents fans of Jane Austen's works?"

I force a smile. I'm not a fan of my parents, but I do appreciate my sisters' and my names. "My mom was. Are you a fan?"

"I am. My mother used to read them to me as a child."

"So did my eldest sister, Louisa. It's how I learned where all our names came from."

"Clara is from Sanditon ?"

I nod eagerly. "Yes, but I'm nothing like her. We only share a name."

"I can tell."

When his lips tip up, my heart explodes in my chest. Well, hell, smack my ass and call me anything you want, because I've never seen a man as hot as this one before me with a little half grin that was designed to make girls like me swoon. It's not even a full smile. Just a little tip of the lips, and I'm in awe of him. I swallow hard, unable to keep myself from beaming up at him.

“Clara! Come on! I need a picture of you and Darcy!” We both look in the direction of my sister Elliot as she holds her belly at the bottom. I can’t believe my sister is pregnant and that I’m going to be an aunt, but I can’t wait. It’s going to be so much fun spoiling that little guy.

“Coming,” I call to her before looking back at McCoy. “I gotta go.”

He holds up my card, his fingers rubbing the smooth surface of the paper. Fingers I wish were on me. Goodness me, I’ve never wanted anyone like I want him. With his voice low, he says, “I’ll be in contact.”

“I hope so,” I say, way lower and more seductively than I intended. “Bye, Coach.”

“Riggs.”

I pause, and then I curve my lips widely at him. “Bye, Riggs.”

His eyes darken, and he knows I’m flirting. My face burns as I turn quickly and head toward my sister. When I look over my shoulder, Riggs is watching me, his brows pulled together and his lips pressed in a tight line, looking every bit like I’m a rock in his shoe. But I know what his smile looks like.

And I will be rewarded with another.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:44 am*

### CHAPTER 3

Riggs

Alex Cruz stays on my last fucking nerve.

He dances on it.

He pokes it.

He drives me up the goddamn wall.

He is the bane of my existence, and if he didn't keep pucks out of the goddamn net, I'd tie his ass to the goal naked and use him for target practice.

Fucking fool.

Ever since he found out he's having a boy, he's been floating across the ice like a goddamn ice skater rather than my winning goalie. I get that he's excited, that he's proud, but apparently, it's impossible to be a goaltender and a future father.

"Aye now, the girls might be looking for another ice dancer for between whistles, but I don't think you'd look good in the skirt."

Alex throws his head back and laughs as he skates to the left, his right leg in the air as he glides, his arms out from his body. "Little do you know, I've got the thighs for a skirt."

I scoff. “You’d know for sure, aye.”

He chuckles a bit more before he does a little turn and starts for me. “I can’t help it. I’m so stoked to be a dad. A boy dad.” He beams, and all I can do is nod. I’m happy for him, but his cards will never be mine. I learned early I’m not meant to have the wife, kids, love. I’m supposed to have Gordie and Gretzky and my hockey team. That’s it. But I have to admit, I am a wee bit jealous of Alex.

Not only is he stupidly in love with Elliot, but he’s breaking generational curses by wanting to be the best dad imaginable. I know he’ll do it. The kid doesn’t back down from a challenge. If he wants it, he gets it, and fuck, if he doesn’t deserve it. He’s a fucking idiot, but he is a good man. I’m proud of him.

“I’m gonna need you to rein it in, Cruz.”

He laughs once more, his eyes dancing with excitement and mischief. “No can do, Coach. Maybe if you put yourself out there and found someone to knock up, you wouldn’t be so hateful.”

I tried to be patient, but I can’t.

I throw a puck at him, getting him right in the padding around his ribs. He laughs once more, skating toward me. “I’m sure there is a rule against abusive coaches.”

“Turn me in, please, then I won’t have to deal with you.”

He leans on the boards. “You don’t mean that.”

“Try me,” I encourage, and he grins.

“For real, Coach, get you someone.”



I give him a dry look and ignore the fact that the ass I wouldn't mind is my boss's granddaughter and probably more than fifteen years younger than me. "I have no issue getting ass, son."

"I said someone, not ass. We all can get ass, but it's different to get someone who will complete you."

I scoff at that. "Alex, I've told you, that ship sailed for me."

He gives me a look. "She wasn't it for you. Your person is out there."

I push his shoulder playfully. "Get your head out of the rainbows and unicorn world you're in, Cruz. Not everyone is lucky like you."

Cruz doesn't like that. "You are. Just put yourself out there."

Once more, the navy-blue-eyed beauty comes to mind, but I quickly shake her free from my thoughts. Her card has been a beacon in my wallet, but I refuse to pull it out. While I do need to hire her, I don't know if I can handle her in my space. The instant attraction I felt when I was toe-to-toe with her was something I am not used to. Yes, I enjoy women. I love fucking and getting off, but it's never been an instant lust like it was with her. I don't understand it.

She feels dangerous to me.

Like she'd turn my life upside down, and instead of feeling bad about it, she'd just grin at me.

I do love her grin, though.

My cock roared to life, swollen and heavy, the moment her eyes met mine. I wanted

to strip her clear of her clothes and devour her. The urge to stuff her mouth with my cock overwhelmed me to the point of having to relieve myself once I got home. I grunted her name as my release covered the floor of the shower. Once I realized what I had done, I told myself I couldn't do that again. Her name is too pure for my mouth. Not only is it wrong to think of that sweet girl while I'm getting myself off, but I could never have her. Not that she'd want me.

But I can't help but feel like she was flirting with me. The low tenor her voice dropped to. Those hooded eyes as she pursed her lips at me. She gave me the vibe she was feeling me, but she was probably just selling her business to me. She's a gorgeous girl, young. She probably didn't realize she was flirting with me.

All these thoughts of taking her and using her in all my deviant ways are my issue. She's a good girl, trying to make a living. Her services are affordable, and the boys liked her just fine. I'm stalling. I need to hire her, but all this is for later. I don't even know why I am wasting my time thinking about it. Oh, I know why. Because fucking Alex Cruz said I need to find someone.

Such a pain in the ass.

"I don't want to put myself out there," I tell him, crossing my arms over my chest. "No one likes having their heart crushed to pieces."

He gives me a look. "It's been years, Coach. Not everyone will do what she did."

Easy to say, but not true at all. The only reason she dealt with my desires was because she wanted something from me. I was there for her, but then I wasn't. Not like how it was when we were younger. I still travel being a coach, and that's what tore my marriage apart. The fact that she couldn't deal with my traveling and not being home with her drove her to another man, even if he had the same job I did. And it's no one's fault but mine. If I had been there for my wife, she never would have stepped

out. Instead, I was chasing my dreams, when the dream I had in my fingertips slipped away.

“Let me worry about me, and you worry about this beautiful family you’re starting, okay?”

Cruz’s eyes burn into mine. “You’re one of my favorite people, Coach,” he admits, his eyes searching mine. “I want you to be happy.”

I can’t hold back my smile. He’s a pain, but I love the kid. I do. His eyes widen since I hardly ever smile. “Be happy for me, aye?”

He doesn’t like that answer, but I’m done with this conversation. I pat his shoulder, nod to him, and then walk down the tunnel to the locker rooms. Once I nod and wish the rest of my boys a good day, I head to my office. It’s boring as all fuck in here, painted a sad gray color with orange accents that were here before I took the job. The only things I’ve added are awards, my old players’ jersey, and a few sticks I broke over the years. I like to be relatable, and having stuff like that seems to work for the guys. Or maybe it’s my approachable face.

Not.

I sit back in my overly cushioned chair and lean to the side to pull my wallet out of my back pocket. I toss it on the desk. It flops open, and there is her bright-pink card. Like her, the card is shiny, along with her logo, but the whole card itself is a glittery pink. Not surprised.

She’s a walking ray of sunshine.

I notice my hand twitching as I reach for the card, and I quickly shake it out, opening and closing my fingers. When I feel confident I can hold her card like a man and not

like a teenager calling a girl for the first time, I reach for the card again. I ignore that my hand is still slightly shaking as I pull it out and throw it on my desk. I take in the details, what she offers, which is all information I already know. I've damn well looked at the card, her site, and her Facebook for the last three days. I'm well-informed. I'm just a scared wee fawn, I guess.

Rolling my eyes at myself, I take out my phone and send her a message since that's what her card requests.

Please text. I don't answer the phone.

At least she's honest, and hey, it's easier for me.

Me: Hey, it's Riggs McCoy. Can we move forward with you keeping the boys on away-game nights?

Her answer comes right away.

Clara McDavid: Hey! Yes, I'm so excited. Can I come by as soon as possible to sit with the boys and learn the layout, what I need to do, and all that good stuff?

She wants to come to my house.

My cock twitches at that.

We'll be in private.

Which doesn't mean a damn thing.

I beg myself to cool down as I type her back.

Me: I'm available after six.

Clara McDavid: Fantastic. I drop my last dog off at six, so send me your addy, and I'll head toward you. I'll have Darcy with me. I hope that's okay.

That damn menace to society. I should see if she'll trade me, watch my dogs and I'll train her wiggly fucker.

Me: That's fine.

I send her my address, and her return text comes almost immediately.

Clara McDavid: I can't wait! You won't regret this!

I reread the text, and even my cock agrees that I probably will regret this.

But I can't help the excitement that courses through me.

Yeah, that can't be good.

### CHAPTER 4

Clara

“Who has you smiling like that?”

I look up at my sister, who is lying back on her elbows on the blanket we have spread out in the grass as the doggies run around the park of my resort. I know my face is bright with a grin from the text exchange with Riggs McCoy, and I’m not even trying to hide it. I’ve been waiting years for him to contact me—okay, it’s been three days, but I don’t know what he was waiting for. He told Peepaw he wanted to call me and hire me at the Pucks and Pups event, so I’ve just been waiting. Not so patiently. I’m not the best at patience, but I truly felt that Riggs and I vibed. He was feeling what I was selling, and he needs me.

Who else can watch his dogs?

No one. That’s why he needs me.

“Coach McCoy. I’ve been waiting for him to get back to me. He needs someone to keep his pitties, and duh, I’m the best.”

She rolls her eyes as Darcy lies across her lap, licking her belly. He’s just as excited as I am about our new nephew. “And you think he’s hot.”

I groan loudly. “So fucking hot!” I squeal, and her laughter is lyrical. “I swear, it’s as if God was up there like, ‘Hm, let me make the finest man alive for Clara and put him

in her path.' Boom, Coach McCoy."

Elliot rolls her eyes, rubbing her belly. "He's almost old enough to be your dad."

I wave her off. "And I have no issue calling him Daddy."

She snorts at that. "I never understood your attraction to older guys. Even when we were growing up, you always flirted with the teenagers, not the boys."

I shrug. "I want someone with experience."

"You're so bad," she says, smacking me with her foot. "You need someone to match your freak."

I beam. "That too. And that's usually older guys who know how to give me what I want."

Elliot's laughter is intoxicating as I grin from ear to ear. "You've always been an old soul too."

For good reason. I had to grow up really fucking quick. Being the baby of five didn't do me any favors. My sisters fled the moment they could from the cult we grew up in, and I don't have the trauma they have. I think it's because I learned from them. No one could touch me if I didn't come out of my room. If I sat way in the back of the church services, so I went unnoticed. If I volunteered for all the girl-only events so none of the guys could catch a whiff of me. I did everything to be a ghost, and it worked for me. I wasn't touched, raped, or forced into marriage. I also think my older sisters hid me from everyone. Did things to get in the way so I could stay in the shadows.

Which is why I feel I owe them everything.

They don't feel the same and only love me, but my heart swells at the thought of them.

No matter the reason, we're free. I have watched each of my sisters fall in love and find their happiness. After being in a situation where all I did was watch them cry or be in pain, I'm about to explode with joy that we're all safe and protected.

"Do you think he's interested in you?" Elliot asks as she rubs Darcy's head absent-mindedly. As much as she says she doesn't like my dog, she's always petting and loving on him. Probably because my good boy is all about protecting his auntie. He growled at Alejandro when he was yelling about a messed-up DoorDash order. It wasn't even directed at Elliot and me, but Darcy crawled over my sister and protected her. He's my sweetest good boy.

I snort. "He looks at me like I'm a rock in his shoe."

She sputters with laughter. "No way!"

"Yes! He's so damn grumpy and put together. I wanted to mess him up, have him break control, and be on the receiving end of the repercussions."

Elliot rolls her eyes before shaking her head. "You are the epitome of a brat."

"Proud of it," I throw back, cupping my face in a girlie way and grinning at her.

I'm met with her laughter as I look around the yard, counting my dogs. I have thirteen today, and while most of them are mutts, I have some purebreds. They are the bougie ones sitting to the side, watching all the cool doggy fun being had. I roll my eyes, but I can't even with them. Instead, I take in how beautiful each dog maze is, how I worked so hard on the fence and the painting along it. I went with a groovy pink-and-orange theme, so everything is bright and eye-catching. I love the sun, the peace sign,



and the dogs. It's perfection in my head.

The dogs can't see it, but it looks great in pictures on social media. It's one of the things I bank on for marketing—it draws people in. Along with the fact that I'm all happy and sunny. People love me. I'm a great time. Well, I don't think Riggs thinks that. I think he thinks I'm annoying, and while I'd be highly efficient at doing this job for him, he'd rather just take the dogs with him. Don't blame him. I'd want to do the same.

I notice Phill, our grounds keeper, making sure the electric fence that keeps bears out is sound, and I remind myself to thank him later. He has been such a huge part of my business. He has been working for my peepaw for as long as I've been living with him, and when Phill offered to help me build the resort, I jumped at the opportunity. He is a man of few words, works to the bone, and doesn't complain. A huge part of my income goes to his salary, and I don't even bat an eye at it. He's worth every penny.

He waves at us, and we wave back with smiles on our faces. When I look at Elliot, she's watching me. "What?" I ask, reaching over to rub her belly. It cracks me up that she thought she could hide this pregnancy from me. I was the first to know. Elliot doesn't gain weight in her stomach, and when I noticed it, I knew she was either bingeing on cheese or she was knocked up. I kept my mouth shut, waiting for her. Especially when I realized she'd stopped taking her anxiety meds. Elliot does things on her own time. No one can rush her or force anything from her. Well, maybe Alex can.

I rub her belly, in awe of the fact that she's growing my nephew. For the longest time, she had a little bit of a pooch, but now, my nephew is showing his presence. It's almost as if he was waiting for his daddy to come back. He hid to help his momma keep him a secret, but now, he wants everyone to know.

Oh, I love him so.

She covers my hands with hers. “Be careful.”

I bring in my brows. “Huh? Am I hurting you?”

Elliot waves me off, rubbing my hands with hers. “No, not that.” My brows furrow more in confusion. “About Coach.”

“What about him?”

“You’re smitten,” she accuses, and I shrug. “And from what Alex says, Coach is dead inside.”

“Dead inside?” I ask, confused. “Why does he say that?”

“He went through a nasty divorce and is jaded.”

“El, be real. I’m not trying to marry him,” I say with a laugh, even though my heart does skip through a little trippy feeling that I don’t really understand. I love that he’s dead inside, that he’s jaded. That means I can breathe life into him. Whoa? Why do I want to breathe life into him? I don’t even know him. Am I really that desperate for some ass? The answer is no, so I don’t know what my mind is doing right now. “I’m just watching his dogs,” I say, more to myself than her.

She sets me with that older sister look that I hate. “I know your smile when you get excited about something, and you’re not excited about those dogs.”

I feign hurt. “I’m always excited for dogs!”

“But you’re more excited for a grumpy, bearded coach who, I hear, hates everyone.

You're too vibrant for someone like him. Don't waste your time."

I can't help the grin that pulls at my lips or how my cheeks fill with color. I lean over, cupping her belly. "My sweet nephew, tell Momma not to worry about me and to worry about you." My nephew kicks me, and I grin up at her. "He agrees."

She scoffs, giving me a pointed look. "You're going to do what you want, but I hope you protect yourself. I've got my hands full."

"Relax," I tell her, holding her gaze. As if I'd burden her with my affairs. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. But Elliot being Elliot, my older and closest sister, she still has that need to protect me.

"I'm not kidding. I'll take him out like I did Coleson."

I snort. "Man, I wish I had been there for that."

She grins. "Eliza was so pissed."

"Right? So funny. But really, sis, it's unnecessary. Nothing will happen."

Though, let Coach Riggs McCoy come on to me. Let me get even an inkling he wants me.

And I'll be fine with the fact that I just lied to my sister.

### CHAPTER 5

#### Riggs

I left the office right away to head home and clean. I'm in no way messy; I was raised by my ma to keep my space clean, and that hasn't changed over the years. Still, I wanted to make sure my place was tip-top for Clara. Since she'll be staying here most nights, I want her to feel safe and at ease. I'm already nervous she won't like it because it's so secluded. I chose my cabin primarily because it's hidden in the deep woods. I'm not saying I don't like people, but I'd rather they not be in my backyard or bringing me shit every day. If I lived in town, that's how it would be. This way, no one knows where I am.

The cabin gives me everything I need. It's only one bedroom with an open floor plan for the kitchen and living room. While it's small, it suits me and my needs. The boys can run through the woods whenever they want, and there are no neighbors to bother me. I had the choice of living in town in an apartment that would be paid for by the Bears, but I wanted to have my space. Since I don't plan on leaving the organization, I wanted a place to call home.

Though, I don't know that it is.

Yes, I live here. Yes, my things are here and my boys love it here, but I still feel as if it's just walls. I don't know what it is. I've decorated with woodsy decor, even hung up a lot of my memorabilia. Photos of Ma and Da from when I was growing up. Even their urns are on the mantel by photos of Gretzky and Gordie. In all senses of the word, the cabin should be my home. But even after two years, it feels like a place I

just sleep in. It doesn't make sense to me, and I try to make myself love being here, but I don't.

And I don't understand it.

I move into the kitchen, collecting things from the fridge to make a little charcuterie board. I throw it together before grabbing a bottle of wine. I've just set out two glasses and opened the wine to let it breathe when I notice Gretzky and Gordie watching me. Their little tails are wagging as their eyes beg for a pepperoni. I glare, and both their ears go back. "Are you supposed to beg?"

Gordie lies down in a submissive way, while Gretzky continues to look up at me with little heart-eyes. I roll my eyes and throw them each a pepperoni. "Rotten dogs." After inhaling the wee piece, Gretzky comes to lay his head against my thigh. I rub his ears, and I look down at him, loving his sweet hazel eyes. I got the boys together—they're brothers from the same litter—but there is something about Gretzky that has my heart. He's a strong boy, smart as a whip, and I feel as if he just knows when I need him to touch me. It's not often, but he's so in tune with me, while Gordie keeps more to himself. Not that I fault him for it. I still love him just as much as I love Gretzky.

My boys.

When Gordie starts to bark, I know Clara is here. I run my hands down my Bears shirt and head toward the door just as the knock comes. At the sound, my heart jumps into my throat. I'm confused by that. Am I nervous? Why would I be nervous? I shake my head free of those thoughts and try to control my breathing as I pull the door open, and my gaze falls on her. If I thought maybe I wouldn't be attracted to her now that I've hired her, I'm nothing but a real fucking fool.

This girl is an angel. A bright smile pulls at her lips, soft dimples appearing on her

cheeks as she gazes up at me. Her hair is up in a messy bun with a little yellow ribbon tied into it. Her navy eyes are shining, full of excitement, and her thick, dark lashes make them seem bigger than they are. She wears a tight yellow tank top that hugs her full breasts and shows a bit of skin above her navel. Her belly button is pierced, a little butterfly dangling over her stomach. She's wearing flowy shorts and some Converse, making her look every bit her age.

Which is way too fucking young for me.

But fuck, if I don't want her.

"Clara." I don't even recognize my voice. It's rough, deep, and yeah, this was a very bad idea.

She beams. "Hey, Riggs." Her attention moves to the boys as they wiggle beside me, wanting her to notice them. "Boys! How are you?" she gushes as she holds out her hand for them. They look at me, and all I have to do is nod before they're on her the way I wish I could be. Gretzky kisses her face as Gordie rolls his massive body into her lap. Meanwhile, Darcy does circles around us, barking and growling.

Damn idiot.

It's pure chaos as the dogs wiggle, bark, and try to attack her.

"Enough, boys. Beds."

My boys stop immediately and go to their beds. Darcy trots after them, and then he's sniffing around their space as Clara looks up at me with doe eyes.

I groan inwardly. Fuck me.

“We were just loving on each other,” she pouts.

I shake my head. “Which is fine, but it got a bit out of hand.”

She shrugs, and I can’t help but love the sight of her on her knees. It’d be better if my cock were stuffed in her mouth, her puffy red lips around my girth, tears streaming down those rosy cheeks before I came hard down her throat.

Aye, you’re a fuckin’ animal.

I swallow hard as she lifts herself from where I’m convinced she belongs and looks up at me. “Well, I love to get out of hand,” she says with a wink. “The louder, the better.”

“I am well aware,” I say under my breath before I wave her in. She hears me, though, her nose wrinkling as she glares at me. “Come on, let me show you around.”

It doesn’t take me long. The cabin isn’t much, and after showing her my room, the bathroom, and then all the dogs’ stuff, we’re done. She listens intently, not saying a word as she takes notes on her phone, except when she asks questions. It’s hard for me to keep focus on what I’m supposed to be telling her when I can’t get enough of the way her brows are pulling in. How her lips purse as she’s deep in thought. She has a bit of a flush along her neck, her cheeks, where she has a smattering of freckles I hadn’t noticed until now. How did I not notice them?

I wonder how many there are?

Before I can start counting like a creeper, we end up in the kitchen, and her eyes light up at the sight of food. “Oh my God, I’m so hungry. Thank you!” She doesn’t hesitate, stuffing an olive and some cheese into her mouth. “Are these blue-cheese olives? My favorite!”

“Mine too,” I say, grabbing one. “Would you like some wine?”

She covers her mouth, her eyes meeting mine as she chews. “Please.”

I pour her half a glass since I don’t want to intoxicate her. The wine is only to bring out the flavor of the food, not to get drunk or anything. I pass her a glass, and she takes it eagerly. “This is a nice spread. Did you make it?”

“I did. I enjoy doing so.”

“Well, I love meat,” she says, taking a piece of salami and popping it into her mouth. I fight back a grin, and her face deepens in color. Then she beams. “That’s what she said, huh?”

I can’t help but grin at that, and her eyes flash with excitement. “I’m glad you said it and not me. I’m not supposed to fall back into my childish ways.”

She waves me off. “Why not. Who says we have to grow up?”

“Society?”

She rolls her eyes. “Fuck society.” Her face is still full of color, and her eyes are blazing with mischief. “Honestly, though, I was going to work for you before you showed me around. You don’t have to wine and dine me.”

She thinks I’m flirting with her? Am I? Fuck me right up the ass. Before I can think much of it, I blurt out, “I didn’t intend to wine or dine you. Just wanted to thank you for your time.”

Her face visibly drops, and her brows pull in. She’s so expressive. Wears her feelings on her sleeve. I bet when she comes, it’s a fucking gift to see.



Get your head out of the gutter, Riggs.

I look away, unable to handle her dismay, as I reach for more food. “And you’re fine staying here with the boys overnight?”

“Yes, if that’s what is best for the boys.” Her voice is firm, to the point. Professional. When I look up, she’s petting Gordie, and of course, he’s looking at her like she’s the queen of treats.

I wouldn’t mind a treat from her.

Yup, I need her out of my space.

“It is,” I bite out, disgusted with myself.

“Great,” she says before reaching for Gretzky. “When do you leave?”

“Monday.”

“Sounds good. Can you have me a key made? I’ll pick up the boys Monday morning along with the key, and we’ll stay here for as long as you’re gone.”

“We fly in Thursday morning.”

“Okay, I’ll take the boys with me that day and drop them off around six.” I nod, hating how matter-of-fact she’s being. “Would you want me to grab them on Friday? Maybe get them on a routine since you’ll be home?”

I pause for a moment, thinking that through. “Can I bring them to the resort on the way to work?”

“Sure. Just call me, and we’ll work it out. If I’m in town, I’ll grab them.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Anything else I need to know?”

“No. I think we covered everything. I’ll change the sheets for you, so you’ll be comfortable. The boys like sleeping in my room, but don’t let them in the bed. They have beds.”

She blinks. “You want me to sleep in your bed?”

I shrug. “If you want, but the boys will go in there at night. I have another bed I can bring in for Darcy. No dogs in my bed.”

Her lips tip up. “Is that, like, a solid rule?”

“Ice solid.”

She eyes me. “Ice can melt.”

I eye her right on back. “No dogs in the bed, Clara.” Her name rolls off my lips in such a way that I wish I were saying it while deep inside her.

I am so fucked.

Her cheeks flush with color as her lips part. Those doe eyes of hers blink twice before she nods. “No dogs in the bed. And thanks. Darcy will love his own bed, but I fully expected to sleep on the couch.”

I shake my head. “No need. My bed is available as long as I’m not in it.”

She jerks a bit, and I'm unsure why. I thought she'd be thankful to sleep in a bed instead of on the couch. Why is she looking at me like I kicked Darcy and told her dogs are dumb? I swallow past the lump in the throat. I have the need to ask what is wrong, but she doesn't give me a chance.

"Cool. I'll see you Monday morning."

She doesn't even spare me a second glance. She gives the boys kisses as Darcy bounces around. She then calls for Darcy, and she's out the door.

And I'm alone.

The emptiness of my cabin closes in on me.

Gordie lets out a whimper, and I take him by the scruff, petting him softly.

"Same, bud."

But I don't elaborate on what I mean or even voice what I'm feeling.

All I know is that the cabin feels dark without the light Clara just brought into it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:44 am*

### CHAPTER 6

Clara

My anger toward Riggs is like blasphemy.

I have no reason to be upset with him.

He wasn't rude and didn't speak out of turn. He was kind, and, while still a bit grumpy, he made me a charcuterie board.

My bed is available as long as I'm not in it.

He may as well have slammed the door in my face.

He made his feelings toward me well-known, and I shouldn't be upset at that. I should be thankful and happy that I can get over my little crush on him. He obviously isn't feeling me, so why should I feel anything for him? Who cares if I love how dark his eyes are and that I can see little flecks of light brown around the rim of his pupils. How even though his sweats were baggy, they still showcased the thickness of his thighs and the roundness of his ass. His Bears tee was tight against his shoulders, and his biceps bulged out of the sleeves.

Riggs McCoy is way out of my league.

But yet, as I sit across from Gavin Hepworth, the backup goalie for my future brother-in-law and my date for the night, I can't help but compare him to Riggs.

Pathetic, I know.

He's the total opposite. Where Riggs is all dark and brooding, Gavin is goofy and light, with blond hair and bright-green eyes. He's tall, but he lacks the muscles to be able to throw me around. To make me feel small and weak in his hands. I want to be owned, not handled with kid gloves. Gavin doesn't have the intense gaze that Riggs has, and most of all, he's missing the Scottish brogue that has me giggling like a schoolgirl.

Yup, Gavin doesn't even give me the urge to scream his name.

Pity.

My sister and her baby daddy don't seem to notice my dismay as they stare into each other's eyes. Alex grins, and Elliot flushes red as he reaches for her, bringing her chair toward him and between his legs as if we aren't in public, but at home. He presses his forehead to hers, and they just grin at each other. When Elliot jumps a bit, she beams even brighter as she grabs his hands to place on her belly.

While I'm completely disgusted by them, I love how much they love each other and that he's feeling his child grow inside her. I wasn't a fan of Elliot hiding her pregnancy the way she did, but it was Austen who thought it'd be better to let her and to play along. I didn't want to forgive her for lying to me, but Alex, he didn't care. He only wanted her and their baby.

Swoon.

I roll my eyes at my inner hopeless romantic and meet Gavin's light gaze. "Sorry, they do this a lot. It's their world. We're just living in it."

He chuckles lightly, and I wonder how it sounds when Riggs laughs.

For the love of God, Clara, get it together.

I exhale as he waves them off. “Try sharing a room attached to theirs.”

I grimace. “God bless, how are you unscathed?”

“Who said I was?” he asks with a wink, and I smile brightly at him. He’s funny. He’s nice. He could be a really good match.

But he’s not Riggs McCoy.

I’ve had crushes, I’ve had infatuations, and while I haven’t been in love, I have gotten over my crushes. So, this shouldn’t be hard for me. I can hook up with Gavin a few times to scratch the itch and then move on once I’m not thinking of Riggs twenty-four seven. But I don’t want to lead Gavin on, and there is a good chance seeing Riggs when I watch the dogs could prolong my crush. If I really wanted to get over Riggs, I should fuck him once to get him out of my system. But that won’t happen if he wants nothing to do with me.

If he wants to keep it professional .

I am too much. Why am I mad he wants to keep things professional? I am a fucking professional! Ugh, but I don’t want to be a professional where he is concerned. I roll my eyes at my inner monologue and notice that Gavin is looking at me expectantly. I blink, and then I feel my face flush. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I was asking how long you’ve been in the dog business?”

I grin widely, hoping it’ll distract him from my daydreaming. “Sorry, my mind is all over the place?—”

Before I can finish, though, a commotion beside us distracts me once more. Alex stands, embracing none other than Riggs McCoy. My whole body is set aflame at the sight of him. He is wearing some jeans and a light orange shirt that hugs his muscles in all the right ways. A black-and-orange Bears ballcap is on his head, hanging low over his eyes, but I can still see those dark depths. God, he is stunning.

I actually feel my lips part as I drink him in, hating that I've been mad at him for the last two days. He stands so confidently, giving my sister a side hug before shaking hands with Gavin. When his eyes land on me, my breath catches in my throat as those eyes move along my face to my neck and then to the rest of me. Does he like the little pink tennis dress I'm wearing? I watch him, hoping for the smallest confirmation, but he doesn't give one. Instead, his eyes meet mine, but I do notice his jaw tightening.

I wonder why.

I plaster a huge smile on my face, hoping it hides how much he is affecting me as I say brightly, "Riggs, funny seeing you here."

He nods. "Clara." He pats Gavin on the back. "I didn't realize you two were dating."

Just as I say, "We're not," Gavin tells him, "This is our first date."

Riggs nods slowly. "That's nice," he says as if it's no concern to him, which it's not, but damn it, I wish it were. I wish he'd get mad, demand no other guy touch me, and then take me home and spank me for my insolence.

Yup, I've been reading too many mafia romances.

"Coach, join us," Alex says, pointing to the chair beside me. "It's better than getting food and heading home, where it'll be cold."

My heart jumps into my throat, wanting to have him stay, but that isn't my place. Plus, he doesn't seem to want to stay. "I like eating at home."

"Sure, but here, the food is warm, and we are good company," Alex says proudly, rubbing Elliot's belly.

"Are you now?" he asks. And is that a playful tone? I know that he and Alex are close, but does that mean that Riggs isn't always so brooding?

"You know it," Alex says, grinning, before he waves down our waitress. "Can you get him a glass of sweet tea? You need a menu, Coach?"

Riggs shakes his head as he lowers himself into the chair beside me. His knee brushes mine, and I take in a deep breath. Of course, he doesn't even notice as he says, "No. I know what I want."

I bet he does. I bet he eats the same thing and never tries anything else.

Unable to keep that in, I say, "Maybe try something new since you're eating at the site?"

Riggs slowly moves his gaze to mine, the brown of his eyes darkening and leaving me breathless. "Are you implying that I only get one thing from here?"

I smile. "I am. Probably steak and potatoes."

Alex scoffs as Gavin chuckles. I feel Elliot's eyes on me, but I ignore her. Meanwhile, Riggs just gazes into my eyes. "And why steak and potatoes? Maybe I like the pasta from here."

I shrug. "Maybe, but pasta isn't good when you get it to go."



He nods. “Which is why I planned on getting it.”

I press my lips together, feeling dumb for saying anything. I just wanted his attention, and, of course, I proved that I’m not worthy of it. When he stands, my eyes widen when he grasps Gavin’s shoulder. “Trade seats with me. It’s you two on a date, not her and me.”

Everyone at the table chuckles. Even I fake a laugh, but the embarrassment that’s flooding me makes me itch all over. I bite into my bottom lip as I reach for my beer, downing most of it as the conversation carries on around me. As I place my glass down, my fingers brush his as he grabs his drink. Our eyes meet for only a millisecond before he looks away at what Alex is saying. My shoulders sag, and I feel his hatred for me deep in my core.

Surely this will be enough to get me over my crush?

### CHAPTER 7

Riggs

I have a toothache from how fucking sweet Clara looks.

She was the reason I came over. I saw her first, the moment I walked into the café. Not Alex, not Elliot, and definitely not Gavin. It was her. All her. My eyes immediately set on her, in all pink, her lips glossed to perfection, her hair half up and half down in curls that frame her stunning face. She has on a little pink tennis dress that should be illegal with how it hugs her breasts, shows her toned shoulders, and I'm sure if she stood, her ass would barely be covered. She's also wearing white socks with high-top pink Converse.

She reminds me of bubble gum that I want nothing more than to savor and then swallow completely.

Fuck me.

I readjust my cock that's more a steel pipe than anything as I lean on the table, trying my hardest not to notice her, look at her, or fall to my knees before her. I've never wanted that. I'm used to women falling for me, but I'd break my knees for a taste of her. To feel her flesh under my mouth, my fingers, and around my cock. The thought has me grimacing as I shake my head. She's too young and probably doesn't know a thing about the deviant things I dream of. Peppa used to tell me all the time that I wanted things she wasn't down for. Sex by itself was good, but it was never satisfying enough for me. Or her, I guess, since she went elsewhere for it.

Great, now I'm thinking of my shitty marriage.

I exhale, and while I don't want to be in their conversation, I can't help but listen to Gavin. He's a good kid, smart, and funny. But surely he knows Clara is out of his league. Seeing them together had my heart racing and my fists clenching. Jealousy so strong eats me alive as I listen to him try to flirt with her. I don't want Clara near him, and I sure as hell don't want him looking at her the way I want to. I chance a glance toward them, and my gaze falls on her. She looks so uncomfortable and not her usual sunshine self. She leans on her hand as Gavin tells her about his family in Florida. Her eyes aren't as shiny as they were when I first got here, and I wonder if it's because of me.

"How about you?"

She sits up then, almost as if she wasn't really listening until now. "Well, I have my peepaw, Dan Davenport, and then my sisters. I'm the youngest of five. Louisa and Austen are in Nashville, Eliza is back and forth between here and Nashville because her husband, Coleson, is rehabbing his leg, and then Elliot is here with me." She throws a loving look at her sister. "Though, with how well Alex is doing, I'm sure they'll be off to a different team before I know it."

Elliot flashes a sad smile as Alex wraps his arms tighter around her. "No matter the distance..."

"...we'll always be with one another," Clara finishes with a small sigh, and my heart clenches at the words they share before looking at each other with such overwhelming love. There is raw protectiveness in Elliot's gaze for her baby sister, while Clara looks at her like she hung the moon and stars above. It's a beautiful sight to see, and I'm in awe of their bond.

Or rather, I'm in awe of Clara.

Her eyes shine like a sky full of stars, and I want to get lost in them. Forming constellations and memorizing everything about her. Her gaze moves to me, and when her eyes widen, I have to look away. It is wrong how much I want her. If I didn't need her to watch my boys, and she weren't my boss's granddaughter, I'd lose myself in her. A smart man would fire her, but I'm proving to be a damn fool. I can do no such thing. Even if I can't have her, I want to watch her from afar. But can I watch her be with another man?

While the answer is flashing like a damn electronic billboard, I ignore it.

Well, I ignore it as best I can.

Thankfully, our food is brought out then, and soon, we're all digging in. It's Gavin who speaks first. "Do you think you'll stay here in Blitz?"

I look up then and find that she has taken a huge bit of her lemon shrimp pasta, the same thing I got. Unable to keep the words at bay, I answer, "I assume so, when she has a very successful business here."

"Yeah, she wouldn't leave what she's built here," Elliot adds. "Coach, she's going to keep your pups while you're gone, right?"

I nod. "Yeah. Hopefully she doesn't spoil them too much."

Elliot snorts. "She will. The only thing Clara knows how to do is shower pups and people with love."

Clara's face flushes as she shrugs, and I love how cute she is when she's embarrassed. When she directs her eyes to mine, I stare into hers and can't help but say, "That's obvious, with how bright she is."

Her face flushes more, the red along her chest and neck begging me for a taste. I shift in my seat again, pulling my gaze from hers as Elliot adds, “Very true. Since she was a baby, she’s been a walking ball of sunshine for us.”

That’s a perfect way to explain her, but I don’t say that or ask Elliot to tell me more. I want to know everything, but I have no right.

She’s not mine.

Beside me, Gavin beams. “She really is.”

I don’t miss how Clara looks away to her food, her blush subsiding as she focuses on the pasta in front of her. Unable to resist, I ask, “It’s good, isn’t it, Clara?”

Her gaze jerks to mine, and a wide smile moves across her face. “So good.”

“It’s my favorite.”

“Mine too. We come here every Saturday.”

I nod. “I order from here twice a week, but I only get the pasta when I eat in.”

Her eyes fill with a sureness. “So, I was right? Steak and potatoes?”

“You were right, and sometimes a burger.”

She scrunches up her face. “The burgers aren’t that great. Have you tried the cod sandwich?”

I furrow my brows. “I haven’t, actually.”

“Try that with the asparagus. You’ll love it.” Her eyes are so damn bright, her smile even brighter, and I can’t stop.

“Are you a fan of asparagus?”

“Huge!” she says with excitement. “I coat them with Parmesan and fry ’em. Chef’s kiss, fantastic!” she gushes, kissing her fingers loudly, and I want to beam back at her.

“I bake them with garlic and Parmesan.”

“Oh, that sounds divine,” she says so animatedly, I’m breathless. We continue our discussion of different ways to cook the vegetable. Our conversation is easy, flowing, and I’m consumed by her. She’s so vibrant—with her hand movements, the flush on her face, and the sparkle in her eyes. We then move on to brussels sprouts and somehow find ourselves discussing how to make golden paste for dogs.

“You’re doing too much!” She laughs, shaking her head, and I can’t help but smirk at her. “I’ll bring you some of mine on Monday. You’re adding too much, and that’s why the boys don’t like it. Dogs have simple tastes. They want meat. I’ll show you how to make it.”

“Fine, but I don’t think your way is right.” Shit, am I teasing her?

She grins. “I know I’m right. I’m the expert.”

I scoff. “Should you really speak this way to your client?”

She waves me off. “You’re not my client right now.”

“No?” I ask, challenging her with my eyes. “Then who am I?”

Her eyes darken, hooding a bit. She pauses, and I swear I see lust in her sweet gaze. It can't be, though. Or could it? "The guy I'm not on a date with."

That has me chuckling, but then I notice I'm the only one laughing. I look around to see that Gavin is gone, and so are Elliot and Alex. I bring in my brows. "Where did everyone go?"

She pulls her gaze from mine and mirrors my expression. "What the hell?" She reaches for her phone, and then her face fills with a blush. "They left. Elliot said they couldn't get a word in edgewise with us."

I mean, we were talking, but surely it wasn't like that. "I didn't even notice."

"Neither did I," she agrees as she sets her phone down. Clara moves her gaze to mine, and I have to fight for my next breath. Fuck, she's gorgeous. I might not be the guy she came here for a date with, but I sure as hell feel like this is a date. She swallows hard, and my cock roars for her attention.

Down, boy.

I lick my lips and exhale. I need to get away from her before I start thinking with my dick and not my brain. "It's getting late."

She draws her lips between her teeth. "It is, and I gotta be up early for my pups." I notice that the check is lying beside her, and I reach for it. She tries to take it, but I wave her off. "What are you doing?"

"Well, since your asshole date left without even covering your bill, I'll make sure it's taken care of. And trust, he'll be doing some extra laps."

Her face flushes as she looks up at me through her lashes. "It's okay. It wasn't really

a date.”

“No?”

“No. I wasn’t interested in him. I only came for the food and because Elliot asked me to.”

Why does that make my heart do a wee jig? “You like food, aye?”

“Ugh, yeah. Food is life.”

I smirk a bit as I nod. “You’re a wee thing for eating the way you do.”

“I work out a lot. So I can eat.”

I nod. “I do the same.”

“I don’t ever see you in the gym at the Bears compound.”

“I usually run the trails by my place.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” she says softly. “I’ve never run on a trail before. Is it fun?”

“Aye, and the dogs love it. I’ll take you out some time. Darcy’s crazy ass would be thrilled.”

She snorts. “Leave my dog alone.”

“He’s a heathen.”

“He’s the goodest boy!”



“Sure, but a heathen.”

She feigns a glare, her cheeks reddening with color. “I will fight you for talking about my boy.”

I snort at that. “A wee thing like you? Bring it.”

Heat crackles around us as we gaze into each other’s eyes. This is dangerous. I press my lips together and look away. “Ya ready?”

“Sure.” Her voice is small, and I don’t dare look at her. Next thing you know, I’ll pick at her just to get her to fight me.

I stand then, and she does the same. We walk to the counter, and I pay before I follow her out to the parking lot. I want to touch her, place my hand on the small of her back, and guide her to my car.

But I refrain.

Barely.

“Thank you for dinner.” She points to the other side of the lot. “My car is over there, so I guess I’ll see you Monday?”

“Of course, and I’ll walk you over.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to. Gotta make sure you’re safe.”

She presses her lips together as she wrings her fingers into a tight knot. I walk beside

her and fight every need to touch her. I can't. I know I won't stop if I do. When we reach her car, I watch her as she unlocks her door and then climbs in. As I expected, the skirt doesn't cover much, and I get a great view of silky, tanned thighs. I want nothing more than to push her against the hood of her car and trail my tongue along her thighs. Taste her. Devour her. Make her scream my name.

I swallow past the lump in my throat as she waves to me. "Thanks again, Riggs."

"Of course. Goodnight, Clara."

"Goodnight."

Then she drives away, leaving me out of breath and hard as stone.

I am so fucked.

### CHAPTER 8

Clara

“So, you hooked up with him?”

I flash my sister a confused look. She’s standing by her closet, packing for her trip with the Bears. She lives in Coleson and Eliza’s place above their coffee shop, Drippy Drip, which we frequent a lot. I love their smoothies, which is why I’m sucking on one right now. Elliot and Alex didn’t change anything about the apartment since it’s not their home. The only difference is the abundance of Amazon boxes since Alex just ordered Elliot’s whole wish list for her. We haven’t had time to unpack or put anything together with the play-offs in full swing, but that’s the plan once the guys win the Cup.

I lean back on my elbows, crossing my ankles as Darcy sits obediently by Elliot’s door, watching every one of her moves. He is going to be the best cousin to my nephew. Ignoring my heart swelling, I ask, “Hooked up with whom?”

“Coach, of course,” she says almost in a tsk.

“No. Not at all.”

“Could have fooled me.” Her eyes are full of all kinds of unwarranted suspicion.

“What does that mean?”

“Clara, it was like only you two were there, and we just showed up. Not the other way around. It was insane how quickly the rest of the world just disappeared while you talked about golden paste for your dogs.”

I shrug. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lying is now my forte.

I do know what she’s talking about. I know exactly how I felt as Riggs and I went on and on about food and then went into golden paste. It was as easy as breathing. There wasn’t a moment to think about breath; we just kept going. He’d tried to one-up me, but he isn’t as passionate as I am. He’s so reserved that he couldn’t go up against my excitement or my knowledge. I loved that he tried, though, and that he listened intently. That his eyes never left mine, not even when we were shoveling food into our mouths, trying to figure out what was different about our dishes from before. We even tried each other’s plates and agreed the meal didn’t have as much garlic as it should have.

It felt so fucking right, I didn’t want anything else but that moment.

I didn’t even notice that my sister had left, and I felt like a dick for not saying goodbye, but I was completely consumed by everything Riggs McCoy. I couldn’t stop. I wanted to know everything that was in his head. Even if it was just about veggies and dogs, he was talking only to me, looking only into my eyes, and seeing me.

I had his singular attention.

“Gavin was disappointed.” I try not to roll my eyes, but I fail. “Clara Drew! He is nice!”

“Sure, but he’s not for me,” I tell her, and she glares.

“How can he be when you’re so caught up on someone you shouldn’t be.”

“Why shouldn’t I be, again?” I ask, genuinely wanting to know.

She gives me a dark look. “Because he’s the coach of the Bears and practically old enough to be your father.”

“Semantics,” I laugh, waving her off. Yes, my crush is in full bloom once more. Yes, I’m aware that’s very bad and will probably end in heartbreak.

But here we are.

“At this point, if I don’t get with someone from the organization, Peepaw would be disappointed.”

She gawks at me. “A hockey player, maybe. Someone your age.”

“That is all neither here nor there,” I say, flashing her a grin. “I can like him all I want, but that doesn’t mean he wants me.”

Her eyes widen before she narrows them at me. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

“The sexual tension was suffocating. It was almost like you two were having sex with words.”

I purse my lips. “How does that work when neither of us said anything naughty?”

“Exactly. That’s how disgusting it was.” She rolls her eyes. “You go, ‘Riggs, trust. I love frying asparagus,’ which really meant, ‘Let me suck your dick.’”

I snort.

“Then he’d go, ‘I like all the garlic in my golden paste,’ when really, he was saying, ‘I will bend you over this table and eat garlic from your ass cheeks.’”

I’m cackling at this point, but Elliot isn’t. “Seriously! It was disgusting!”

“You’re delusional. We were only talking,” I say through my laughter.

“And making eyes.”

“I mean, I was, but I didn’t think he was,” I admit, and she shakes her head.

“Oh, he was, in his brooding, grumpy way.”

I giggle. “Do you really think so?”

“Clara Drew!”

“What? He’s hot, El. You know it.”

“I don’t care. Tell me you didn’t sleep with him.”

“I didn’t. I swear,” I say when she gives me a look. “We realized everyone had left, he bought my dinner, and then he walked me to my car. He never touched me, or even asked to. I think you’re making this up.”

Apparently this is my sister’s molehill to transform. “Actions speak louder than

words,” she says, holding my gaze. “He bought you dinner, when you were on a date with someone else?”

“Yes, because he felt Gavin was a dick for leaving and should have paid. He’s also making him do extra laps, which I think is funny.” Once the words leave my mouth, I look at her. “Okay, so there is a chance he likes me.”

“More than likes you. He wants you, and I’m warning you—it won’t end well.”

“Why are you being so negative? Let me have my fun.”

She sets me with a look as she sits on the edge of the bed where I am. Of course, Darcy comes over and cuddles between us. She brushes a stray hair behind my ear and kisses my forehead. “Like I said before, you shine too bright for him. He will swallow you whole and spit you out. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I can’t get hurt if I know that going in.”

“But you don’t,” she says softly, brushing my cheek. “You’re already half in love with him as it is.” I blink a few times, and she nods slowly, pleased with herself for knowing me so well. “Let him go.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Keep it that way,” she urges, her eyes holding mine. “It’s my job to protect you, and I know this can’t be good for you. He will ruin you, and it hurts me to say that because I love the guy. He is so good to Alex and me, but I promise you, I’ve heard Alex talk about him. To him. He’s too jaded, too broken. You’re too good for him.”

“But it could be different with me.”

“He hasn’t been in a relationship in fourteen years, Clara. As much as I love you, you can’t change that. Or fix him. No matter how much you think you can.”

My sister sets me with one last pointed look before she gets up to start packing once again. I watch her for a moment, rubbing Darcy’s head as I mull over her words in my head. I get what she’s saying, but this is the overprotective, about-to-have-a-baby Elliot. My sister, before she was pregnant and medicated, would urge me to hook up with whoever I wanted. But I get what she’s saying. I don’t want to hook up with him...well, I do, but I want more.

I want to be the only person he sees.

And according to my sister, that’s not something Riggs McCoy is capable of.

So, I should let this go.

But why does the thought of doing that make me want to cry?



### CHAPTER 9

Riggs

My boys are extra wiggly this morning.

And not in an excited, happy way.

Unfortunately, when my bags are by the door, my boys know I'm leaving.

Gretzky hates the bags so much, he's pissed on them a time or two. Gordie growls at them, and at the bottom of one are teeth marks from where he gnawed at it. Poor guys. It breaks my heart to know that leaving them makes them anxious. I wish I could take them with me everywhere. They're so well-behaved that I know they'd do awesome, but it wouldn't be fair to leave them in a hotel room or drop them off at a kennel they don't know when I'm at the rink. As much as I think they'd do great in the rink, and the players would enjoy kisses between plays, I know they'd get in the way.

I think that's why Dan suggested Clara. He knows how much the boys mean to me and that Clara would care for them like they're hers. I knew that fact from the jump. I also knew I wanted her naked at first glance.

Which has posed a wee bit of discomfort in my pants.

Okay, a lot of discomfort.

I'm fucking steel here.

All night, I tossed and turned as I thought of her. Her glossy pink lips, the challenge in her eyes. Fuck me, she's passionate. I love that she gets that determined little twitch in her nose when she's convinced she's right. I mean, she wasn't wrong, but I didn't want her to know that. I love how her eyes brighten when we talk about the four-legged creatures we both love, and what's best for them.

The seductive way her eyes drooped when she told me goodbye still has my cock harder than a frozen puck.

She's...got me in a choke hold, and I don't even think she knows it.

I hear the sound of dogs singing "Jingle Bells," which not only has my dogs going nuts but has my brows pulling together.

What the hell?

Before I even reach the door, I see a long bright-orange bus with groovy yellow, pink, and purple flowers painted all over it. It also has paintings of dogs, playing and sleeping in all sorts of places. The windows are covered with big flowers that have faces on them, and her business name is written in big bubble letters. It's so over the top, so loud and bold.

So her.

She honks the horn again, causing the song to restart, as she waves and grins widely at me.

I can't help but smirk.

This girl is way out of my league.

I throw open the screen door, and the dogs whimper beside me as she comes down the stairs. She's wearing a pair of yellow biker shorts and a pink crop top that has my mouth going dry and my cock straining against my slacks. He is still pissed at me that I didn't take her home after our dinner on Saturday. But I'm finding when it comes to her, he's an addict. I need to get him some help.

ASAP.

She waves at me, and I start for her, the boys hot on my heels. They are still wiggling and whining, wanting desperately to get to her.

Same, boys. Same.

"Go on," I say, and they shoot off to greet her. She drops to her knees and cuddles them close to her, kissing her noses and heads as she coos sweet nothings.

Lucky bastards.

"Y'all ready to go? Yay!" she gushes as they climb up into the bus. She follows behind but then pauses. "Wanna come in?"

I nod, unable to speak, as I get a full view of the tight globes of her ass. I want to bite each cheek, leave my mark so that if anyone gets a peek, they'll know her ass is mine.

I pause.

Well, that's a hell of a thought.

I swallow hard as I go up the stairs. Inside the bus are power fans to cool the dogs in

the summer heat, while a bunch of pups sit in seats like fucking schoolkids with seat belts on. The bus is the same color inside as on the outside. Bright and overwhelming. Just like the girl who is cooing to all the dogs. They bark, howl and look so damn cute, I can't help but grin. I watch as she gets Gretzky and Gordie in a seat with Darcy. She gives them all kisses before turning to me. "Pretty nifty, huh?"

"Nifty?"

Her eyes dance with excitement. I see pride there too, and I can't help but also be proud of her. This is awesome. I'm overwhelmed by the color and how the sun plays off the light flecks in her navy eyes. I'm still smirking, and it feels so unnaturally natural, I'm worried about my health.

"Duh, dude. We're groovy around here."

I actually laugh. At her.

Of course. Disguising my laugh with a cough, I nod. "This is really awesome. You should be proud of yourself."

She beams. "Thank you. I am."

I nod, and I know this is my cue to go, but I can't. "Did you come from a workout?"

"I did." She looks down at herself. "I didn't get to change."

And thank fuck for that. I lick my lips and beg myself to keep my eyes on hers. "Did you eat?"

Why did I ask that? Why do I care?

Because she said the other night that she always forgets to eat and then inhales her food at dinner after a long day.

Foolish girl.

She gives me a surprised look. “I got an iced coffee,” she says, pointing to the front where her coffee is in a cupholder.

“That’s not food, lass.”

Her eyes sparkle as a small grin moves across her lips. “I know, but I didn’t have time.”

“Make it,” I demand, and her grin falls.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You’re out here working your ass off, and it’s hot as fuck out. You need to eat and hydrate.”

She salutes me. “Yes, Coach, Sir, Man Guy!”

I give her a dark look, and she grins. She then leans in, and I get a whiff of her cherry smell that has my cock begging me to make all the bad decisions. Ones that involve her bent over the nearest surface. “Just so ya know, I’m an adult.”

I scoff. “Barely.”

She glares. “I am twenty-one years old, thank you.”

“Aye. Yippee, huh? Go get you a drink with your twenty-one-year-old self, but God

forbid you get some food, aye?”

Her navy eyes narrow. “Do you get more Scottish when you’re annoyed?”

This fucking girl.

I blink, and I wait for the attraction to die down. I wait for myself to realize she is a baby and I can’t fuck her.

That realization doesn’t come.

And that pisses me the fuck off.

Through clenched teeth, I say, “That’s adorable. Now, wait here.”

“For what?”

“Because I told ya to,” I throw over my shoulder at her. I look back in time to see her pout, her nose and brow wrinkling as I jog back to my place.

Why do I find that so cute?

I hurry into the kitchen, making her two peanut butter sandwiches and then cutting up some apples and strawberries for her. I select one of my travel cups and fill it with ice water before grabbing her key that I had made. I carry everything out and find her sitting in the driver’s seat. Her brows pull together, and something flashes in her eyes as I close the distance between us and hand her everything I’ve made her.

“You made me food.”

“Yeah. I can’t have you falling over with my dogs.”

“This is very kind of you.” She takes a bite of the sandwich and grins. “I love PB and J.”

I nod. “Good. Now, eat. And don’t let me find out you’ve skipped meals again.”

She grins, that damn challenge in her eyes. “And what happens if you do?”

This girl is just as much of a menace as her fucking fool of a dog. My fists clench as I keep my gaze locked with hers. I want to tell her exactly what will happen and how she won’t be able to sit, but if I do that, she’ll know I want her.

I can’t want her.

Frustrated, I snap, “Just do it, aye?”

Flames dance in her eyes, and everything inside me tightens. “Maybe I want to know what will happen.”

I blink. Is she flirting with me?

I swallow hard. “Believe me, you don’t.”

“Will you make me run laps?”

I glare at her, my heart slamming inside my chest. “No, I have something more in mind.”

“More?” she asks, her lips curving in a sneaky little grin. “Are we talking, like, dirty more? Or, like, running more?”

Unable to handle her, I turn to the boys and kiss them both. When Darcy licks me, I

glare at him. “Behave, you.”

I should be saying that to his mom.

Clara’s angelic giggles run down my spine, and my stomach clenches. “Tell Daddy bye, boys!”

Daddy.

Fucking fuck me sideways. My eyes drift shut as I inhale sharply. I turn to look at her, drinking her in and wanting her to say that again—but to me.

While my dick is deep inside her tight little cunt.

I gotta go.

“I’ll be in touch,” I say, moving past her.

“I sent you the link for the app. Make sure to get it so you can see all the pictures I post, and I’ll text you when I get to the house tonight.”

“I don’t like apps.”

She gives me a dry look. “Okay, Grandpa.”

God, are you there? Help me, please. “Text me the pics, aye?”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

I want to laugh, but I don’t want her to know I think she’s funny. Or that I enjoy her messing with me. I nod, feeling like my heart is about to break free from my ribs.



“Sounds good. Be safe, Clara.”

“You too, Riggs.”

I step out, and she closes the door behind me. I look over my shoulder when she hits the horn, grinning widely at me. I can't stop myself from laughing, which is unlike me. I can't help it. Not only do I hear the dogs barking to “Jingle Bells” again, but I swear she is a ball of sunshine. She's so luminous, and I love being on the receiving end of her glow.

Which I'm sure will end up burning me to ashes.

### CHAPTER 10

Clara

Me: I might be coming up with a plan to keep Gretzky and Gordie.

I would never do such a thing, but I can't help goading Riggs. He is a blast to fuck with, and now I know why Alex does it. Riggs gets so mad, but he has his mask locked in place, and it's fun to watch it crack along the edges. He also gets this look in his eyes like he isn't sure if he's gonna strangle me or fuck me.

It's a blast.

Maybe if I push hard enough, he'll decide on the latter.

Or hell, both...he-he.

Riggs: Plan away. You'll fail.

Me: Wow, that's rude. Aren't you a coach? Aren't you supposed to uplift me?

Riggs: Only telling you the truth. And I coach men, not wee lasses with smart mouths.

Me: Are you saying I have a smart mouth?

Riggs: No, I'm talking about another Clara who is watching my dogs for me.

Me: Oh, she sounds wonderful.

Riggs: She's a pain-in-my-ass smart-mouth who is apparently trying to steal my dogs.

Me: I think she's awesome. But for real, let me have them.

Riggs: No. Train your fool of a dog.

Me: Stop calling Darcy a fool before you and I fight, good sir.

He writes something, the bubbles appearing before they disappear. That happens three times before he finally writes me back.

Riggs: Did you eat lunch?

I bring in my brows. I offered to fight so I could touch him.

Hopefully naked.

But he shot me down. He's very hot-and-cold, this guy.

Me: I did, and I shared my steak bites with the boys. They are currently lying on me as everyone else plays.

I send a photo of the boys lying on me, and of course, there is a streak at the bottom of the picture where Darcy is running like...a fool. But he's my fool, damn it.

Riggs: You're going to make them fat.

Me: Oh, for sure.

Riggs: Though I see nothing can calm down Darcy.

Me: Nope, he's a free spirit.

Riggs: Like his mother.

I beam at that, doing a little wiggle that's totally childish, but man, he makes me feel things I like. I didn't get the chance to flirt when I was a teenager. I hid a lot and kept my head down, so I know that's why I enjoy flirting so much now that I can live my life the way I want. The last guy I dated flirted all the time, but he was a dud in bed. Lots of talk but nothing to back it up. Then I had a guy who didn't want anything but sex, and boy, was he a good time, but he was so boring.

I know this is my crush talking, but I suspect that if Riggs let go, he could be the best of both worlds.

And I want him to let go.

Riggs: I have dinner in the freezer for you. Just four little meals that I thought you'd enjoy.

My lips curve up.

Me: You know you paid me, right? You don't have to make me food.

Riggs: I am well aware, and I wanted to. I want you to have what you need.

Well, catch the hint. I need you .

I giggle, not having the balls to type that. I can't ignore how my chest warms at his words, though. For such a grumpy pants, he sure is thoughtful.

Me: Thank you.

I wait for his response, but he doesn't give me one, and it only confuses me more. I lean into Gretzky and nuzzle my nose in his neck. "Your daddy is a puzzle I'm going to figure out."

Gretzky doesn't seem to care and continues snoring. I can't help but think of Elliot's warning, and I don't want to believe it. I want to think she and Alex are wrong. That Riggs would be different with me, but that's exactly what they're telling me. He won't, and that sours my good mood. I want to know what happened to him. I want to know why his marriage ended and why he is so against being with anyone. I want to know if he even wants me. Or if I am totally making all this up in my head.

Like the overanalyzing person I am, I go through every interaction I've had with Riggs as I gather up the dogs and drive everyone home. I can't make heads or tails of how I think he feels. Usually, I can read a guy pretty well. My whole life, I observed those around me, and I'm proud of my people skills, but Riggs is definitely different. Men usually think with their cocks and they either want me or don't, but Riggs isn't a young buck led by his cock. He's a man—with restraint and control.

Two things I want to destroy.

And let the glorious aftermath rain down on me.

When I arrive at his cabin that fits him perfectly, I am nowhere near figuring out an answer. I have no clue. I guess all I can do is wait it out or maybe just ask. I don't know if I have the guts to do the latter, considering if he rejects me, it'll be awkward when I watch the dogs. Since I love Gretzky and Gordie and want to help Riggs, I don't want to mess with a good thing. But what if it can be more?

I consider calling one of my sisters, but everyone has something going on. Austen is

busy traveling with her Russian Stallion through Russia. Eliza is deep into Coleson's rehab for his leg in Nashville and running the coffee business back here. Louisa is planning her wedding with Ciaran, while traveling back and forth between here and Nashville for Dirty Pages. Elliot is growing my nephew and building a life with her baby daddy, while doing all the social media for the Bears. She also doesn't want me with Riggs, so I can't really talk to her about it.

It's times like this I wish I had friends outside of my sisters.

But that means I'd have to like other people.

Ew.

I roll my eyes as I park my SUV up in front of the wooden fence. I get out, collecting the dogs from the back where I have them strapped in, and then I let them run around like crazy. They bark happily and nip at one another playfully as I take in the secluded cabin that only makes me grin. It's so Riggs. All dark and mysterious, and in the middle of fucking nowhere. I bet he likes not having neighbors or having to deal with people. The house is a dark-wood log cabin with orange shutters and a bright-orange door. Like all Tennessee fans, he takes the color orange very seriously. I spy a wood-chopping spot, and I feel my lips curve. I bet he chops his own wood. All sweaty and hot. Muscles bulging and wood chips flying.

Once I have my phone out of my pocket, I take a photo and send it to him.

Me: Are you a lumberjack?

Riggs: Yes, it's my side hustle.

Me: Can I record it and sell it on OnlyFans?

Riggs: For what?

Me: Duh, thirst traps.

Riggs: No. I'm exclusive on OnlyLumberJacks.com

I snort.

Me: Send me the link.

Riggs: No can do. I can't be responsible for the damage to your innocent brain.

I snort louder at that.

Me: Oh, Coach, Sir, Man Guy, there is not a damn thing innocent about me. Want my OnlyFans?

A text bubble appears, disappears, and by the time it happens a ninth time, I'm cackling.

Me: I'm kidding.

Riggs: Thank fuck. I was nervous you were serious, and I wasn't sure how to act like I didn't know that tidbit of information about the granddaughter of my boss.

That has me pressing my lips together.

So, does he want me but not want to act on it because of my peepaw?

Interesting.

I tuck my phone into my pocket since I'm not sure how to answer that, and I call to the dogs as I head to the front door. I use my key, and the dogs barrel in, rushing to the water bowl to rehydrate. I lock the door then the dead bolt before taking off my shoes and setting my purse by the door. I carry over my dishes from this morning and wash them before finding one of the little dinners Riggs made for me. I turn on the oven then place the meal on a sheet pan to put in after my shower. I'm all hot and sticky.

The dogs are on my heels as I head back to his bedroom with my overnight bag while I try to ignore the butterflies taking flight in my gut. I'm going to sleep in his bed. Without him, but in his bed. I wonder if it smells like him?

Oh, I hope.

I shimmy in excitement. Once I hit the switch, the room floods with light, and I take in Riggs's space. It's just a bed, dresser, and an ensuite bathroom. However, the bathroom is a thing of beauty. All white marble, with a dark navy clawfoot tub and a handheld shower attachment hanging above the tub. Does my grumpy coach like baths? The tub is massive enough for two, which makes me green with envy over the women he's brought here to take a bath with him. Maybe cleaning up from a massive fuck session or being carried to a massive fuck session.

I want a massive fuck session.

I exhale as I take in the masculine space. Everything is in dark blues with light blue accents. His bed is huge, yet he doesn't let the dogs on the bed?

"Your daddy is mean," I tell Gordie, who wiggles beside me with big brown eyes full of love for me. "This bed is big enough for all of you—and me and Darcy."

He doesn't seem to agree and trots to his bed. I mean, for a dog bed, it's top-of-the-



line. It's on a pedestal and looks fluffy enough for me to sleep in it. Beside it are two others, and my heart warms that Riggs got one for Darcy. Now I just gotta get Darcy to sleep in it.

I drop my bag on his dresser and notice a photo of him with two older people. His parents, I assume, since he is a younger version of the man in the photo. Though he has his mom's dark brown eyes. They're all so happy, so joyous, and I can tell he loves them. I run my finger along his face. He is much younger in this photo, no beard, and no laugh lines around his eyes.

God, he has always been devilishly handsome, though.

Why isn't he locked down with a trove of children?

I don't allow myself to feel anything about that. My feelings could shift to sadness or jealousy, and I'm way too tired for that. Instead, I look back at the bed. I close my eyes and pray it smells like him before crawling onto the pillow-soft bed. I drop down on my stomach and bury my face in the pillow before letting out the most satisfying groan. I don't know if he changed these sheets, but all I smell is spice and bergamot and all things Riggs McCoy.

Thank God.

I rub my face in the pillow, imagining it's Riggs's neck as I inhale deeply. He always smells so damn good, and I can just imagine him lying here, relaxing, his legs spread wide. I bet he lies naked, his cock in his hand, and pleasures himself right here, his low, manly moans filling this space as he tugs on his cock. Heat burns through my veins, and my toes tingle as I'm overwhelmed with lust. I wonder what it would be like having his weight on me, his smell suffocating me as he ate at my mouth, my breasts, and between my legs. I wonder if he'd be rough with me or if he'd handle me like I'm breakable.

I moan as I roll onto my back, everything on fire. I'm wound up so tightly, I know I won't be able to function without release. Just the thought of him feeling the same way I did after our impromptu dinner has me pushing my hand into my shorts to my burning hot center. I'm soaked, and my hips jerk when I press my fingers against my clit. Heat burns throughout my body, my toes curling, my stomach clenching, and with another stroke, I come with a guttural cry. I gasp in breath, my chest heaving as I gaze at the ceiling with half-lidded eyes. I'm taken aback when a laugh bubbles out of me. I haven't come that hard in a while, and it's all because of him.

The man of all my desires.

And I just came in his bed.

Without him.

If that makes me a slutty little freak, hey, I'll get a shirt made, because I will own that.

Proudly.

### CHAPTER 11

Riggs

I knew, I fucking knew, when I got the notification of movement in my bedroom, I should ignore it.

Who else would be in my room?

I knew. I did.

I told myself to ignore it.

I even clicked off the notification.

But then I went to the app for the live feed.

Like a complete fucking glutton for punishment.

There in my bedroom, in my fucking bed, lies Clara. She's wearing her workout gear from earlier, her ass eating her shorts as she rubs her face in my pillows. I should say I'm watching to make sure the dogs don't get on the bed, but I know I'm not. Hell, if she knew, she'd know I wasn't watching for the dogs. But before I can feel like the creep I am, a beautiful, ethereal groan comes from my phone. A loud one, one that rattles the device in my hand as I watch her. Or maybe I'm shaking. Yup, I'm shaking. Fuck. She clenches her ass cheeks, her body almost vibrating as she continues to rub her face in the pillows.

One thing is for sure—I'm never washing those pillowcases.

All of a sudden, she rolls onto her back, and her pink-painted toes curl as she groans louder. Her breasts move with each breath she heaves in and out. Her face is flushed, her body vibrating as she clenches and unclenches her fists.

My mouth goes dry.

I know I should close this app. I am well aware I need to stop watching, but...I fucking can't.

My eyes are wide as I watch her chest move up and down. My body is tight, my cock straining against my slacks as I drink her in. I almost can't take it. I almost throw my phone.

But then her hand travels down her body, running over the exposed flesh along her belly, before sliding into her shorts. And even though I've been breathing since birth, I forget how to perform the action in mere seconds.

My jaw goes slack as she moves her fingers against her center. The sounds of her arousal fill my phone, making it really hard for me to stay standing. My legs lock, and I fall back into the chair that is thankfully behind me. Heat gathers at my spine; my stomach clenches, and I can't believe I'm allowing myself to watch this. I shouldn't invade her privacy, but I'm unable to look away.

I don't want to look away.

I'm not even myself as I unzip my slacks before pulling out my heavy cock. I give myself a tug as my body burns with desire. I spit on my hand, taking my length in my palm as I start to stroke myself with a vengeance. I want to be there. I want to be the one touching her sweet cunt. I want to taste her. Lick her from clit to ass and repeat it

until she's screaming my name and creaming all over my face. I wish she were naked, but then, it doesn't matter. Her moans are so fucking sexy, I'm burning from head to toe. The flesh I can see is beet red.

Then her lips part, and the throatiest, most gorgeous moan I've ever heard in my life leaves her sweet lips as she bucks against her hand. I move my hand up and down my length faster, squeezing myself, and when a cute little giggle escapes her, I blow my load. I drop my phone, come spurting everywhere and making a mess as my head falls back. My own grunt fills the space as white dots appear in my vision, and I jerk my hips up. I can't breathe. I'm gasping as I squeeze my eyes shut.

Clara just came in my bed.

My bed.

Yup, I'm never washing those sheets.

But I sure as shit need to change my pants and...fuck, my tie.

Just like I knew from the moment I saw her, this girl has made a mess of me.

Alex is my golden goose.

And if that means I'm Veruca Salt dancing around in a little red dress, singing and chasing Alex's golden eggs down a chute, then that's who I am.

Fuck, I love this guy.

He's zoned in, his eyes on everything as he moves in front of the goal like a goddamn ninja. The defense has been slacking and letting players get to the house, but Alex keeps slamming the door. The dude gets on my nerves, but I could kiss him for

keeping us in the game. When he gloves a shot that shouldn't have gotten through, I glare at the line that skates toward the bench for a change.

“So, is this the Alex Cruz Bears? Or the Knoxville fucking Bears? Get it together, everyone! Fucking protect Cruz so he can protect the house!”

Everyone grunts in agreement, and my glare deepens. I don't give a fuck that they're tired. We're all fucking tired. “I get that you're fucking tired. I get it—I do. But we haven't worked for over eighty games to get here and lose! I want the W, and you should want it too. Do you?”

Everyone yells in agreement.

“Then protect the fucking house, would ya?”

I know I'm aiming too high. It's only my second year as a head coach, but I've got the team to get me the Cup.

And I want the fucking Cup. I'm tired, too, and strung so damn tightly, I can't stand it. I almost called in a woman to take the edge off, but it didn't feel right. Makes no sense, and my cock and I are going to have to discuss this later since I really don't like what that could mean.

That I only want Clara.

And I can't want her.

I can't have her.

She is young, vibrant. I'm a freaking fool, damaged goods, and all I could do is fuck her good. I couldn't give her a good life. Hell, the only good in my life are my boys

and my team. I don't even know... Fuck, I gotta stop thinking this shit.

But once more, my damn phone vibrates with a notification of movement in my bedroom, and my body twitches with the need to look. I know I can't look. I'm feeling tons of guilt from seeing Clara in her private moment. I know I should come clean, but I don't want to embarrass her—or myself, because I'm sure I'd admit that I came at the sight of her giving herself pleasure to smooth over the fact that I watched her get off.

The problem is, I want to watch her come undone again.

But from the pleasure I give her.

Which is bad and is why I'm ready to strangle everyone around me.

The crowd is crazy and loud, cheering on their Griffins. The score is tied at zero, and as we're in the third, I need us to score. I don't want to go to overtime, not when my boys need the rest. I pace along the bench behind the boys, ignoring my phone that's vibrating, probably with notifications about Clara that I need to turn off. Or I need to leave my phone in the fucking locker room because each vibration torments me.

When it buzzes again, I take it out and hand it to my assistant, Willy. He gives me a weird look. "What's up?"

"Keep that for me." He doesn't question me and puts it in his suit jacket. "But don't look at it."

"I won't, Coach," he vows.

I nod a thanks and try to focus on what is going on before me. The Griffins are in our zone, and it pisses me off that they're still there. We should be in their zone by now,

and thankfully, Markson gets possession and hurls it up the ice before passing it off to Jennings, who shoots quickly, going top shelf. His shot is blocked away, but the sweetest fucking rebound pops back and lands on Markson's blade. He doesn't even have to try hard; he taps the puck in, and the light goes off.

I fist-pump my hand at my side as the bench explodes with excitement and cheers.

"About bloody time," I mutter, and Willy smirks at me.

"Gotta believe, Coach," he throws at me, and then he makes a face. "So, no wonder you gave me your phone. It won't stop going off."

I whip my gaze to him. Is she getting off again? It doesn't matter, you eejit! You've got work to do!

This girl is a problem.

One I shouldn't be enjoying, but I am.

"A wee little lass, wanting all your attention?"

I glare at my friend, who came with me to the team. "Shut it."

He snorts but doesn't push me. He's not a dick like Cruz. Probably because he was around when my marriage ended. Great. Now, I'm thinking of the past.

I hate thinking.

I force myself to look out at center ice. I'm jittery and not feeling like myself. I don't like this feeling at all. I reach into my pocket and bring out my Bubble Yum gum. I open two pieces and stuff them into my mouth. The flavor is disgusting and sweet,



but it distracts me from wanting to tackle Willy for my phone. I gotta turn that camera off. I can't allow myself to be tempted like this. While I feel guilty about what I saw, I can't help but think she did it on purpose. Not that she knew the camera was in there, but to leave her scent in my room. I have absolutely no clue what the hell to do with that, but fuck, if I don't want to do something.

Something that starts with me between her legs and my name being screamed from her gorgeous lips.

This is bad. So fucking bad.

When one of the Griffins passes up to a fucking cherry-picking motherfucker at the line, I yell out. "He's offsides!"

But before I can even get the whole sentence out, he scores.

Fuck.

I jump over the bench, using two players' shoulders for balance before I almost launch myself over the fucking boards. I throw my hands up. "Ref! Are you fucking kidding me? Are you blind? He was offsides a fucking mile!"

The ref ignores me as my assistant coach Willy looks at the tape. "Aye! Aye! Ref!"

The ref still ignores me because he knows good and well, he's a fucking eejit!

"Yup, offsides," Willy calls to me, but I already knew that.

"Challenge! Aye! Aye! Challenge, Ref!"

Finally, the bastard stops ignoring me and skates over, annoyed. "I hear you."

“Then fucking acknowledge me, huh?”

Once more, he ignores me as he calls for a coach’s challenge, and play stops. Cruz comes skating to the bench, leaning on it beside me. I tap his helmet. “Good job, Cruz.”

“Thanks, Coach.” He eyes me, that goofy smile on his face, and I glare back at him.

“What, Cruz?”

“You seem a little keyed up.”

“I want to fucking win,” I sneer, and he grins.

“That’s a done deal. What’s really wrong?”

I give him a dark look. “Does it look like the time to talk about anything but hockey, Cruz? Why do you always bug the shit out of me?”

He tickles my beard, the freaking eejit. “Because you’re so cute to tease.” I smack his hand away, and he only grins. “Talk to Clara?”

I glare, unable to control the thoughts swirling in my mind. Does he know? That I like her? That I saw her come? Shit. “What’s it to ya?”

His grin widens. “Just curious if she’s working well for you. I did knock up her sister, so I do care for her.”

My jaw tightens, and I feel my molars starting to crack. I don’t know if I’m pissed about the call, pissed that he wants to know about Clara, or pissed that he has the right to care because she’s his future sister-in-law. Actually, I’m pissed about

everything.

Most of all, that she came in my bed.

Alone.

“Go to your net, Cruz,” I bite out, and he shoots me a cheesy grin.

“Aw, it’s okay to have feelings. Share them with me.”

“Go, Cruz.”

His laughter trails behind him to his net, and I swear I crack a tooth.

But the goal is called back because the Griffins were offsides.

And we end up winning the game.

Which is good since I know how to win hockey games. But the game of Clara McDavid?

Yeah, that’s another story.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:44 am*

### CHAPTER 12

Clara

Me: I got lost in the woods.

Riggs: What in the hell? How?

Me: I don't know. I was on the trail during my run, and then I got off it. Thankfully, Gretzky and Gordie knew where to go. Darcy and I were as lost as last year's Easter eggs.

Riggs: JFC. Be careful out there. Don't go trailing too deep. Actually, stay on the road. It's four miles to the stop sign at the turn to my house.

Me: I'm honored you think I can run eight miles.

Riggs: You can't? Maybe if you ate more, you could.

Me: Is that a challenge?

Riggs: If you plan on running with me, I do eight miles. And no matter how much you flash those little doe eyes at me, I won't carry you.

Me: I bet I could convince you.

Riggs: Did you eat after your run?

I grin to myself, my face flushed as I position my smoothie and breakfast sandwich before sending him a photo. He hearts my photo before writing back.

Riggs: Good girl.

My thighs clench, and the butterflies dance in my belly.

Me: You're very demanding. Bossy, even.

Riggs: So I've been told. I don't see a problem.

Nor do I.

Me: I know I work for you, but you treat me like one of your players.

Riggs: Stop acting like them, and I won't.

Me: How would you like me to act?

When I send the little angel emoji, I know I'm playing with fire, but I can't help it. I didn't sleep a wink last night. No matter that I rubbed my clit to the point of pain, I couldn't get off enough to fall deep into sleep. I am so unsatisfied, it's tragic. I was so enveloped in his smell, in my thoughts of him doing the dirtiest things to me, it almost brought me to tears. I want him. But I hate that I can't get a read on him. One minute, I think he wants me too, but then I second-guess myself, thinking he is only looking out for me because he's older than me.

It's really frustrating.

After my run that didn't help a damn thing, especially when I got lost, I took a shower, loaded up the dogs, and then we went to pick up all my other charges. Once I

got them settled with my two employees, I headed toward Drippy Drip to get my smoothie. I added the sandwich when I remembered Riggs would be on me if I didn't. I probably need the fuel after no sleep and getting lost, considering I have to go over to Dirty Pages to unload shipments.

Since Louisa has moved to Nashville to be with her hotshot hockey-player hunk, I have taken over receiving shipments for her. Eliza was doing it, but she basically moved to Nashville too. I'm not sure what will happen with Dirty Pages. There is talk of opening one in Nashville, but it does so well here. Tourists and locals love what the store offers. Romance-only books? I mean, come on! It's the best, and I love it. That's probably why I don't mind spending one day a week there.

Beside me, Gordie and Gretzky sit so pretty, while Darcy is on his back, his legs in the air as he squirms against the floor. As bad as it sounds—and trust, I love my boy—these three remind me of the hyenas from *The Lion King*. Two are all put together and smart, while the third is derpy. I know I'm wrong for thinking my boy is derpy, but Gordie and Gretzky make him look bad. Alone, he is the bestest, smartest boy, but alongside the mini-me's of Riggs McCoy, he's a bit of a loose screw.

Now I feel bad.

With a giggle, I lean down and scratch Darcy's belly. His tongue lolls out, and his eyes are full of love for me. "You may look derpy with these two around, but you're my baby, aren't you?"

Gordie leans his head against my knee, and I kiss his nose. "I love you too."

Gretzky doesn't let anyone upstage him, licking my thigh until I kiss him too. "You too, you sweet boy."

Me: I think the boys love me more than they love you.

I send a photo of all three dogs loving on me and smile when Riggs hearts my photo.

Riggs: Or they're trying to get food out of you.

Me: Rude! I am a great dog sitter.

Riggs: Never said you weren't. You're the one trying to steal my boys from me.

Me: Scared?

Riggs: Not even in the slightest.

Me: I could steal them, you know.

Riggs: How? We three run eight miles. You couldn't keep up.

Me: Wow, choosing violence this morning?

I can't help but grin.

Riggs: You tell me you got lost, and you make it a point not to take care of yourself. Oh, and you're trying to steal my dogs. Talking to you raises my blood pressure and forces me to choose violence.

Me: I'm sorry, Grandpa. Do you need me to pick up your meds on the way home?

Riggs: You're a menace like your dog.

Me: Since I'm so bad for your health, maybe you shouldn't talk to me.

I'm provoking him. I want him to say that he wants to talk to me, that he enjoys my

texts, that he lives for my words. That he wants me.

I should have known better.

Riggs: I am well aware that talking to you is bad for my health.

Me: Then don't answer my texts.

Riggs: That can be arranged.

Me: Cool. Download the damn app.

Riggs: Maybe I should.

Me: Do it.

Riggs: I will.

Me: Good. See ya, Grandpa.

Riggs: Make sure you eat.

I want to tell him to go fuck himself, but instead, I tuck my phone into my pocket. Gordie is looking up at me expectantly, and I shake my head. "Your dad is an asshole."

Or maybe I'm just an idiot.

The asshole downloaded the app.

And he hasn't texted me since.



This is what I get for provoking him. For playing with fire when I knew better. I had plenty of warnings from Elliot, and still, I let myself want him. I let myself think something was brewing between us. I'm such a dumbass. It's been two days, and the Bears are coming home this morning after winning both games in the series.

While it's the best of seven in the NHL for all play-off rounds, it's the best of five in the AHL in the early rounds. The conference final and Cup final rounds are the best of seven. Since this is a conference final, the boys have a lot of work to do, but I have no doubts the Bears won't be returning to Michigan.

My future brother-in-law is locked in and ready to go. He is leading his team to victory, and it's a sight to see. His goal is to have a photo of his son in the Cup hanging on the wall. It's the sweetest thing ever, and I can't help but love him something insane for loving my sister and nephew so much. The only problem with everyone else being so in love and happy is that I feel more alone than ever. Which is pathetic when I have the best dog in the world that loves me endlessly.

I cuddle closer to Darcy. He sleeps soundly beside me while Gordie sleeps against my back and Gretzky sleeps between my legs. It's early morning, and I should be getting up to go on my run, but I'm being lazy. Plus, my back is aching from sleeping on the floor the last two nights. I couldn't bear sleeping in Riggs's bed. Not with how badly I want him and that he thinks I'm bad for his health. So, instead, I've been sleeping with the dogs in their beds. I know that's pathetic, maybe a bit childish, and I know I'm being stubborn, but it bothers me that he hasn't texted me.

I really did convince myself he liked me.

But why does it matter? I am a catch. Any guy would love to be with me, so why am I wasting my time being all hung up on a guy who doesn't even want me? I am better than this. I am Clara Drew McDavid, a cult survivor, a business owner, and a fucking badass boss bitch! I don't need a man. I've got Darcy, and I can get myself off in

seconds.

I'll just ignore the fact that I get off so quickly because I am thinking of Riggs.

He is replaceable!

Yeah. Replaceable.

I roll my eyes, and I refuse to allow myself to contradict that thought. I also need to remind myself to ignore the ache in my chest, but that might be a bit harder. I want to call Elliot. I want to unload on her and have her tell me that I'm better than this. I just know she'll tell me she told me so, though. She'll get all protective and big sister on me, probably kick Riggs in the balls.

She has a habit of being violent when it comes to her sisters.

I think we all love her more deeply for that.

I close my eyes, exhaling and not allowing myself to cry. He hasn't texted me—who cares? I still have a job with him, and I still get to love on Gordie and Gretzky. Now, if he fires me, then I'll cry. I can't be sad over a guy who doesn't want me.

That's his choice, and really, he's dumb. I'm awesome.

Though, I don't feel that awesome right now.

I nuzzle my nose in Darcy's scruff. I really should get up, get my day started, but I'm so warm and comfortable with my pups. I could skip my run today. The only reason I was trying to up my time was so I didn't embarrass myself when I ran with Riggs. I doubt that will ever happen now.

As much as I love the boys, I may need to quit this gig.

Just as the thought hits, Gordie moves his head to my neck. He sighs contentedly, and my heart warms. No, I can't quit. I love these boys.

And even though it makes me an idiot, I'm still crushing hard on Riggs.

When my phone dings with a text, I open my eyes, and I'm not gonna lie, I almost come out of my skin. Excitement flushes through my body when I see a message from Riggs. My eyes widen and my heart slams into my ribs as I hit the notification with a shaky thumb.

Riggs: Why in the hell are you sleeping on the floor?

Wait. What?

### CHAPTER 13

Riggs

I have decided that not only am I the creep of all creeps, but I may be a wee bit obsessed with Clara.

I'm not sure when it happened. The day I came face-to-face with her and looked deep into her stunning navy eyes? When I felt my heart warm near her for the first time? When we had dinner together, everything around us disappeared, and only she remained? When I made her a PB and J? Or was it, in fact, the day I watched her come in my bed? I don't know. I've been going over it since our little spat that I truly don't understand.

And all I know is I am desperate for her.

I have spent the last two days in such a foul mood, I don't know how my boys ignored me and won. Though, they did. Even Alex has given me a wide berth, and whenever my phone goes off, I physically have to toss it aside so I don't look at the camera. I have been snappy, annoyed, and ready to strangle anyone who looks my way. My poor cock probably has bruises on it from where I have violently jacked off just to get her out of my head.

It hasn't helped. If anything, the thoughts of her have become more intense.

I only had two days of her texting and teasing me, and those days didn't suck. I didn't feel like I was just going through the motions. I was looking forward to our next

interaction, laughing at her silliness. And fuck if I don't want every day to be like that. Yet, I somehow said something wrong, and she got pissed. I'm not surprised; my track record with women isn't the best. Hence why I've been single for fourteen years. My ex would say I never think through what I say, just say it with no cares how someone might take it. Then I apparently became a grumpy fuck, with good reason. And now, I can only get women to fuck me but not want to stay around. Not want me as a whole.

Not that I wanted them to.

Or that I want Clara to want me as a whole.

Right?

Right.

Fuck me.

I was honestly just telling her how I felt, but it was obvious I pissed her off.

Leaving me to be disgusted with myself.

I don't want to dim her light, but I have, and I should do what's right. Leave her alone. Stop thinking of her. It's clear as ice that I can't be with her. That wanting her to want me as a whole is damn near impossible. There are too many reasons that it wouldn't work out.

I'm an asshole.

She's a lovely ball of sunshine.

She's too young.

My boss is her grandpa.

But when I think of her, those reasons don't seem to be that important. I don't ever think like this, and I don't know what the hell is going on in my mind. I have been with countless women, but I've never wanted one the way I want Clara. To say I'm confused is an understatement. Maybe I just need to fuck her good one time and get it out of my system. Though, I've seen enough movies to know that never works. If I touch her, taste her, slide into her sweet cunt, I'll be hers forever.

And the thought of that scares me to my core.

I assumed thinking that way would urge me not to contact her, but when I got a notification of movement at six a.m., I couldn't bear not making sure she was okay. What if someone had broken in, hurt her? Or what if she tripped over the dogs and cracked her skull? I couldn't live with myself, so I hit the camera to find her lowering herself to the floor with the dogs. My huge California-king-sized bed is neatly made and empty, while she lies on the floor. She cuddles with the dogs and with a pillow and blanket that I don't own. Has she not been in my bed? What the hell?

Unable to resist, I text her since I know she's awake.

Me: Why the hell are you sleeping on the floor?

Clara: How do you know that?

Oh.

Fuck.

Me.

Well, no reason to lie.

Me: I have cameras throughout the house and got worried when the camera went off so early.

Once more, bubbles appear and then disappear before appearing again.

Clara: You have cameras?

Me: Yes. One in every room but the bathroom, and six outside.

Clara: In every room?

My heart is in my throat. I may as well start looking for a new dog sitter because I'm pretty sure mine is about to quit. I may need to let my lawyer know, too, in case she sues me.

I'm such an eejit.

Me: Yes.

Clara: So, you've been watching me?

Me: No, not in the way you think. Only when there is movement that I don't expect to be there.

Clara: You know that's fucked up, right? Especially since you didn't tell me.

I clench my jaw.

Me: I do realize that, and I apologize for not informing you sooner.

She reads my message but doesn't answer. My heart is pounding in my chest, and my hands go numb as I hold my phone in a death grip. I close my eyes, feeling like the biggest fucker in the world, until I hear the whoosh of an alert.

I look down to find her message.

Clara: So, what? When there is movement, you just watch me?

Me: No. I make sure everything is okay, and that's it.

Clara: Why don't I believe you?

Because we both know I'm a creep.

Clara: How many times have you watched me?

Lie, you dumb fuck. Lie!

Me: Maybe we should have this conversation in person.

Clara: Or you can be honest.

I swallow hard as her next message comes through.

Clara: How many times?

Me: I'd really rather have this conversation in person.

Clara: Answer the question, Riggs.



I'm tempted to ignore her request. I could reasonably act as though my phone is dead since I'll be home in twenty. I'm at the airport, sitting in my car since the notification came when I got into the driver's seat. We took an early flight in since the game went into overtime last night and I didn't want my team on a late-night flight. I think it is better for Clara and me to discuss this in person, but this may be easier. Not having to see the disgust on her face. I sure as hell don't want to lie to her. Maybe admitting my guilt will help ease it.

And lose my dog sitter and possibly bring a lawsuit.

No big deal.

With shaky fingers, I type back.

Me: I've only checked the camera in the bedroom twice, and the one at the front every time you leave to make sure you've locked the door. I can show you my history. It registers when I log on.

It doesn't take long before she writes me back.

Clara: Twice in the bedroom? You watched me in the bedroom? When? This morning and when?

Me: I didn't watch you. I just checked.

Clara: When was the other time?

I don't have to answer her; she knows, and while it was the best orgasm of my life, I feel like shit for it.

Me: The first night you were there. I wasn't expecting you back so early. I wanted to

be sure it was you.

Bubbles appear then disappear, and then nothing comes for a full minute. I close my eyes, knowing I've fucked up. I'm tempted to go to the arena and wait for her to leave the house so I don't have to face her, but I'm no coward. I fucked up. I need to apologize, but I want to do it in person. I start my car, and right as I go to back out, my phone sounds. I look down to see it's her, though I knew it would be.

Clara: Did you watch me?

I shouldn't answer. I don't want to upset her, but the damage is already done.

Me: When?

Clara: Riggs. Did you watch me?

Me: Can I please talk to you when I get there? I'm on my way.

Clara: Answer me.

Me: Yes. I watched you.

Clara: Why?

Me: You know why.

Clara: I do?

Me: Yes.

Clara: I don't. Tell me.

Me: Because I couldn't look away or turn off my phone, even if someone held a gun to my head.

Clara: So, you wanted to watch me.

Me: I needed to watch you.

Seconds tick by, and my heart is beating so hard, my vision is hazy.

Clara: I thought I was bad for your health.

Me: You are. Doesn't mean I care a bit about my health.

Suddenly, my camera app alerts me to movement, but I ignore it, waiting for her reply.

Clara: Look at the camera.

I do as she says, and I find her in the middle of my bed with her hand between her legs. She is wearing a large white tee, and her panties are pushed to the side, revealing just a hint of her center. Instantly, my cock swells, and everything goes tight. My body vibrates with lust, a heaviness sits on my chest, and I know this is the moment when I can turn the camera off and ignore her...or watch what I so desperately want to see.

Yet I go for option three.

I hit her contact, and her voice is deep when she answers. "Mmm-hmm?"

Fuck me, she sounds like sin, and I am ready to punch my one-way ticket straight to hell.

My voice is gravelly as I say, “Take your hand off my pussy, Clara.”

She takes in a deep breath before asking, “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I say, squealing out of the parking lot. “If you’re going to come in my bed, it’ll be from the pleasure I give you.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:44 am*

### CHAPTER 14

Clara

Riggs hangs up without another word, and I still the movements of my hands. I should be disappointed in myself for being so damn wet between my thighs, but I can't help it when it comes to him.

“Take your hand off my pussy, Clara.”

His ? Holy shit. Did he actually say that to me? He did, and the gush of my arousal around my fingers proves how much his words affected me.

“If you're going to come in my bed, it'll be from the pleasure I give you.”

I didn't make that up or dream it. I heard it, and I don't think I'll ever forget his words. I'm breathing hard, my body so tight, I feel as if my skin may rip at any moment. My heart is slamming inside my chest, my ribs aching from how my heart is trying to escape.

He's coming home.

To me.

Thank God.

A bubble of laughter leaves my lips as I wiggle in the bed. I don't care that he has

cameras; it's understandable, especially when he has different people watching his dogs. But it pissed me off that he didn't tell me. When I'd realized he'd watched me in the bedroom, gone was my anger, replaced by pure lust. I know that's a little cuckoo, but knowing he watched me come undone thrills me beyond belief. I've spent the last two days wondering why he didn't want me. Why he felt I was so bad for his health. But truth be told, he wouldn't watch me if he didn't want me. I mean, he could—he's a man with needs. But there was something in his voice that has me trembling with excitement.

Game on.

I hear his truck first, and my heart rattles in my chest as the anticipation burns through me. The dogs take off out of the room, barking and whining since they know he's home. I squeeze my thighs together as the front door slams into the wall, shaking the cabin before I hear his voice.

“There are my boys.”

I hop out of his bed and enter the living room to see him crouched down to greet the dogs.

“Look, boys. Daddy is home,” I say softly, almost teasingly.

He jerks his gaze up to mine, and I'm breathless at the sight of him. His hair is a mess, as if he's been running his fingers through it. His pupils are blown out, full of lust and promises of things I'm unsure if I'm ready for. He wears a pair of dark slacks with an orange button-down that has the first few buttons open. With his eyes trained on me, he kisses the dogs' muzzles, even Darcy's, before he stands to his full height.

I trail my eyes down his body and stop where I can see the clear outline of his cock straining against the thin fabric of his slacks.

God, he's stunning.

"Hands on the counter, baby girl."

My brow arches. "Baby girl? What happened to lass?"

His jaw tightens. "Things have changed."

"Have they?"

"Yes," he bites out, and then he nods to the counter. "Hands on the counter."

I don't even realize I'm shaking like a leaf until I have to move my limbs and do what he says. I lean my palms on the counter, and like the horny little slut I am, I arch my back, my cheeks peeking out from below my T-shirt. I wiggle my ass, and an appreciative groan bursts out of him, leaving heat to gather low in my belly. He comes toward me, his heavy footsteps sending jolts of pleasure straight to my pussy with each step he takes. With his eyes trained on me, he approaches the side of the counter before he takes the edge of the granite top in his hands. His knuckles are white as he drinks in my body, and I feel each glide of his gaze on my skin as if he is actually touching me.

He has me feeling like butter in a hot skillet with just one look.

The want, the anticipation, the excitement are suffocating me, and I want more .

Him. I want him.

Riggs swallows hard, bringing his eyes back to mine. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the camera," he says, his voice gruff and so deep.

“You should have.”

“You’re right,” he agrees, and he squeezes the granite countertop. “I didn’t want to embarrass you.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” I breathe out, and my statement awards me a little pull of his lips at one side. My thighs tremble as I stay locked under his gaze. “Did you enjoy what you saw?”

He chuckles, the sound so devilish, I could come to the sound of it. “There are no words to describe how much I enjoyed it.” My breath catches, my pussy weeping for this man. “But from now on, you’ll only come for me.”

“Is that right?” I ask, and I know a challenge is burning in my eyes.

He chuckles once more, and I am drawn tighter than a bow. He reaches out, running his thumb along my bottom lip. “So sassy.” I nip at his thumb, and his breath hitches. “I have all kinds of things I want to do to you, but I should probably fuck that mouth for driving me crazy these last couple days.”

I run my tongue along his thumb as I look up at him from beneath my lashes. “I drove you crazy?”

“Fucking nuts,” he admits, his eyes burning into mine.

“Show me how crazy.”

He doesn’t move, and disappointment moves through me. “If I do, I won’t stop.”

“I won’t ask you to.”



Riggs's eyes are pitch black. "You know this is a bad idea."

"I don't care," I murmur.

"You're too young."

I shrug. "Can you not keep up, Grandpa?"

He narrows his eyes, but his grin is unstoppable. "Oh, that mouth of yours." He chuckles as he leans in. "You won't be calling me a grandpa when I get through with you."

My lips curve. "No? Maybe Daddy instead?"

"Baby girl, you don't know what you're doing to me."

"Prove it," I taunt. "I have been flirting and goading you for the last four days, and you've done nothing but ignore me."

He chuckles. "Oh, baby girl, I haven't been ignoring you. I've been resisting you." His eyes widen a bit as he bends forward, his mouth so close all I have to do is lean in to kiss him. I don't, though. I wait. "But not anymore." A deep rumble leaves him before he steps behind me on the next breath I take. I gasp when he presses his hard cock against my ass, my hips hitting the counter.

I reach for him, but he tsks me. "I said, hold on to that counter." His voice is so authoritative, so hot. He wraps his fingers around my messy bun and pulls my head back, lengthening my neck for him as I once more do what he says. I cry out, my eyes drifting shut as he runs his nose along my neck. "You smell so sweet." His words are tight, clipped, and I get the feeling it's hard for him to speak. He trails his lips along my neck, licking and nibbling as he grips my hip with his other hand. "I bet your

pussy tastes even sweeter.”

“Only one way to find out,” I purr, pressing my ass back into his groin even harder.

He groans loudly before sinking his teeth into the crook of my neck. I gasp, my body singing for him as he turns me in his arms, pressing our bodies flush. He cups my jaw, rubbing his thumb along my bottom lip. His eyes burn into mine, his lips parted as he stares down at me. In a low voice, rough and dark, he says, “If I become too much, let me know.”

I pull my brows together. “Too much?”

He nods. “I have a feeling you’ll break every fraction of my control.”

I nip at his thumb, and his breath catches. “That’s been my plan since I met you.”

His eyes widen only a fraction before he leans in. His lips brush mine, and I can see he wants to kiss me, but something is holding him back. Unable to resist, I go up on my tippy-toes and take his mouth with mine. A deep rumble shakes his chest when my tongue strokes along the seam of his lips. He opens for me, and once my tongue touches his, I feel like I’m having an out-of-body experience. He tightens his hands on my hip and my jaw, and I swear I feel when his control snaps.

Riggs takes over the kiss, his tongue invading my mouth like he’s a treasure hunter and I’m the ultimate prize. He tastes like mint, his lips soft and thick against mine. He captures my bottom lip between his teeth, pulling back slightly, and I gasp again, rocking my hips against his. He is so hard, so thick, and I want every inch of him inside me. He releases my bottom lip, and then his hands are at my hips, lifting me up and onto the counter. We lock eyes as he runs his hands up my thighs and then moves between my parted legs. He cups my jaw with both hands and then drops his lips to mine in a searing kiss that has my heart pounding and my pussy begging for his

attention.

I reach between us, going for his zipper, but he smacks my hand away. “What did I say about your hands?”

My stomach clenches. “Please, I want to feel you.”

He chuckles against my lips, his eyes possessing mine. “And you will. Everywhere. But since I met you, there hasn’t been a second when I haven’t thought about how your pussy tastes.”

I smile slowly. “You’ve been talking about tasting me since you got home, and still, your mouth isn’t on me.”

His eyes darken. “You and that mouth.”

I lean in, licking his top lip. “Then shut me up.”

Riggs’s fingers bite into my skin as he growls deeply.

Like, actually growls. Like a dog.

It’s hot as fuck.

And by the serious look in his eyes, I think my mouth may finally be getting me in trouble.

A kind of trouble I want more than I want my next breath.

### CHAPTER 15

Riggs

I may come in my pants like a wee lad discovering Pornhub.

I haven't even gotten between her legs yet, and I'm ready to blow my load.

Between her sexy-ass body and her pouty lips that belong to a smart-ass mouth, I'm unsure how much more I can take.

I'm breathing like I've been doing laps on the ice for hours, and if I'm honest, this is the new normal when it comes to her.

She drives me out of my goddamn mind.

I trail my hands down her body, hating that the shirt is hiding what I so desperately want. I reach for the hem of said shirt, and she lifts her arms for me before I throw the tee behind me. I gaze down at her tits, looking like little teardrops with dusty pink nipples that are screaming to be feasted on. I lean in, running my lips down the middle of her chest before I cup her breasts in my hands. I stroke my thumb across one nipple while I swirl my tongue over the other. She moans loudly, her thighs squeezing my hips, bringing me closer to her core. She's burning hot between her legs, and I groan against her taut nipple before switching to the other.

“Such pretty nipples.”

“Riggs,” she pleads, sending fire throughout my veins. I nibble on the underside of her breast before I move a hand between her legs.

“Fucking fuck, baby girl, you’re soaked,” I say on a strangled moan, and she arches against my hand. Her panties are wet, and I know once I move the thin fabric to the side, I’ll have no choice but to drown in her.

“For you,” she says on a gasp, and a lusty red haze appears at the sides of my vision.

I hook my fingers into the thin fabric, my fingers brushing her wet center, and I’m rewarded with a throaty moan that goes straight to my cock. I didn’t think I could be any harder, but she proves I can. I meet her gaze as I yank it off, and I hear the sound of her thong tearing before I push the fabric away as if it’s offended me. Her eyes are hooded, pupils blown as she looks at me like I’m the only thing she wants.

Wow. I like how that makes me feel.

I look down, her center glistening, swollen, and bare. “Mmm,” I say, running my fingers along her lower lips. “Such a pretty pussy.”

Her chest heaves, her eyes dark with lust as I fall to my knees before her. I’m a big guy, and on my knees, her pussy is right there for the taking. As I’m about to lean in, I notice I have three sets of eyes on me, and one of them is barking like a mad fool. “Boys! Go lie down. I’ll give you attention once I’m done getting my fill here.”

The dogs scurry off as Clara pants above me. I look up at her, entranced by how beautiful she is, as I take her by her thighs, pulling her to the edge of the counter. Her eyes are dark as I bring each leg up over a shoulder before dropping my mouth to her weeping center. I lick her from her entrance to her clit in one swoop that has her jerking against my face. Her juices coat my tongue, and I almost roar in victory. I have thought of nothing but getting my mouth on her pussy since I saw her fingers

there, and while the wait was pure torture, the taste of her is worth it.

Clara's dainty fingers dig into my hair, her nails biting into my scalp as a choked moan leaves her lips. "Riggs. Fuck yes."

Her groaned words make me feral as I devour her. I lick her like she is forbidden fruit I'm not allowed to indulge in. Her mewls, her moans, her hisses are a symphony as I swirl my tongue around her clit. She tastes so fucking sweet, so fucking perfect, I can't get enough. I push a digit inside her, and she arches off the counter. I grin against her wanton center, but when she clenches my finger with her sweet pussy, I'm the one moaning.

"Mmm, your pussy is strangling me, baby girl," I mutter against her clit as I add another finger and curl them up to hit that spot I know she wants me to touch. "So fucking perfect, baby girl." Her juices gush around my fingers, and I grin. "Is my baby girl a slut for praise?"

She rocks her hips, her eyes dark as she brings that bottom lip between her teeth. "Or maybe a slut for you," she says, her voice so thready, it has me vibrating with need for her.

"Mmm, my slut, huh?" I say as I fuck her harder with my fingers, my control slipping with each pump of my hand. "You want me to treat you like a slut? Fuck you so hard you can't walk?" She can only nod, and I glare. "Words, baby girl. I need you to tell me what you want."

"Fuck yes, please!"

I groan against her pussy, swirling my tongue over her clit. "I don't know what is going to get me in more trouble—this pussy or that mouth."

She arches her back, grinding against my mouth as I finger-fuck her while sucking that sweet little nub of hers. “Both.”

I chuckle, and she jerks against my mouth. “That mouth is going to ruin me, baby girl.”

“You have no idea,” she cries out, her pussy strangling my fingers as she comes undone with a wail. I don’t stop, though; I fuck her pussy with my fingers until her juices are running down my wrist.

So. Fucking. Exquisite.

“I don’t?” I ask when her eyes meet mine.

She gives me a lopsided grin, and she reaches out to grab ahold of my beard. I gasp as she yanks me to her with more force than I would have thought she could muster. When she has me where she wants me, she bores her eyes into mine as she runs her tongue along my bottom lip, leaving me utterly speechless as she licks herself off my lips. “Just wait till my mouth is around your cock.”

She sends me a devilish grin, and I know one thing for sure.

I am beyond fucked.

I take her by her neck with my free hand while I curl my other deep inside her. Her mouth parts in the perfect O, and I cover her lips with mine. I run my tongue along hers, over the roof of her mouth, before I suck her tongue between my lips. She tastes so fucking good, and I want to devour her. I kiss her top lip then her bottom one before I remove my hand and bring it to her mouth. Her eyes are dark, set on me, as I stuff my fingers into her mouth. “Suck.”

She does as I say with a whimper, sucking my fingers as her eyes burn for me. “You taste so fucking good, don’t you, baby girl?”

She swirls her tongue over my digits as she nods, humming around my fingers and causing my cock to throb. I squeeze her neck as I withdraw my fingers, a string of spit leaving her lips. I lean in, licking the spit from her lips as I nibble on her bottom lip.

“Can I move my hands?”

I smirk against her lips. “Yes.”

She takes ahold of my shirt and rips it open, buttons flying as her hot mouth connects with my chest. She licks her way down my sternum before swirling her little pink tongue around my nipples. I pull her hair out of the bun, tangling my fingers in the strands as my head falls back, and she peppers kisses all over my neck. “Fuck, I want you so bad,” she mutters against my heated skin.

“Oh, Clara, you have no idea how badly I want to bury myself inside you,” I groan as her hands move over my stomach, tracing each ab before reaching for my belt. She hops off the counter, unbuckling the belt as her eyes meet mine. Fuck, if she isn’t a little minx. Her face is flushed, her eyes heavy-lidded. Her mouth is puffy and turned up in the naughtiest of grins. She makes quick work of my belt, opening my pants, and then pulling out my cock. Her eyes widen, her lips parting as she palms my length before stroking it. I jerk into her hands, tightening my fingers in her hair as she caresses me from root to tip. She licks her lips, and I’m a goner for her. She starts to lower to her knees, but I stop her.

“You put your lips on my cock, baby girl, I won’t make it.”

Her lips curve. “That’s the point.”



I can't help but chuckle as I take her hips in my hands. She runs the pad of her thumb along the head of my cock, collecting the precome, and I groan loudly, surprising myself. She brings it to her lips, licking it with her pink tongue as her eyes stay locked on mine. "But I want to taste you," she whines, and I jerk once more in her hand.

"And I want to fuck you."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

She turns, arching her sweet ass for me before I whip her back around. "Oh no, baby girl. When I fuck you for the first time, your eyes will be on me, and I'll watch as you come all over my cock."

She parts her lips, but before she can utter a word, I lift her back onto the counter. I press her thighs open, her soaked center taunting me as I squeeze my cock. I press the head to her entrance, her warmth, her juices making me wild...

Wait. Fuck.

"Shit. Are you on birth control?"

She nods. "Yes."

"Thank God. Say I can fuck you raw, baby girl," I practically beg. "I don't want anything between us."

"Please," she whines, wrapping her legs around my waist, digging her heels into my ass. "Fuck me, Riggs."

I roar with lust as I thrust into her. She's so fucking tight, and she strangles my cock,

making it to where I can only get halfway in. I rub her jaw with my thumb. “Relax. Baby. Let me in.”

“You’re too big,” she cries, her eyes filling with unshed tears.

“You can take me. Relax,” I urge. “Let me fill this gorgeous pussy.”

She cries out as I thrust a bit more, and the sight is something to behold. Her cunt stretches around me like I belong inside her. I rub her jaw, meeting her wet, heated gaze. “Look down, baby girl. Look how good you’re taking me. How your pretty pussy is stretched all around my cock. You are fucking perfection, baby.”

Her arousal floods around my cock, and I’m lost for her. She cries out when I thrust in to the hilt, filling her completely. Relief at being strangled by her sweet cunt forces a sound out of me I’ve never heard in my life. It’s between a growl, a moan, and a desperate sigh. It’s perfection. She’s perfection.

She squeezes my hips with her thighs, and I pull out slowly, only to slam back into her. “Yes, Riggs! Please!”

Her words are like fuel to my fire, and I can’t stop from pulling out and slamming back in again. She feels fucking fantastic. Her pussy is made for me, only me, and she is fucking mine. When she throws her head back, I squeeze her jaw and bring her gaze back to me. “Eyes on me, baby girl.”

She whimpers, her body clenching around mine, and I know I won’t last much longer. I need her to come, though, all over my cock. I move my hand from her jaw to my lips, sucking on my fingers before I drop them between us. I swirl my forefinger around her swollen clit, and she jerks against me before she screams my name.

“Yes, baby girl. Louder, so my neighbors can hear.”

She chokes on a laugh. “You have no neighbors!”

“Then you better get louder so the whole town of Blitz knows that I’m fucking this sweet cunt, and that you’re loving every second of it.”

She cries out, louder, like I wanted, before she chokes my cock with her orgasm. Her eyes squeezed shut, she throws her head back and wails my name. Her body is flushed, her tits bouncing with each of my thrusts as I rut into her like a beast. I can’t get enough; I want all of her. “Fuck, baby girl. You are the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Riggs, please. Harder.”

“Oh, my baby wants it harder?”

She whines in agreement, and I feel my control snap. I grip her hips, my fingers biting into her sweet flesh as I slam into her over and over. Each time I go deeper, her wails become louder. The dogs are barking, howling and whining, but I’m too lost to care. Clara screams my name as she strangles my cock once again. Not a second later, my balls draw up, and I explode inside her. She milks my cock, and to my surprise, I’m the one grunting her name.

“Fuck, Clara,” I moan against her neck as she circles my neck with her arms, pulling me in close. She digs her heels into my ass when I bury my face in her neck. Our hearts pound against each other, our bodies slick with exertion. She dances her fingers along my spine, and I kiss her neck, sucking and biting it before I lean back to look down at her. Her whole body is flushed, her eyes wild with lust, and I can’t get enough of her. I lean my forehead to hers, and she brings her hands up to cup my face. She runs her thumb along my lips, and I nip at it as our eyes meet.

“I’m so fucked,” I admit against her thumb.

She curls her lips, her eyes burning into mine. “Why is that?”

I can’t look away. She has me trapped in her heated gaze. I brush my lips along hers before I answer. “I thought if I fucked you once, I’d get over this. But that’s not the case at all.”

“Same.”

This girl. I shake my head. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Fuck me again?”

I search her gaze. “What if that’s not enough either?”

She tips her lips up, mischief twinkling in her navy depths. “Then I hope you have the stamina to keep going.”

I can’t help but grin. “Is that a challenge I hear, lass?”

She sticks out her tongue, running it along my bottom lip before she whispers, “Call it whatever you want.” She kisses my lip before nipping at it. I groan, my cock twitching inside her. “I want you, Riggs.”

Her hooded eyes burn into mine before she sucks on my bottom lip. She licks it, nibbles on it, and the action sends molten heat throughout my whole body. I feel myself getting hard all over again, both our climaxes running down my length. I jerk my hips against her and mutter, “I don’t think you know what you’re asking for.”

“I do.”

“You do?”

She nods, peppering kisses along my jaw. I run my tongue along her lip, and she whispers, “I do. You, Riggs. I’m asking for you.”

Her words hit me in a way I’ve never experienced, and I don’t know how to handle them.

But that’s a worry for tomorrow.

Today, Clara McDavid is mine.

### CHAPTER 16

Clara

Riggs's arms are like steel bands around my limp body.

I feel like a jellyfish, all gooey and boneless. I have never been fucked so hard in my life, and I want more. Even though I am sore, and I feel as if I may look a bit funny when I walk away from him, I need so much more. My eyes drift shut as he trails his lips along my jaw, my chin, down my neck until my head is hanging back and I'm moaning his name. No matter how good I imagined it would be between us, nothing compares to the real thing. This man is an enigma.

How can he be so damn grumpy and act like I'm a pain in his ass but then fuck me with such care and need? He's caring; he's shown that to me, but I truly thought he would just get his. Boy, was I wrong. Between the endless orgasms and the heated looks, I feel beyond special. I feel wanted. All the things I've so desperately wanted all my life, and Riggs gave them to me in mere minutes. It makes absolutely no sense to me, but I want to be on the receiving end for the rest of my days.

Whoa, hold your horses, Clara. But then again...no. I want him, and I'm not going to hide that. Or try to think otherwise. Especially when it's obvious he wants me too. But want and love are two different things. He can want to fuck me, but love can be completely off the table. Elliot warned me about this, and here I am, ready to fall face first in love with him when I don't know what he wants.

Riggs nibbles on my collarbone, distracting me from my thoughts, before he

whispers, “Don’t leave me hanging for two days like that again.”

I rub my cheek against his, loving how rough his beard feels on my skin. “You said I was bad for your health.”

He chuckles against my jaw, sinking his teeth into it. “Even though you are, I was just teasing you like you do me.”

“Well, I may have gotten a bit butthurt.”

“A bit?” he teases, his voice gruff. “Baby, you made me download the app just to see you and the boys.”

“No. Your stubborn self did that all on your own.”

He pulls back, obscuring my line of vision. A smirk plays on his lips, his eyes dark and playful. “And your stubborn self uploaded photos only on there.”

I shrug. “I was pissed.”

“Why?”

“Like I said, I’m over here throwing my best game at you, and you were ignoring it all.”

He scoffs. “You were being a pain in the ass.”

I nip at his bottom lip. “And you love it.”

“Such a mouth.” He chuckles low and deep as he runs his nose along my jaw. “When do you need to leave?”

I groan, not wanting to do that at all. “By eight.”

He licks up my neck, sucking on my heated flesh. I feel his arm move, and he mutters against my skin, “It’s ten after seven.”

I bury my fingers in his hair, tugging on the strands tightly. I don’t want to go. For the first time in my life, I don’t want to be with my dogs. I want to be with him. He wraps his arms around me once more, and he lifts me from the counter. “That means I have fifty minutes to fuck you senseless against the wall and then fix you breakfast.”

I giggle, the sound filling the space around us. “Is that enough time?”

He scoffs, the sound so sinful, my pussy clenches around his thick cock. “Not nearly, but I’ll make it work.”

I grin. “Confident in yourself?”

His gaze tells me he totally is, and the grin on his lips leaves me breathless. “Maybe I’ll use the time to spank that ass as punishment for that mouth of yours.”

I press my lips to his bottom lip. “Please, Daddy.”

He groans, digging his fingers into my hips. “You’re fucking dangerous, baby girl.”

I feign innocence. “Me? No.”

“Yes, you,” he insists.

I lean in, nipping at his bottom lip. His eyes darken as I sink my teeth into the cushion of his flesh. “Are you scared?”



His eyes flash with such heat, my body burns for him. “Fucking terrified.”

Before I can even come up with a retort, he presses me into the wall, the coolness on my back making me hiss. He takes me by the back of the knees, pushing them into the wall as he pulls out and slams back in. He fills me so deeply, I can’t do anything other than find purchase by digging my nails into his biceps. Riggs is fucking magnificent. Strong, wide shoulders, defined and toned. Hair down the middle of his chest that travels all the way past his navel to his engorged cock. His waist is trim, his abs thick and corded, and he has that V that happens to make me forget I’m a feminist. Instead, it makes me want to drop to my knees and say “Yes, Daddy” at every turn. Before I can drool all over him for his beauty, he fucks me ruthlessly, each thrust harder and deeper than before. He fills me so fucking fully, I know no other man could ever measure up to him. He’s so thick, so long, I swear I feel it in my throat as he fucks my pussy. He leans in, taking my nipple in his mouth, and I cry out when he bites down lightly. He continues to fuck me as he feasts on my nipple, lapping and biting from one to the other, driving me to madness. I’ve never come from nipple stimulation, but if he keeps it up, I just might.

“Such perfect tits,” he grunts against my flesh. “Just enough to fit in my mouth.”

I groan, tilting my hips up so he can go deeper. He licks his way up to my neck, sucking and biting before capturing my lips in an all-consuming kiss. I hold on to him, to the point that I’m sure I’m drawing blood as he pounds me into the wall with each thrust. It’s deliciously perfect, and I can’t help but scream his name for the nonexistent neighbors to hear.

Against my lips, he mutters, “You scream so fucking good for me, don’t you, baby girl?”

“Riggs,” I cry out, squeezing his cock as my release comes out of nowhere. He’s so deep, hitting me in that spot that girls only dream of. I come hard, my body trembling

under his manic thrusts. His dark-chocolate eyes meet mine as I squeeze him tightly, and when he grins a predatory grin that should be terrifying, my heart explodes.

I'm ruined.

This man is the only man I'll ever want.

He thrusts once, then again, before he stills, my name a stifled curse on his lips. I feel him coating my insides with his hot come, and I swear I almost come again. My body is shaking, my toes curled so tightly they're cramping, and my heart is damn well about to come out of my chest. But then Riggs's eyes meet mine. Such heat, so much sin swirls in the depths before he lets one of my legs drop. I sway, but he holds my hips in place, his cock still deep inside me, throbbing and filling me deeply. He slowly pulls out of me, and I'm disappointed he didn't kiss me first, but then he lowers himself to his knees. My eyes widen when he spreads my lower lips and drops his mouth to my swollen clit. My mind takes a moment to catch up as my body sings for him. He shoves his tongue inside me, and I bow off the wall, jerking my hips and screaming so loudly, even my eardrums rattle.

The dogs don't like that at all, but I'm realizing when we're going at each other, nothing else matters.

Breathless, I cry out, "What the fuck, Riggs! Please, I can't."

He chuckles against my pussy. "But you will, baby girl."

Jesus Christ on a cracker.

I detonate. I come so hard, I see nothing but white spots. He continues to suck on me through my orgasm, making my legs shake. He then swirls his tongue around the opening of my pussy, lapping at my...well, hell...our come. I groan in pleasure at the

thought of him tasting us. No one has ever done that to me, and it's really hot to see a big, burly man between my legs, lapping up our orgasms. When he stands, I can only stare at him when he cages my head with his hands. He locks his eyes with mine, his lips and beard glistening with our releases, leaving me to moan as I arch up into him. His eyes dance before he leans in and grabs hold of my jaw. With his other hand, he taps my lips with an expectant look on his face, his eyes molten for me. I raise my brow, confused, and once more, he taps on my lips.

When I open my mouth to ask "What?" he deposits our come into my mouth, and I can't keep my eyes from widening. His hold on my jaw is hard and has my belly clenching as he says, "Swallow." I don't even hesitate; I do as he asks, and he nods approvingly. "That's my good girl."

Can you come from praise? I think I am.

Gasping, I gaze up at him as he thumbs my bottom lip. "Do you taste how good we are together?"

Breathlessly, I whisper, "Yes."

He leans in so that I can't see anything but him. He moans against my lips. "You may be taking breakfast to go."

"Why?"

"Because I'm nowhere near done eating mine."

With that, he drops back to his knees and buries his face between my thighs.

And continues to feast on me for breakfast.

### CHAPTER 17

Riggs

I can still taste Clara on my lips.

Smell her on my skin.

Hear her cries as she came.

And I want more.

A lot more.

Which wasn't how this was supposed to go. I was supposed to fuck her, be good, and walk away.

That's not happening.

I can't pinpoint what it is, but something about this girl has me in a choke hold. I have this animalistic need to claim her. Make her mine so that no one can have her. It doesn't make sense. It has been fourteen years since my heart has fully pounded in my chest, and fuck, if it's not pounding at the mere thought of her.

Her smiles.

Her doe eyes.

Her lips.

Her fuckable body.

That mouth that doesn't shut up.

Everything. Her. I want all of her.

I don't understand what I'm feeling. I don't get this need for her. I had her. It should be enough, but it's not even close. I want to know everything about her. I want to hold her. Be with her. Laugh with her. Train her fool of a dog.

Fuck me, I sound like a fucking teenager after getting his cock wet for the first time.

What is wrong with me! What has she done to me?

Her pussy has to have put some kind of spell on me because I want to drown in it.

Live in it.

Goddammit, I'm getting hard just sitting here.

I adjust myself as I lean back in my office chair. I twirl the tip of my beard as I sit at my desk where I'm supposed to be working, but instead, I'm thinking of her. She was more than I could ever have imagined, and I don't like the idea of her not being in my bed tonight. We never made it to my bed, where she came without me that time. I fucked her against the wall, ate her against said wall, and smacked her ass as she went to take a shower. She then walked out of my place on noodle-like legs with a PB and J sandwich and a wicked little grin on her face to head to work with the boys.

Leaving me alone.

One thing I used to love being, until she came into my life.

I groan, dropping my head into my hands as my heart battles my brain. In my brain's defense, my heart has been dead for a while. And really, why are we listening to that thing? He failed us when it came to Peppa. He believed she was the one, but really, the one for her was whoever was around to fuck her and pay for her family. I was never her one. I was her cash cow. Clara wouldn't do what Peppa did. She's a good girl.

Jesus above, what am I thinking?

Clara is young. She probably only wants to fuck.

She doesn't want forever.

Especially with a fucking tool like me.

Someone who leaves all the time and has thirty guys to take care of. Someone who failed at one marriage and couldn't keep the person he loved. I bet she wants kids, and I don't want those. Not in this world. Especially when I don't know how long I'll be around for them. I'm not the guy for Clara McDavid, but why do I want to be?

It's her smile.

I want to be on the receiving end of it daily.

Fucking hell.

I groan again as I run my fingers through my hair. As I rub my scalp, I can't help but remember how it felt to have Clara do the same. How her dainty yellow nails dug into my skin in such a pleasurable way. Jesus Christ, I have to see her again.

Reaching for my phone, I open our text thread.

Me: What are your plans for tonight?

She answers right away.

Clara: Not sure. I guess I don't have any.

Me: You do.

Clara: Yeah?

Me: Yeah. I'm making you dinner.

Clara: Well, okay then.

Me: Okay then.

Satisfied with that, I go to put my phone down, until another text sounds.

Clara: So you want to see me?

Me: Baby girl, you know that answer.

Clara: Maybe I want to hear you say it.

I grin and hit the microphone to send a voice message.

"I want to see you tonight."

She hearts the message and then types back quickly.

Clara: On a scale of one to ten, how would you feel if I wore this?

My brows knit together as the dots turn into a photo.

Of Clara.

In only a bra and panties.

The stunning black lace number has her tits looking scrumptious. Her stomach is flat, but you can tell she likes sweets. She's so sexy, and a barely there thong has my mouth going dry. I breathe in deeply through my nose and somehow type back.

Me: Just that?

Clara: I'll have to wear a dress over it, for the drive over.

Me: Of course, but that'll be under the dress?

Clara: It will if you want it to be, Daddy.

My cock turns to steel, heat burning deep in my stomach as I lick my lips.

Me: Keep on messing with me, baby girl.

Clara: You love it. Daddy.

A rumble of laughter escapes me as I scroll back up to the picture of her fine self. She is fucking perfect, I swear. All legs, a sweet ass, and tits I want in my hands and mouth. Before I start drooling, another message comes through.

Clara: Are you really going to cook, or do you plan on eating me for dinner? 'Cause I



didn't eat lunch, and I'm hungry. So, should I get food before I come?

I laugh at that.

Me: First, yes, I'm making you food. And second, I'll be eating you too, after I punish that ass because you forgot to eat again.

Clara: In my defense, my life is hard.

Me: So is mine, and I still make sure both of us eat.

Clara: You ate me!

Me: Best meal of my day. Five stars, highly recommend. I'll be a repeat customer.

Clara: My only customer?

My heart slams into my chest, begging for her. She's flirting like the little minx she is, but I don't think she realizes how important that question is to me.

Me: Only me.

Clara: Yes, Daddy.

I shake my head, grinning like a fool, until there is a knock at my door. I look up to find Dan Davenport coming in with a wave and a grin. He's a big guy, light-brown hair, thick beard, and a potbelly from his beer and pretzel obsession. He's a big personality and one of my favorite people. He hired me on a whim, believed in me before I even believed in myself. I turn my phone over as his voice fills the room. "Great road trip, Coach. Your boys are killing it."

“Thanks, Dan.”

“No, thank you,” he says, leaning on the back of the chair in front of him. His weight makes the chair groan as he sets me with a look. “Ready to close this out?”

“Yes, sir. That’s the plan.”

“Good. I have the banners already ordered for the finals.”

I nod. “Good. We’ll need them.”

“I’m depending on you.”

“Yes, sir.”

We share a grin. “Alex was a good move,” he tells me, and I nod in agreement.

“As much as I hated to take him back from the Assassins, I knew we couldn’t win without him.”

“You were right. Even if the damn little shit knocked up my granddaughter.”

I press my lips together, hiding all emotion. “Congratulations?”

A soft chuckle leaves his lips. “Thanks. Though, she’s pissed at me. I tried to say she couldn’t work for us while being with him, but I didn’t mean it. I wouldn’t do that to her. I think I say that shit just to test them. Alex came to her defense real fast, and while I already like the guy, I think I’ll like him even more as the father of my grandchild.”

“Alex is a good dude. He loves Elliot deeply. He tells me all the time. Really

annoying about it,” I joke, and then I pause.

When do I joke?

Dan nods. “I know, but being with a hockey player isn’t easy. All the traveling, the mental game. I don’t want that for my girls, but they’ve all ended up with one. Well, except my sweet Clara. I’m still holding out hope she’ll find herself a rich man whom I can get to invest.”

His laughter makes me sick. Clara’s name on his lips sets my teeth on edge, and I’m not sure why. He is her grandfather, not competition, yet he could keep her away from me. I also don’t like the idea of her with anyone else. I swallow past the lump in my throat as he asks, “How’s it going with her? She’s a good girl, right?”

Oh, you have no idea how good of a girl she is.

I school my features as I meet his gaze. “Gretzky and Gordie love her. She’s been great.”

He nods proudly, his eyes light. “That’s wonderful to hear. I have to say, these wins look good on you, Coach. I haven’t ever seen you smile this much.”

I look away as I blow out a breath, and I have the urge to tell him it isn’t the wins but his granddaughter instead. Maybe if I’m honest and tell him my intentions, it won’t blindside him. Not one of his granddaughters ever told him about their love interests, just waited until he found out. Maybe Clara and I will be different?

I don’t tell him, though, since maybe I should ask her first. Yeah, she said the bit about being her only customer, but that’s sex. Fucking hell, this girl has me all in my head. Before I can say anything, though, Dan’s phone rings. He waves to me, answering it and leaving my office.

Leaving me with my thoughts.

Of Clara.

I turn my phone over to see another text from her. It's another photo of her, cuddling with Darcy, Gordie, and Gretzky out in her dog park. While she has clothes on, an athletic outfit of shorts and a tank, it isn't what she's wearing that has my mouth going dry.

It's that fucking smile of hers.

A mix of happiness and something sneaky.

Like she has a secret.

Only for me.

I want to know them all.

### CHAPTER 18

Clara

Unsure if I can last two hours before getting some food, I make sure the boys are all set at the playhouse before I head into town for a smoothie and maybe a muffin. Hopefully Drippy Drip has their pomegranate-orange muffins. They are my favorite. I almost consider calling Riggs to see if he wants anything, but that seems a little too girlfriend/boyfriend when he only just fucked me stupid this morning. I don't want him to think the muffin is a reward for a job well done. No, I want to reward him in all kinds of different ways.

Yet I want to bring him a muffin.

In the girlfriend/boyfriend sense.

Maybe I will since that's how Louisa and Ciaran got started. They bought each other muffins and then screwed each other's brains out. Muffins and sex seem a pretty legit combination, in my opinion. Be a nice late-night snack. Before I can fall too deeply into my thoughts of sex, muffins, and Riggs, my phone rings.

"Hey, sis!" I answer, and Elliot's voice fills my SUV.

"Hey, what've you got planned tonight? I thought maybe we could go shopping since I'll be busy tomorrow with the game."

I press my lips together. "I'm surprised you're not gonna shack up with Alex."

She giggles. “I will if you have plans, but I wanted to tell you all about his mom. How amazing she is, and what happened in Michigan.”

“What happened?”

“I want to tell you in person.”

My heart clenches. “Tell me now.”

“Why? Do you have plans?”

I make a face, but I don’t feel right lying to her. I thought I could lie to her when it came to Riggs, but I can’t. I love and respect my sister too much for that. “I do.”

“Oh! What are you doing?”

“You tell me your news first.”

I don’t have to see her face to know her brows are drawn in and she’s glaring. “Clara Drew, what are you doing tonight? Or rather...who are you doing?”

“Rude!” I yell, even though I laugh too. “For your information, there will be dinner before I do him.”

She scoffs. “Shit, knowing you, you’ll probably fuck him as you two eat.”

I snort. “You make me sound so dirty.”

“You are. You make me look like a nun. And I don’t mean by how many guys. I mean by the freaky shit you do with them.”

“Hey, don’t play. You take all my ideas and use them on Alex.”

Her laughter is like music, but I know she’s blushing hard. “I did use that little blow job trick the other night.”

“Which one? Where you fuck yourself with a dildo and suck him off?”

“Jesus Christ, Clara!”

“What? That’s hot.”

“No, when I hollow out my mouth and have him fuck my throat.”

“Oh,” I say dryly. “That’s not a trick, El. That’s normal head on a Tuesday afternoon.”

“Oh my God, Clara!” she squeals, giggling like a little Sunday-schooler. “You are too much.”

“But you love me.”

“I do,” she agrees. “So, tell me who you’re doing tonight?”

Damn it, I thought I had distracted her. “I don’t know if I want to tell you yet. Let me see how it goes.”

She pauses for a moment, and then her voice is loud as she yells, “You hooked up with Riggs, didn’t you! Girl, you’ve worked for him for four days.”

“What? I told you I think he’s hot.”

“Well, duh, he is. But he is emotionally closed off to everyone.”

“I don’t think so. He was pretty passionate when he was wrecking the shit out of me this morning.” I look down at my bruised thighs from the strength in his powerful hips. “I’m pretty sure I’m walking bowlegged.”

“For the love of all things holy...” she mutters, and I know she’s shaking her head. “How?”

Now, I’m the one pausing. “Well, you see, what had happened was?—”

“Clara Drew, what did you do to wake up his emotionally dented ass?”

“Hey, that’s rude.”

She giggles. “Girl, you’re already defending him? You’re a goner for him. Nothing I say will change that. So tell me how you did it.”

I bring in my brows, but I don’t disagree with her. I am a goner for him. Sighing, I say, “It isn’t what I did—well, I did do something, but I didn’t know he was watching.”

“You knew.”

I laugh. “No, really! I didn’t,” I insist. “The first night I was in his house, I was in his bed, and it smelled so good. Just how he smells. I got all hot and bothered, and I got off.”

“In his bed?”

“Oh yeah. It was hot.”



“You came in Coach Riggs McCoy’s bed.”

I grin. “I call him Daddy .”

I’m met with silence, and then my phone rings with a FaceTime call. Thankfully, I’ve already parked, so I hit it just as Elliot’s face comes on the screen. Her long hair is pulled over one shoulder as her greenish-blue gaze locks on me. She looks like a doll, so pretty. Thick lips, a little cupid’s bow, and the most stunning long lashes. I hope my nephew has her eyes and lips. He’s gonna be the most gorgeous baby! Before I can tell my sister how pretty and glowy she is, she gives me a stern look, but she’s holding back a grin. “One second, please.”

Just then, all my sisters join the call. Each one is so beautiful and alight with happiness to see me. I’m not surprised that Elliot called them; we’re all best friends.

The only good thing our parents did was give us one another.

“Sisters, our baby sister is a slut,” Elliot announces, and Eliza giggles as Austen’s eyes widen.

It’s Louisa who says, “It’s okay. I was too, until I met Ciaran. Hell, I don’t even think I knew his name before we fucked. Aw, I just knew I would love him.” She does a little wiggly dance that has me grinning. She is just so happy. So in love.

“Wow. I’m so proud of my eldest sister right now,” Eliza mumbles, and we all laugh at that.

“Says the one who married a guy for a coffee shop,” Louisa fires back.

Eliza scoffs. “And all the orgasms.”

Austen snorts. "I'm the only normal one here who fell in love before I knocked boots with him."

I raise my eyebrows at her. "You were living with him without anyone knowing. Someone you didn't know. Didn't you try to kill him too?"

"She broke his Xbox," Louisa provides.

Austen gives us a dark look. "Well, at least I didn't get knocked up and hide it for six months!"

Elliot makes a face. "Hey, I am doing God's work here. Providing you guys with a nephew!" We all laugh at that. "But for real, Clara has all of us topped," Elliot insists.

"Wow. I don't agree," I mutter, but everyone is still giggling.

"Clara Drew, tell everyone what you just told me."

I flash her an exasperated look, but I don't care. These women are my heart and soul. We may tease one another, but at the end of the day, we love one another more than anything. "I don't know what the big deal is. So I am dog-sitting for this guy?—"

"Coach Riggs McCoy," Elliot supplies, and everyone's jaw drops, their eyes widening. Elliot nods. "Exactly."

"Wait," Louisa wheezes. "You're being slutty for Coach McCoy?"

Elliot snorts. "More than slutty. Our baby sister calls him Daddy."

Austen and Eliza giggle loudly as the latter cries out, "Shut up!"

“Hell yeah, I do. Have you seen him?” I justify, and Louisa agrees.

“I’d call him Daddy.”

“Same,” Austen giggles as she shuts the door behind her. It’s dark on her screen, so I assume it’s nighttime where she is. “Don’t tell Dimitri, though.”

“Um, yes. Coach McCoy has all the zaddy energy.” Eliza beams. “We all know this. Tell us what happened to warrant calling our dear, sweet sister a slut?”

I love Eliza. She is the mom of the group even though she’s the second eldest. I grin as I shrug. “Like I said, I am dog-sitting for him. He has been great, really kind, and has made me feel at home, even had food for me on the nights I’d stay at his house.”

“Why are you staying at his house? You don’t do that,” Louisa says, and I nod.

“Not usually, but Peepaw asked me to since Riggs is really protective of his dogs, Gretzky and Gordie.”

“Aw, such cute names!” Eliza gushes. “Are you comfortable there?”

“Yeah, for sure. He’s been super cool, and of course, I’m crushing on him because he’s hot as sin.”

“So hot,” Louisa agrees.

“Like, take me to hell, Father, for I have had impure thoughts about another man who’s not my husband,” Eliza jests, and we all giggle.

“Also, let’s all remember that Peepaw set this up. So when he comes with his bullshit, we can blame him,” Austen points out, and we all nod in a united front.

“Exactly!” I agree, pointing to my sisters. “Anyway, he smells good when he’s standing beside you. Like all woodsy, a lumberjack, wrestle-a-bear kind of sexy smell, and I was looking at his bed and thought maybe the bed smelled like him. So, I jumped onto the bed, and it did.” I let out a slutty moan that has them all laughing. “Got me all hot and bothered, so I got off.”

I’m met with stunned silence as Elliot chokes out a laugh. “Yes, our sister came in Coach’s bed without him in it.”

I shrug. “Yeah. But apparently, he saw me do it.”

Everyone is talking then.

“What?”

“How?”

“Oh my God!”

“Are you embarrassed?”

“Not at all. I’d do it for him in person. But I guess he has a camera in the room, and I didn’t know that.”

“He saw you on what, a nannycam?” Louisa asks.

“No, I think a doggycam.”

“Who cares about the damn cam. What happened next?” Austen practically yells then covers her mouth, a blush filling her beautiful face.

“He admitted to watching me, then I told him to look at the camera again because I was going to give him one hell of a show.”

Louisa giggles loudly. “You are my favorite kind of slut.”

I laugh loudly at that. “Oh girl, guess what he said?”

All of them gasp, “What?”

“He told me to take my hands off his pussy.”

Pure chaos ensues as my sisters giggle, cackle, and yell at me for all the deets, and I don’t disappoint. I tell them everything, and all I can do is grin like a fool.

I know my sisters don’t judge me or think less of me. We grew up in a world where women were objects and property. My sisters did everything they could to make sure I never had to be anyone’s object. I wasn’t forced into anything or owned by anyone. The first time I had sex, I loved how much power I felt in making my choice. Sex wasn’t tarnished for me like it was for them.

For all the protection and love they provided me, I love them more than I can ever express. But I would give it all back in a heartbeat if it meant they’d never have had to go through what they did. Sometimes I wonder if we were all meant to leave the cult with deep scars. While mine aren’t from trauma like what they experienced, I still came out a little broken. I don’t think I can blame the cult since I was born the way I was, but still, why did we have to go through what we did? It’s all so depressing and unfair. Why couldn’t we have grown up normal? Why did we all have to experience so much pain?

But then, is the reward for all of it having one another?

Because it's in moments like this that I'm grateful for my sisters. And I know they're grateful for me.

### CHAPTER 19

Riggs

I cup the back of my neck as I wait for my coffee to be placed on the counter. I didn't get much sleep last night, and after my morning activities, I didn't catch a nap. Nope, I'm too keyed up from all the thoughts and feels of Clara McDavid. A smirk pulls at my lips as I recount what she said she's going to have under her dress tonight. I can't wait to get my hands on her creamy skin, to taste her and devour her in all the ways possible.

Fuck, I want her.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I lift it up to see a message from the girl who has been on my mind like crazy for the last couple days.

Clara: Do you like muffins?

I bring in my brows, and then I smirk.

Me: I do enjoy your muffin. Pretty sure I made that clear this morning.

My mouth waters at the thought of her pretty center all ready for me to eat, as her next message comes through.

Clara: No, I mean eating muffins.

Me: I did eat your muffin. Very tasty.

Clara: Riggs! Come on!

Me: Truthfully, no, I don't like muffins. I'm more of a donut kind of guy.

Clara: Ah, okay. I was going to get you a muffin at Drippy Drip for a late-night snack.

I look up at the sound of the door as she flutters in. Her dark-brown hair is down, loose waves over her shoulders. She's wearing a floral sundress in all kinds of pinks, blues, purples, and greens that stops right at her thighs, showing off her long legs and her pink-painted toes. She looks fucking adorable, that's for sure.

I look back down at my phone.

Me: I'll eat anything from you.

I look over at her as her lips curve up in that wicked grin of hers. Her eyes light up, the navy so bright, it's intoxicating.

My phone vibrates.

Clara: Anything on me, or that I bring you?

Me: Shit, I'll eat the muffin off your muffin, baby girl. If it has to do with you, I want it.

I watch as a flush creeps along her neck and up her cheeks as her grin grows.

Clara: Not to assume, but I think you might like me, Coach, Sir, Man Guy.



I grin, licking my lips.

Me: Good assumption.

I look back over at her, but she's not grinning like I thought she would be. Instead, she's got her arms around Gavin Hepworth. He hugs her tightly, grinning from ear to ear as they part, and he looks down at her with pure adoration in his eyes. She greets him with a smile that belongs to me, and my fucking jaw goes tight. I have no right to walk over there and knock my fist into his perfect smile, but that doesn't mean I don't want to. How dare he look at my girl?

Your girl?

Dammit to hell, what is happening to me?

I narrow my eyes as they continue to talk. She's moving her hands a lot, but I can't hear what either of them is saying because it's so loud in here.

“Coach?”

I look up to see my coffee is waiting for me. With a nod of thanks, I grab it and then look back at where Clara and Gavin are standing. If I'm honest with myself, she looks good with him. He's all light like she is, kind, and he'd be good for her. He's only a year older than her, and I bet she wouldn't call him Grandpa like she does me.

She definitely wouldn't call him Daddy.

No, that's only for me.

I don't want her with him. I want her with me.

Clara is mine.

She must feel me staring at her because her eyes move to me, and gone is the sweet girl who was looking up at him. Instead, my feral little baby girl is looking only at me. Her lips part, her eyes go hooded, and then she is giving me that sinful grin that I want to be the last thing I see before I die. Fuck, she's gorgeous. She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, and pure defiance plays on her face.

She is going to be my downfall.

She lifts her hand, batting those sweet lashes up at Gavin as she places the hand that belongs on me against his chest. It's only for the briefest of seconds, but it gets my blood rushing through my body. She wiggles her hips, grinning up at him in a way that's so damn saccharine, I want to throttle her. When she lets out a breathy little sigh of, "Oh Gavin, stop! I'm related to Alex now. I have to say he's the best goalie!"

I see red, but I don't react.

No. That's what my little minx wants.

She wants me to lose my cool, but I'm not going to give it to her.

She wants to fuck with me? Well, I can fuck with her.

I lick my lips as I run my hand down my beard before dropping it into my pocket. Her eyes trace the movement and even stay on me as I take a long pull of my coffee. We lock eyes, and I dare her to touch him again. She doesn't, thank God, but when she turns to place an order, Gavin leans into her side, saying, "Just put hers with mine."

Without hesitation, I walk toward them as I say, "And I'll pay for them both."

Gavin and Clara look up as I hand the cashier my card. Clara smiles as Gavin sputters, “Oh. Hey, Coach! Thanks.”

“No problem.” Clara’s eyes don’t leave mine. She orders three pomegranate-orange muffins and a smoothie, while he orders who the hell knows what. I don’t even see him. All I see are her doe eyes and that mouth that is all curved up for me.

Not him. Me.

“Hi, Coach McCoy.”

“Miss McDavid.”

Her eyes flutter with trouble, and I can’t help but chuckle at her antics. She’s a damn brat if I’ve ever seen one. She licks her pouty lips as she closes the distance to me and the counter where the orders are delivered. She stands between Gavin and me, her legs crossed at the ankles as she plays with the hem of her skirt, looking all innocent and fucking delectable.

I’m the only one who knows she’s pure fucking trouble.

“Your dress is very pretty,” I tell her, and she preens up at me.

Gavin says something, but I’m too busy typing a message to her.

Me: It’d look better on my floor as you sit on my face.

Clara glances at her phone, and her eyes widen before she slaps a hand across her mouth. I hold back my laughter while I stand beside her, her heat, her cherry smell, leaving me dizzy with want for her.

“You okay?” Gavin asks, and Clara only nods, not looking at him.

“Just fine,” she mutters as she drops her hands to her phone. She tips it more toward me, so he can’t see, and types me back.

Clara: Or around my hips as I suck you to the back of my throat.

I take a deep breath, my cock loving the sound of that.

Hell, I do too.

“Are you waiting for something, Coach?”

I nod and lie, “Sure am.”

He nods, but I pay him no mind as I text Clara.

Me: Waiting for you to blow this dude off and let me fuck you in the bathroom.

Beside me, Clara’s lips quirk as she looks up from her phone to Gavin. “Sorry, what?”

“Can I take you out again tonight?”

Dude’s got balls, I’ll give him that. I act like my phone is the most amazing thing in the world as she says, “Sorry, I have plans tonight.”

“Oh, too bad.”

“Totally.”

“Maybe another time?”

I fully expect her to agree. She’s a good girl, but to my surprise, she says, “I’m not gonna lead you on, Gavin. I’ve just started dating someone.”

Dating.

Hmm.

I don’t like that word.

“Dating? So, you can date me too. You’re not exclusive, are you?”

Can I trade him? I think I have the power to do that.

Before she can answer him, her name is called, and she gets her food and drink. She looks over her shoulder at us. “Thanks, Coach. See you around, Gavin.”

I want to clock the kid for watching my girl walk away, those sweet little globes swaying side to side under her skirt, which swishes and gives wee peeks of the backs of her milky thighs.

My thighs. That I want to mark and turn a bright pink.

My groin tightens as my heart picks up in cadence.

I look over at Gavin as he looks back at me. “Can’t win them all,” he says with a shrug,

I nod in agreement as my phone sounds.

It's an image of the dress Clara had on across the sink in a bathroom. In the mirror, I can see that she's only in her bra and panties.

Fucking minx.

### CHAPTER 20

Clara

I don't even realize I'm holding my breath until there is a soft knock on the door.

“Open up, baby girl.”

His voice is deep, rumbling, and so damn hot. I unlock the door, opening it as I lean against the wall so that no one sees me when he enters. He kicks the door shut with the heel of his shoe before leaning against it, his chest rising and falling just as quickly as mine is. We lock eyes, and instantly, I'm breathless. His jaw is tight, his eyes narrowed, and my pussy clenches at the sight.

Fuck, I want him.

I hadn't expected him to be here. I thought he was at work. But the moment my eyes landed on him, I knew I had to poke the bear. He looked so dashing in his black slacks and orange Knoxville Bears polo, his hair brushed to the side, curling at the ends, and his beard all neatly trimmed. He looked way more rugged this morning when I left him, but now, he is all business. All put together and in control.

I have no choice but to fuck with that control.

The way he stood beside me—his hand in his pocket, acting as if he wasn't vibrating with want for me—drove me crazy. I wanted to drive him as crazy as I felt, and now, I am on the receiving end of his scrutiny. Every fiber of my being is on high alert,

excitement coursing through me and straight between my legs.

“Hey.”

He chuckles, but amusement doesn't reach his dark-chocolate gaze. “Hey there.”

He drinks in my body with his eyes. The black lace bra I have on covers absolutely nothing, and I know he can see how erect my nipples are. The black lace thong I wear is the same, giving him a perfect view of my lower lips and my arousal for him. He licks his lips, running his hand down his beard as he continues his assault on me with his stare. Each pass of his eyes feels like a lashing, and I love how it makes me feel.

Powerful.

Desired.

Wanted.

“Tell me something, Clara,” he grits out. “Do I appear to be the kind of man that shares what is mine?”

Tingles run through me as I arch my body against the wall. Breathlessly, I whisper, “I didn't realize I was yours.”

“Interesting,” he says, throwing his coffee into the trash and locking the door before stalking toward me like I'm his prey. My breathing picks up, and I wet my lips with my tongue as he steps in front of me. “Did I give you the impression while I was fucking you that you were anything but mine?” My eyes widen as he cups my pussy in his palm. “When I was tongue-fucking this pussy, did you truly believe I would be okay with you flirting with another man?”



“No,” I moan as he squeezes my pussy, my body going so taut, I feel like my skin will rip and fall away, leaving me utterly bare for this beast of a man.

He cups my jaw hard. “Then why the fuck did Gavin think he could ask you out?” I’m caught in his gaze as he continues to squeeze me with his fingers. “Were you fucking with me?”

“Yes,” I admit on a moan.

He chuckles as his mouth grazes mine. “Oh, that’s not smart, Clara.”

My eyes widen at the use of my given name. “Clara?”

“Oh yes. You’re not my baby girl when you’re bad. No, you’re Clara, the girl who drives me fucking crazy with murderous thoughts when a man thinks he has the right to look at and touch what is fucking mine.”

I take a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. Please?—”

“No, you’re not,” he says in a deep voice. He whips me around, pressing my chest into the wall as he angles his cock into my ass. I can feel his thick cock hard against my skin as he cups the back of my neck with one hand, the other at my hip. “You wanted to make me jealous. You wanted me to punish you, aye?”

I whimper, my body shaking with desire and excitement. I can feel each of his words deep in my core. My thighs clench as I slowly nod. “Yes, I wanted to make you lose control.”

He chuckles as he moves his lips to the shell of my ear. “Make me lose control, aye? Oh, my baby girl, you don’t know what you are in for.”

On his next breath, his hand comes down hard on my bare ass cheek. I press my lips together to keep from screaming, my eyes squeezing shut as the delicious sting from the smack to my ass vibrates through my body. Heat floods between my legs when another comes, then another, each hard and fast against my poor left ass cheek. I cry out, but his hand covers my mouth, and I feel his lips curve against the shell of my ear.

“No one is allowed to hear you. Your moans are mine.” Thwack . “You will be quiet as I spank this sweet ass.” Thwack . “And know you’re lucky I don’t have any lube because I’d fuck your tightest hole right here and now for how crazy you’ve made me feel.” Thwack . He squeezes my burning-hot flesh and spreads my cheeks. I go onto my tippy-toes, holding back a moan as he moves my thong out of the way, pressing his forefinger against my back hole. “Mmm, maybe I’ll fuck this ass without lube as a punishment.”

I cry out at that. “No, please. It’ll hurt.”

“I know. That’s the fucking point.” He growls in my ear, and I’m basically goo at this point. “Has anyone fucked you here, Clara?”

I hate when he calls me by my name. “No, no one,” I admit on a cry from behind his hand. “Please, not here.” His voice is rough and hard as I hear the belt clink before I feel him push down his zipper. “Riggs, please.”

He chuckles against my ear. “I should, you know,” he mutters, and then he thrusts into my pussy in one go. He fills me deeply, fully, and all I can do is whimper against his palm. “I should fill your virgin ass with my cock and make you scream this fucking place down.” His thrusts are ruthless, dangerous, and so fucking good. “You’re lucky you blew him off.”

“I don’t want him,” I moan against his hand that is still partly over my lips. “I’ve only

wanted you. Only you.”

He squeezes my hip as he pushes deep inside me, each thrust harder than the last. “Which is why your tight ass is safe.” He leans in, his lips moving against my ear as he whispers, “For now.”

I come at his rough promise, squeezing his cock as he ruts into me.

“Fucking hell, baby girl, you were made to take my cock.”

“Harder,” I whine, arching my back so he can go deeper.

His grunts are deep, and I can’t get enough. He gathers my hair in his hand, yanking my head back, and he captures my lips in a deep, possessive kiss. His tongue probes my mouth, devouring me as he continues to thrust into me. The sounds of arousal as he fucks me are downright embarrassing, but I don’t care.

He makes me feel alive.

Riggs yanks his mouth from mine and smacks my ass once more. Hard. Against my ear, he mutters, “You’re going to come for me again. Like a good girl, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I sob, my body tensing with each thrust. “Please.”

“Mmm,” he growls in my ear before moving his hand between my legs and finding my clit. He glides his fingers over my swollen bud with just the right amount of pressure, and it doesn’t take long before I feel myself almost there. Heat gathers in my core, at my spine, and I feel him everywhere. He drags his mouth along my shoulder, his teeth grazing my heated skin as he sucks and nibbles. I throw my head back onto his shoulder, closing my eyes as he fucks me senseless. Each thrust, each press of his fingers against my clit, is better than the last. I bury my mouth against his

neck, biting down before I come violently around his cock.

He hisses out a curse, squeezing my pussy with his palm as he holds my hip in his other hand, and he hammers into me. I almost feel like I'm going to black out, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as my chest heaves, and he fills me deeply. He stills then, jerking up inside me until I feel the heat of his release, and he grunts out, "Fuck, baby girl."

I take a huge breath, my heart pounding in my chest as I kiss the spot I bit. I lick where my teeth sank into his flesh and kiss it once more. He turns his head, capturing my lips with his. The kiss is sweet, gentle, and has me floating on a pretty pink cloud. He brings his hand up, cupping my jaw as he pulls back. His heated gaze bores into mine as he strokes my jaw with his thumb.

"Baby girl."

I'm surprised I can speak. "Hmm?"

"Don't ever let me hear you say you're dating."

I bring in my brows. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

"It's more than that, and you know it. Even if it shouldn't be, even if I should walk away and leave you be, I can't."

My lips quirk, my heart slamming around inside my chest. "So should I say we're fucking?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want people to know about us yet."

I narrow my eyes. "So, you're hiding me?"

“No,” he grumbles, nibbling on my bottom lip. “Let me get through the play-offs. Then we’ll sit down with Dan, and I’ll explain what you mean to me.”

“What I mean to you?”

“Yes. That you’re important to me.”

“That’s it?”

Now, he narrows his eyes. “What do you mean, that’s it?”

“I don’t want to be important to you. I want to be everything to you.”

He searches my eyes. “Done.” My heart skips a beat as I gaze up at him. “I haven’t been in a relationship for fourteen years, baby girl. I’m not sure if I know how to anymore, but I want to try. With you.”

Ha! Suck it, Elliot and Alex.

I try not to react to his words, try not to giggle and do a little dance. Instead, I ask, “So, what do I say to anyone who wants to date me?”

He makes a very dark noise that lets me know he doesn’t like the idea of someone else wanting me. “That someone owns you.”

I give him a look. “Do I own you?”

His eyes soften as he runs his thumb along my lips. “Completely.”

We lock eyes, and then he’s kissing me again with so much passion, I feel him deep in my soul.

The weight of his words hits me like a thousand frozen pucks.

I own Riggs McCoy.

But he doesn't want anyone to know.

I'm not sure how that makes me feel, but it's hard to think when his mouth is devouring mine.

### CHAPTER 21

Riggs

Well, I just tossed all my cards out there on the table for her to see.

For Clara to know how much she affects me. How deeply I already feel for her when I've only known her a week. I don't understand how I've gone so long without even wanting more than a fuck from a woman to now wanting all of Clara. For her to know that I don't like other men looking at what is mine. I know Gavin isn't even on my level. I am a man; he's a mere boy, and my baby girl wants a man. She wants me.

Thank fuck.

Jesus, how she came apart on my cock is engrained on my soul. Watching her ass turn bright red from my punishment has me harder than a goal pipe and needy as fuck for her. I can't explain it. How crazy she makes me. How possessive I get when I look into her navy-blue doe eyes. I needed her to know she is mine.

All mine.

It's insane, but I can't help but think of a poem my ma had cross-stitched for her and Da's bedroom. I think I still have it packed away somewhere, and I have this need to find it. Not only because I miss my parents but because the poem reminds me of Clara. It was by Robert Burns, and to this day, I still remember the lyrics.

To see her is to love her, And love but her for ever;

For Nature made her what she is. And never made another.

I don't know why it just came into my head, but it has, and now I can't kick it out. But with the good thoughts come the bad. Did I fuck up? Am I allowing myself to feel so much for someone when I know I shouldn't? When I know I failed once and probably will again? Though, with that thought, did I truly fail, when I gave my life to Peppa and she threw it back in my face? That's a thought I never even considered. For so long, I allowed what Peppa did to ruin me, to hold my failure over my head, but then Clara came barreling into my life like her fool of a dog, and I seem to have forgotten all my past pain and trauma.

It's insane.

It's enlightening.

It's fucking terrifying.

As I stand at the counter, alone, putting the final touches on dinner, lemon shrimp linguine with fresh Caesar salad and garlic bread, I worry I may have jumped the gun. I may have lost control and acted without thought.

Who am I kidding? That's exactly what I did. Because of her.

Clara McDavid.

My little ball of sunshine and pure trouble.

Truth is, she scares the fuck out of me. I don't even know who I am right now. Pining away after a girl who's so much younger than me. Wanting all her time, her smiles, her body. I love how she makes my mind work overtime to keep up with her bratty self. No one has ever tried me the way she does. Usually, people run the other way,



but Clara runs right for me—guns ablaze and a challenge in her eyes. She's incredible.

She's mine.

Fuck. The last time I thought that was with Peppa. As much as my insecurities over my past marriage weigh on my soul, I have to remember that Clara isn't Peppa. I always felt like Peppa was hiding something from me. She was, but I didn't know that at the time.

With Clara, I know what she's thinking. I feel it deep within me. Plus, she'll say whatever is on her mind without any hesitation. My baby girl is so damn responsive, too. One touch and she falls apart for me. I adore that about her. It's a hell of a feeling, knowing she wants me. Knowing that I please her, that she enjoys what I give her. I don't have to question it; it's in her eyes.

She's a fucking whirlwind, and I love the feeling of being knocked off my axis with her.

I just fear I'm diving in headfirst because, for the first time, I'm finally feeling something.

Alive. I feel alive.

As I light the candles at the bar, I hear tires on the gravel out front. I smile, and I can't help but think it's crazy how much I've smiled since she came into my life. I hear a door close as I pour two glasses of wine, and then I hear the dogs barking happily. As I put the bottle down, the door opens, and the boys come barreling in, Darcy hot on their heels. I greet my boys, even kissing Darcy, before I look up to find Clara grinning from ear to ear.

She has on the dress she was wearing earlier, her hair is down, framing her heart-shaped face, and her navy eyes gleam with hunger. I lick my lips as I stalk toward her. She reaches for me just as I get to her, and I wrap my arms around her, our lips meeting with so much passion, my heart races. I never had the need to kiss anyone until I met her.

Kissing her is as necessary as breathing.

She runs her tongue along the seam of my lips, and I open gladly for her. Our tongues move together as she tightens her arms around my center, my hands getting lost in the waves of her hair. When I pull away, out of breath, I cup her jaw, running my thumb along her chin. My other hand drifts down, grasping her ass cheek, and she hisses out a breath.

I grin. "Sore?"

"Yes. Some brute reprimanded the hell out of my ass."

My eyes dance with her. "You loved it."

She gives me a wicked little grin. "I did."

I tug on her bottom lip with my finger. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes shine as she nods slowly. "Great."

I kiss her again, and she leans into me. All her sweet, lush curves are flush against me. I nibble on her bottom lip as I rub her bottom. "Dinner is ready."

"Good. I'm hungry."

I roll my eyes as I take her hand in mine, threading our fingers. “Do I need to ask if you ate real food today?”

She gives me a bashful smile. “Define real food?”

“Not a smoothie or an iced coffee.”

She ponders that. “I plead the Fifth.”

I tap her ass softly, and she squeals before her laughter fills the space. God, I love her laugh. I lead her to the bar, and she sits as I head to the kitchen to get our food. I place two salads down before grabbing the pan of linguine to serve each of us. Her eyes sparkle as she takes everything in, her mouth parting just a bit. “This looks so damn good. Where did you learn to cook?”

“My ma,” I say as I go back for the bread. “She was an excellent cook.”

She pulls in her. “Was?”

I nod. “Yeah, I lost both my parents at nineteen. Car accident. At least they got to see me play in the NHL before it happened.”

Her lips turn down, her beautiful doe eyes filling with tears. “Oh, Riggs. I’m so sorry.”

I give her a weak smile. “Thank you. There isn’t a day I don’t miss them.”

“I bet,” she says softly, then she reaches for her wine. “To your parents, especially your mom for teaching you to cook so I can eat good food.”

My smile widens as I tap my glass to hers. “Slàinte Mhath .”

Her eyes sparkle. “I love when you speak Scottish to me.”

I choke on my wine. “I swear,” I say, wheezing as I cough, and she giggles. “You’re trying to kill me.”

“Never,” she promises, her lips curving as she flutters those lashes at me. “I’m just telling you the truth.”

“Sure. But, baby girl, it’s not Scottish. It’s Gaelic.”

“Yeah, that. It’s hot.” I chuckle as she digs in. Before I can even take a bite, I’m met with the most erotic moan as she covers her mouth. “Oh my God, Riggs. This is good.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I do. Thank you for cooking for me.”

“Thank you for existing.”

Silence falls between us, but not an awkward or a tense silence. Rather, a sweet and heartfelt one. Clara’s face is so bright, so beautiful, I want to wrap her in my arms and never let her go. I hope she’ll stay tonight. Really, I hope she never leaves. I break away from her intense gaze, twirling my fork to get some pasta as she does the same.

A few moments pass before she says, “Can I ask you something?”

I nod slowly as I meet her gaze. “Sure.”

She drags a piece of shrimp through the sauce before glancing up at me. A flush fills

her luscious cheeks. “Earlier, when you were nailing me to the wall of the bathroom—” I can’t help but chuckle, and of course, my little minx waggles her brows at me. “You said you haven’t been in a relationship for fourteen years. Why is that?”

My heart stops in my chest as my stomach twists. This is the reason I don’t do relationships. It can’t only be about the present; of course she wants to know my past. Just as much as I want to know hers. I’m not that great at being vulnerable, and opening up to her will leave me just that.

Exposed.

I clear my throat as I lay down my fork. I lean my elbows on the table as our gazes meet, and her eyes beg me for the truth. I can’t lie to her. I can’t brush her off. Especially when I don’t want to.

“Short answer, I never wanted to.”

She gives me a dry look, and then she reaches over, threading her fingers with mine. “You know I want the long version.”

I rub my thumb along the spot between her thumb and forefinger. Her skin is soft, inviting, and as I get lost in her eyes, my stomach flips and flops like a fish out of water.

Am I doing this?

Shit. I think I am.

Why, though? How does she do this to me? Make me want to open up and spill my guts to her? Is it her eyes? The way she looks at me like a dog waiting for a bone.

How her eyes gleam in such a supportive and sweet way? I don't know, but I can't stop myself from telling her the truth.

"I got married a couple months after my ma and da passed away. I met Peppa when we were in secondary school, fell in love, and while we were young, I had this need to protect her. She, her ma, and her siblings had fled an abusive home, and I wanted nothing more than to be there for her. I loved her. Greatly."

Clara brings her lip between her teeth but then releases it to ask, "She didn't die, did she?"

"No. We got divorced a few years later."

Her brows furrow as she tightens her fingers around mine. "Oh, why?"

"She cheated on me," I admit, and her eyes fill with such pity. I wait for the remorse from telling her my truth, from admitting my downfall, but it doesn't come. "For almost six months before I found out. With a teammate of mine—who was like a brother to me and the one to tell me because he was in love with her and wanted her for himself."

She squeezes my hand again. "Well, she's a cunt, and her loss is my win."

I can't help but smile at her. "It was my fault. I wanted so badly to live my dreams in the NHL. I worked my ass off to get where I was, but I kept getting hurt. Instead of staying home with her, I was always training, always trying to get better and stronger."

Before I can get all the words out, she's shaking her head. "No, it's not your fault. She knew what she was getting into. She knew you way before the NHL, so that's bullshit. Instead of fucking around, if she was lonely, she could have gone to the rink

to at least be in the same space as you. There are ways to make things work instead of fucking cheating.”

And just like that, the ice around my heart shatters, and it feels as if my heart is beating fully for the first time.

I have to ask, “Has someone cheated on you?”

She scoffs. “I wish a dude would. My sisters would kill him, and then I’d resuscitate him so I could kill him again.” I chuckle at that. “No. I’m just a firm believer that if you want to be with someone, you do what you have to do to make it work. Relationships aren’t easy, but if you truly love someone, you’ll work for it.”

My heart is thumping at that. “It’s funny, my coach at the time said that the day I got married. Told me that if Peppa was what I wanted, I had to work for her. He told me to honor my parents and love her the way they loved each other. I thought I did. I thought I did everything I could while still training, but it wasn’t enough for her. She drained me dry to pay for her family, and then she stepped out on me.”

Clara shakes her head. “I’m sorry that happened to you, and it makes sense why you never tried again after her.”

I shrug. “No one ever made me want to try.”

A sparkle glints in her eyes, and my heart almost comes out of my chest. “Until now?”

Her confidence is intoxicating. It shines just like she does. “Until now,” I agree, squeezing her hand.

She stands up then, leaning over the counter, and I meet her halfway until our lips

touch. She tastes like lemon and perfection. When she pulls back, she rests her forehead to mine. Her navy gaze holds mine hostage as she says, “I would never do anything like that to you.”

“I know.”

“And know I won’t be flirting to fuck with you anymore. I don’t want to trigger anything.” She waggles her brows at me. “Though, I do enjoy the punishment.”

I scoff, licking my lips as desire courses through me. “You’re a brat, through and through. I’m sure I’ll have a lot to punish you for.”

She feigns shock. “I am not a brat. I’m your good girl.”

“Oh, you are, but you’re also a brat.”

She beams, her eyes full of excitement and sweetness. “But seriously, if at any point this isn’t working anymore, we’ll talk about it and go from there. Please don’t make me pay for her mistakes.”

Another huge difference between Peppa and Clara. Peppa never was so forthcoming. Never talked or asked for anything, except money for her family. For such a young woman, my baby girl’s maturity is stunning. Or rather, maybe it’s not her maturity. Maybe it’s just her. Clara knows what she wants. She goes for it, makes it happen. Her business is enough evidence of that, and I am in awe of the woman before me.

Her strength is fucking hot.

I cup her jaw, running my thumb along her bottom lip. “Never.”

As I find myself lost in her navy gaze, I can’t believe how easy it is to make that



promise to her. I haven't been with anyone because of what Peppa did to me, yet here I am, staring into the eyes of a beautiful and dynamic woman, making a promise that shouldn't be so easy to make.

But I know it's a promise I'll never break.

### CHAPTER 22

Clara

No wonder he's been closed off.

It really upsets me that Elliot just decided that there was nothing more to Riggs than what he put out there. I knew from the jump that beyond all his hotness and his grumpy exterior, there was more to him. The man has a soul, he has a heart, and yes, he's locked it all down, but it was for good reason. He lost his parents, then got married, only to have her cheat on and steal from him. Is it pathetic that I'm green with envy that he loved her? Maybe, but I think I'm even more upset that she hurt him when he loved her so much.

Bitch.

"Was it a happy marriage?"

He chewed his bite as he shrugged. "At first, it was. But like I said, I was always getting hurt, which made me an asshole, as she'd called me. Then I was always traveling, and I think we grew apart."

I nod. "So, it was good until it wasn't?"

"I don't know. I've spent a lot of years grieving my marriage, and sometimes I wonder if I'm not actually grieving her but rather the time I wasted on her."

I bring in my brows. “I need more than that.”

A small smile pulls at his lips. “I think I married her because I felt so hollow after my parents died. I think she took advantage since I was up-and-coming, just signed one hell of a deal, then got my inheritance. I’m not saying she didn’t love me. I think at one point she did, but she went from living with her ma and siblings to me, we didn’t have sex until our wedding night, and I mean...you’ve gotten a taste of what I like,” he says with a wink, and I grin. “She always said I was too much. Too much in bed, touching her too much, I asked too many questions. I don’t think I ever realized it until we were at the end that I wasn’t her type.”

“You’re not too much, Riggs.” His eyes shine for me, and my heart trips over itself. “But that’s young love. Either you grow together, or you grow apart.”

He searches my eyes with his. “That’s a very adult comment for a wee lass.”

I shoot him a glare. “Excuse you—I’m your baby girl.”

He rubs my knuckles. “You are.”

I nod in agreement as I shrug. “I grew up with four older sisters who were more my moms than my sisters. I learned a lot from books they’d read me, and the situation in which I grew up didn’t really allow for me to be a kid.”

His brows pull together. “I always wondered where your parents were.”

“Nowhere near us, thank God,” I mutter, shaking my head. “So, don’t judge me, okay?”

He gives me a dry look. “Really?”

I laugh nervously. “Really, this is going to sound like a very bad made-for-TV story.”

“Now I’m intrigued.”

I roll my eyes before taking a deep breath. I’ve never told a guy this, but I want to tell Riggs. “My sisters and I grew up in a cult, like a real one where we all lived in the back of some field and didn’t have TV or internet.” I pause for his reaction, but he is listening intently. “We weren’t allowed to wear anything but dresses and never show more skin than our faces and hands. My sisters taught me to read, write, and sing my ABCs. I was reading Jane Austen books when I was nine, and only because Austen would save whatever little money she could to buy them for us.”

“So basically, you guys were Amish?”

I ponder that, and then I shake my head. “Eh, maybe 50 Shades of Amish, but not in the even vaguely consensual way like the book.”

He cocks his head. “What?”

“Women were property to the men of New Beginnings. When the leader decided he wanted my mom as his wife, he killed my dad and said God told him to do it .”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Was nowhere to be seen in New Beginnings,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood. “I watched my sisters be abused and raped, forced into marriage. I cleaned their wounds when they’d get beaten up. It was mostly Louisa and Elliot since they don’t know how to shut up, but Austen and Eliza were hurt just as badly, in different ways.”

“Did they hurt you?”

I squeeze his hand. “Thankfully, I didn’t go through what my sisters did. My sisters hid me a lot and always made excuses, saying I was sick or doing homework, so no one really got a good look at me until I left. It doesn’t mean I left unscathed, but we all got out.”

“What do you mean?”

I press my lips together and decide I’m not ready to talk about that. “I don’t know that I want to share that yet.”

His eyes turn soft, and he strokes my knuckles with his thumb. “I’m here when you are.”

I give him a small smile, and then he says, “I’m thankful they didn’t hurt you.”

I shrug, and I hate the guilt I feel that my sisters weren’t so fortunate. “They tried. And the day I made a run for it to the end of the road, where my sisters and Peepaw waited, a guy tried to steal me. But I kicked him in the balls and ran like the devil was chasing me. In a way, he was.”

When I look up at Riggs, his eyes are shining with pride, but I do see a bit of rage in that dark-chocolate gaze. “You keep impressing me, Clara McDavid.”

I smile proudly, brushing my hair off my shoulders like the bad bitch I am. “I know. I’m pretty amazing.”

He smiles as he nods in agreement. “And these people are still alive? How have my hockey players not killed them all?”

I chuckle at that. “We don’t know where they are, and Peepaw paid them off to never look for us. He wanted a fresh start for us. I know that my sisters’ partners have asked

to find them, but we don't want them knowing about the guys, or even knowing how happy we all are. We want that to be the past, and we have worked really hard on ourselves not to let it affect our present and future."

"You're very wise, baby girl."

I shrug. "I was raised by the best."

He brings my knuckles to his lips and kisses them softly. Silence stretches between us as he licks and nibbles my knuckles to the point I wonder if I have sauce on them. But I know I don't. He's just being supportive, letting me know without words he's here for me.

My grumpy guy.

Unable to handle the silence anymore, I say, "Wow, this is some heavy stuff. I'm pretty sure since this is our second date, we're supposed to talk about our favorite colors."

"Second date?"

I give him a dry look. "Don't play. You hijacked my date with Gavin."

He chuckles at that. "No, you dumped that guy on the spot."

"Yeah, for you," I say, giving him a wide grin. "And he still wants me."

His face turns to stone. "He can't have you."

"I know," I say simply, fluttering my lashes at him. "He's not my type anyway. I like brooding lumberjacks who coach hockey."

Riggs's lips curve a bit as he looks up at me from beneath his lashes. His eyes are so beautiful. He's beautiful. "Pink."

I wrinkle my nose at him. "Are you trying to guess my favorite color?"

"I'm right."

"No way!"

He laughs softly, but then his face turns serious. In a deep voice, he asks, "Hey, baby girl?"

"Yes?"

"What's your favorite color?"

"Yellow."

His eyes go molten. "I should have known with how beautifully sunny you are."

"You really should have."

"Even though your ass looks great all pink from my handprint," he says as if he is telling me the odds of a thunderstorm.

I feel my face flush as I shake my head. Not wanting to give in to his crude words that have me on edge, I ask, "What's your favorite color?"

He licks his lips, holding my gaze. "Navy."

I scrunch up my face. "Navy? That's so weird. Why wouldn't it be blue? Navy is so

boring.”

He stands then, coming around the counter and spinning my barstool so I’m facing him. He leans in, caging me between his arms as his chest touches mine, and his hips push my thighs open. His jaw is tight, his eyes dangerous as he moves closer, his lips brushing mine. “You’re wrong.”

“No, I’m not. Navy isn’t a color that you go, hey, that’s my favorite!”

“I do.”

I roll my eyes, but he takes my jaw in his hand, locking his eyes with mine. “No matter how the sun catches them, or how turned on you get, your eyes stay the perfect shade of navy. That’s why navy is my favorite.”

I can’t breathe. I can’t think.

Holy mother of fucks.

“Because of my eyes?”

“All because of your eyes.”

Swoon. Can he let me go so I can turn into a puddle of goo and soak into his skin?

Is that weird?

Yeah, I’m a weirdo.

“What about before me?”



“I didn’t have a favorite color,” he admits, stroking my lip with his thumb. “There are a lot of things I didn’t have before you, and I didn’t know they existed until now.”

Before I can turn to goo or swoon or even take in a breath, he kisses me.

And I fall even more in love with Riggs McCoy.

Pulling only a mere breath away, he whispers, “I’m ready to eat dessert.”

I part my lips, and he runs his tongue along my bottom lip. “I brought those muffins.”

He shakes his head, his lips grazing mine. “Nope, you’re my dessert.”

With that, he drops to his knees before me, his eyes dark and wanton. His shoulders push my thighs apart, and with his eyes still on me, he devours me.

Like I’m his favorite dessert.

### CHAPTER 23

Riggs

There isn't a day that passes as a coach of a bunch of young men that I don't ask myself, what the ever-loving fuck ?

We drop the next two games, the Griffins coming out on top. Yes, both were only by one goal—mainly because Cruz works his ass off, while apparently, my offense is sleeping. It's not a good look after we went to Michigan and dominated, to come home and put up two goose eggs. It's pathetic. It's downright frustrating. As I stand in the middle of the locker room, not on our emblem but to the side since we don't need any more bad luck, I choose my words wisely. I don't want to kick them while they're down. I can see it on each of their faces; they feel the losses as deeply as I do. The emotion is palpable, that they don't want to let me down, let down the fans, but here we are. It's my job to get them on track.

Exhaling, I lift my head as I tuck my hands into my pockets. All eyes are on me, not only those of my players, but also my staff. I lick my lips before I ask, "Wellington, how many games are in a series?"

"Seven."

"How many do we have to win?"

"Four."

I nod. “Four,” I repeat, moving my gaze from player to player and including my staff in my molten stare. “How many wins do we have, Cruz?”

“Two.”

“Two,” I repeat, nodding. “We are halfway there, boys. Halfway. We are meant to be the first franchise in AHL history to bring home a Cup after only two seasons. I believe in this team. I believe in us. Do you believe?”

A grunt of agreement fills the room.

“Halfway,” I repeat, scanning the room. “We just need two more wins, and we love winning in Michigan, don’t we?”

More grunts of agreement. Clearing my throat, I say, “Let’s go embarrass them the way they embarrassed us these last two games.”

Everyone starts to clap, grasping shoulders, pumping arms, and even tapping their gloves on their lockers in agreement before I hold up my hand to silence them.

With a pointed look, I say, “This series is ours. That Cup is ours. And we will win.” More cheers erupt, and my heart warms at the excitement and motivation I’m providing my team. “Now, go get some rest and be ready for practice at nine. We’re flying out at four. On three. One, two?—”

Everyone shouts, “Bears!”

I leave the locker room shaking with anger. I hate that we dropped those two games. I hate that we couldn’t shut out the damn series and be done with those damn Griffins. I want that Cup so badly. I want to be the first coach in AHL history to get a Cup in the first five years of my coaching career. It’s not easy, but I want it. I need it.

When my phone sounds, I pull it out of my pocket as I enter my office. It's a message from Clara, and just like that, my anger starts to dissipate. This girl has cast some kind of voodoo on me, I swear. Just seeing her name, knowing she's messaging me, has me lighter than I was before.

Clara: Sorry.

I smile as my heart warms at the five-letter word. She's such a sweet little thing. These last four days have been pure bliss. She hasn't been back to her grandpa's, instead staying with me. When we're not lost in each other's bodies, I've been teaching her to cook. She's a quick learner, not that I'm surprised. The girl can do anything she puts her mind to. I find myself on the couch watching TV with her and just enjoying being with her. I never liked to sit still until her. With her in my arms, I don't need to move. Except when we're working out. We have been running every day, but she hasn't made it the full eight miles.

And of course, I've ended up carrying her home each morning.

More so because I love the feel of her hot body on my back.

It's also a hell of a workout.

Not that I don't get one at night with her in my bed.

I can't help but smirk as I write her back.

Me: Can't win them all.

Clara: Still, you're a winner in my eyes.

Me: Thanks, baby girl.

Clara: Come home.

I love when she calls my house her home, but I know what she's saying with those two words. She's telling me not to stay at the office and obsess over game film. She wants me to come home to her. She has figured me out so quickly and thoroughly that sometimes it's hard not to give in to the fears that urge me to run the other way. Instead, I continue to run right for her.

Me: An hour.

Clara: No. You can watch tapes tomorrow. Come home. I've got a surprise for you.

Me: You naked in my bed with a bow on your pussy?

Clara: Shit, I forgot the bow.

With that, she sends me a photo of her completely naked in my bathroom. Her creamy white skin is all soft and beautiful. Her hair is down in waves, framing her face as she pouts her lips in a sinful way that makes staying to watch film a distant thought. My cock instantly strains against my pants as I reach for my keys off my desk and leave.

Me: You don't need it.

She sends me a laughing emoji, and I write her back again.

Me: On my way.

Clara: I'll be waiting.

Me: Good girl.

She's waiting at the counter for me when I open the door twenty minutes later. With my eyes on her, I lean down to greet the boys. Gordie licks me happily, and I know he enjoys Clara being with him at all times. He seems happier.

Same, bud.

I kiss Gretzky, and he wiggles against me, pressing his butt into my side so I'll scratch his ass. Darcy rolls onto his back, squirming like a damn eejit as I rub his belly. But even while I'm greeting the boys, my focus isn't on them.

It's all on Clara.

She stands beautifully naked in my kitchen as she leans on her forearms. Her face is flushed, her hair falling forward over her shoulders as her blue gaze stays locked on me. If I weren't distracted by what sits in front of her, I would drink in her smooth skin and perky tits. But for some reason, my baby girl has both a large dildo and a small one on the counter. And I think I see a butt plug.

What has me in knots, though, is her wicked little grin.

"Should I even ask?"

She beams, her eyes wild with trouble. She is the most stunning woman I've ever laid eyes on.

This girl is all mine. Fuck.

She licks her lips and taps the largest dildo, which is bright green. "I thought we'd have some fun with your ass."

I cock my head, chuckling at the absurdity. "Baby girl, nothing is going in my ass."

I'm kinky but not stuff-things-in-my-ass kinky."

She pouts, looking more gorgeous than ever. "What about this one?" she asks, pointing to the smaller one, and I laugh.

"Nope."

She eyes me. "Fine. This butt plug." She holds up a silver plug with a daisy on the base.

I roll my eyes. "Nothing is going in my ass, but I will gladly stuff your ass."

"That's not fair," she whines, but her eyes are dark with crazy mischief. She is out to ruin me, I swear. "How about my finger?"

She wiggles her pinkie at me, and I laugh. "Nope."

She sighs deeply. "Fine. You can stuff them in me."

My cock jerks in my pants. "I can?"

"Yup," she says, coming around the counter. "You can stuff one in my ass, then pick one to stuff in my pussy while you fuck my mouth."

A groan escapes my lips as I shake my head. How in God's name did I find this girl? I close the distance between us, and she reaches for me as I capture her in my arms. Our lips meet, and she opens for me instantly. Her tongue meets mine, and my chest rumbles with satisfaction.

She tastes like sweet peaches, which I assume is from the ice cream I got her the other day. She still eats like a damn hormonal teenager, but I'm getting more food

into her that is healthy. The last thing on my mind is food when she traces the outline of my cock with her hand. I jerk into her grip, and she smiles against my lips.

“Which one do you want in my ass?” she asks, her lips grazing mine.

“The plug,” I answer, gripping her ass cheeks and pulling them apart. She grins up at me before turning in my arms. She perks that sweet ass at me, her back arching as her round globes bounce for me. She hands the plug to me over her shoulder, and I grab the lube that’s also sitting on the counter.

“Did you really think you were going to get a dildo in my ass?” I ask as I squirt the cool liquid down the crack of her ass. She hisses out a breath and then wiggles her ass for me.

“Didn’t hurt to ask.”

I smack her ass for that. “I am the one to fuck your ass, not the other way around.” Without a word, I gently press the plug to her tight little hole. My sweet girl goes to her tippy-toes, hissing as I push the plug in. I encounter some resistance, but my baby takes it like a champ.

I spread her cheeks apart. “Fuck, baby girl. I’m going to have to work on this ass if I’m ever going to fit.”

She looks over her shoulder at me, heat in her blown-out pupils. “You’ll fit.”

Fuck. “You are a gift.”

She turns in my arms, holding both dildos. “Which one for my pussy?”

It’s hard to pick when I’m caught up in a whirlwind of lust. I point to the green one,



which has a suction cup at the end that I hadn't noticed until now. Her eyes dance with mine as she slowly pushes my shoulders. I step back as she licks the suction cup and then slams it to the hardwood floor. My body is so tight, my cock weeping for her, as she slowly lowers herself to a hover over the dildo. With her eyes on me, full of desire, I lean back to watch as the dildo disappears inside her. She whines a bit, her mouth parting in a little O until she is bent forward on her knees and the dildo is deep inside her.

I can hardly breathe. My chest keeps seizing up, and my cock is painfully hard. I lick my lips, shaking my head. "How does it feel?"

"So full," she gasps, and I watch as she moves up and down on the dildo, her eyes trained on me.

"Fuck, baby girl, you're killing me."

My little minx only grins as she reaches for my slacks. "Ready to fuck my mouth?"

Before I can answer or even form a thought, she brings me to her with a tug, undoes my belt and then my pants before pushing them down my hips to my thighs. My cock springs up at her, engorged and throbbing. The tip is leaking as I look down at her with hooded eyes. She grabs me by the base of my cock and runs her tongue along the tip. I thread my fingers through her hair as I push the head of my cock between her slick lips. The feel of her mouth, all wet and hot around the head of my cock, has me hissing out a breath as I push farther into her mouth.

I worry I might hurt her, but her gaze meets mine and she urges me with her eyes. I hold the sides of her head, and I thrust deep into her mouth. My baby girl doesn't gag, her eyes on me as she falls back onto the dildo. When she moans around my cock, I lose my goddamned mind.

I fuck her throat.

“Do you know what you’re doing to me?” I hiss, my ass clenching as I push my cock down her throat. Tears gush down her cheeks, clinging to her lashes as I fuck her ruthlessly. Each thrust has the dildo going farther inside her greedy cunt, and she moans around my cock. In doing so, I’m able to go deeper into her throat, cutting off all airflow. I still, watching as her eyes widen, tears burning in them before I pull back to let her breathe. She inhales sharply, spit escaping the sides of her mouth and around my cock. Her tongue rolls up under my cock, and I lose my ever-loving mind.

“Knowing each of your holes is full for me...?” I hold her tight in my hands as I fuck her pretty mouth. Her eyes never leave mine, but they do roll back when I assume she comes. Her body shakes as she cries out around my cock, and I only fuck her throat harder. Each thrust is like coming home, and I swear, nothing in the world matters but this beautiful girl. I feel my balls pull up, heat gathers in my spine, and I thrust deep before I explode down her throat. She moans deeply, sucking me as my come overflows her swollen mouth. The sight, knowing she’s full in each hole because of me has me roaring her name.

I shout so loud, my ears ring.

When I feel a tap on my thigh, I look down to see her flushed face and more tears leaking out. I pull back, and she gasps, inhaling deeply through her nose, and I drop to my knees before her. I gather her in my arms, pulling her off the dildo and into my lap. She’s drenched and covers my slacks with her release. I kiss her mouth, tasting myself on her tongue, and the primal part of me loves that my come is in her mouth. I kiss her lips, her jaw, her cheeks before licking the tears from her sweet navy eyes. I move her hair off her face and kiss her lips once more.

Clara’s mischievous gaze meets mine, and when she smirks at me, I feel my heart sing for her.

“Bet you didn’t think a bit about losing.”

I can’t help it. I laugh hard, shaking my head. I cup her jaw, dusting her lips with mine. Against them, I whisper, “If this is the reward I get for losing, baby girl, I never want to win again.”

Her eyes sparkle, passion, lust, and sweetness in her navy depths. “But when you win the Cup, you get my ass.”

I groan as I capture her mouth with mine.

This girl is going to kill me.

And I’ll enjoy my death at her hands a thousand times over.

### CHAPTER 24

Clara

The Bears won in Michigan, with Alex pulling a shutout, while our team scored four times. They came back hard, and I love the determined, excited look it put on Riggs's face. I've noticed that his mood is often related to how his boys do. He gets wound up so tightly, almost as if he feels their losses as his own, which I guess they are. They are an extension of him. It's easy to see how much he cares about not only the boys, but his job. I admire that about him. He loves hockey so much, and his passion for the sport is so beautiful.

It leaves me breathless.

The passion he expresses is my favorite thing about him. If it's not about hockey or the pups, it's about me. In all ways, I want to make him proud. To make him as happy as he makes me. When he comes home after a hard game or practice, I do everything in my power to relieve him of his tension. As much as I hate being apart from him, the anticipation of him coming home to me is something I never thought I would enjoy. I love how he comes undone; I love how he grunts my name, how his eyes get lost in mine, and how I feel him everywhere. He cherishes me. He cares for me. Riggs is everything I knew he was behind the mask, behind the gruffness, the grumpiness.

He's the man of all my dreams.

Even when he looks like he's ready to tear the mic from its stand and throw it at the

reporters. I knit my brows, and my heart aches as he defends his team after their loss at home. Really, the Bears played a strong, good game. Just a fluke goal off our player's skate that slipped through Alex's closed pads, leading the Griffins to victory. It's frustrating, and I can see the weight on Riggs's shoulders.

Elliot leans into me at the back of the room. I didn't intend on coming to the press conference, but I wanted eyes on Riggs. When the goal went in, I saw his shoulders fall, I saw the tightness of his jaw, and I wanted to soothe it all. I know how badly he wants this, and I want it for him.

"He looks like he might kill everyone in this room."

I nod at my sister. "Yeah, it seems that way, for sure."

"How are things going?"

A smile pulls at my lips. "Wonderful. He's..."

"Wonderful?" Elliot supplies, grinning over at me. She holds her phone in one hand to take video, while the other cups the underside of her belly. I can tell my nephew is getting heavy by the way Elliot is holding him. She glows now, and I love that about her. I love Alex more since he's the reason. My eyes drift to the huge heart-shaped diamond on her finger. My sister is living her best life, and I couldn't be more excited for her. "Have you told Peepaw yet?"

I shake my head. "We're waiting till after the play-off run to go public."

She brings in her brows. "What? You're hiding your relationship?"

I shrug. "It's not a big deal. Everyone has a lot going on."

“Still, I don’t like that.”

I give her a pointed look as I rub her diamond ring. “Set a date yet?”

She shakes her head, a flush filling her cheeks since we both know I’m the only one who knows Alex proposed. Her fingers are so swollen, she hasn’t been able to wear her ring before today. She’s a sneaky little thing, for sure. “Not yet. We’re waiting till this little dude comes.”

“And when are you telling everyone?”

She side-eyes me. “Fine.”

“Fine,” I retort. And then I ask, “Still thinking he’ll be Alejandro Jr.?”

She nods. “It’s looking that way.”

“Cool. I shall call him Benito.”

“You would,” she snorts, shaking her head.

But then our attention is pulled away when Riggs suddenly stands, knocking his chair to the floor behind him. “I’m done,” he practically growls before stalking away, and my stomach drops.

“Jeez, he’s big mad.”

I lick my lips. “He takes this very seriously.”

“I know, but he has a temper. He’s not mean to you, is he?”

“What the hell? No, Elliot, he is so good to me. He isn’t like that with me.”

She eyes me in that big-sister way that makes me want to poke her in her now-outie belly button. “Just be careful. He may be able to control his temper now, but?—”

I hold up my hand. “I’m gonna stop you there. He wouldn’t.”

Still, she eyes me, and I glare back. “Oh, Clara... You love him already?”

My glare deepens. “It doesn’t matter. I know him, and he is good to me. Don’t take what you see and what he puts out as who he is inside. He is a good man. My man.”

She presses her lips together, her eyes flooding with guilt. “I’m sorry. I just worry about you.”

“I know,” I say on an exhale. “But trust that I know who I am with.”

She nods. “I will. I’m sorry.”

I swallow past the lump of emotion in my throat. An awkwardness falls between us and I hate it, but I can’t accept her take on Riggs. He is more than what he lets on.

He’s everything.

I lean in, kissing her cheek before rubbing my nephew. “I’m going to go catch up with him.”

Elliot sends me a strained grin, and I feel bad for snapping at her, but I couldn’t help it. I don’t like anyone speaking ill of Riggs. Not even my sisters. Not when I know who he is. How he cares for me. How he makes me laugh to the point of tears. How he’ll carry me on runs or make sure I eat. There is something special between us, and

I won't allow anyone to tarnish that. To speculate because my man is a bit grumpy. He is. But he is also caring, smart, funny, and passionate. I wish people saw what I get to see, but at the same time, I'm glad they don't.

The real Riggs is all mine.

I check his office, but he isn't there. When I round the corner to the locker room, already with my story in place about why I'm looking for Riggs, I run right into my brother-in-law. Well, future brother-in-law. Alex steadies me then flashes me a toothy grin. "Hey, sis. Where you off to?"

"Looking for Coach McCoy. I don't know if he wants me to bring the dogs to the house or keep them with me."

I didn't think this all the way through, in that he may have told Alex I've been staying over. Thankfully, my brother-in-law is none the wiser. "Oh. Well, he's currently on the ice, very angry, so I would say just keep the dogs. For their safety and yours."

My heart clenches, and I know I need to get to him. "Cool. Thanks, bro. Your future wife is waiting for you."

His eyes shine as he grins. "She told you?"

"Of course."

His grin grows as he squeezes my bicep before moving around me. "See ya."

I wait till he's down the hall before I make my way through the arena to the tunnel that leads to the bench. I hear the slap of a stick, then a clunk, over and over. I step up behind the bench and find Riggs in a black tee and his gray dress slacks on skates, swinging his stick and shooting puck after puck into the goal. Sweat gathers along his



temple, curls the back of his hair, and drips from his beard. Each swing of his stick showcases the muscle of his back and the power he has as the puck whizzes through the air to the back of the net. I lean on the boards, in awe of him.

He's magnificent.

But I can see the tension and the frustration in every shift of his shoulders. I hate it. I don't want him to feel like this. He's mumbling something that almost sounds like he's cussing in Gaelic, but I can't be sure. All I know is I've got to do something. When a plan hits, I rush down the hall to Elliot's office. I know she has a pair of skates in there, and I have every intention of getting on the ice with my stud of a man.

Elliot is right. I am in love with him. Fully and completely.

And my man needs me.

### CHAPTER 25

Riggs

“Oh, how does it feel to drop a game that was clearly ours?” I spit out, and I slam my blade into the defenseless puck. The sound ricochets through the space, and the puck hits the back of the net. “If the game was clearly ours, wouldn’t we have fucking won, you fucking eejit?” Once more, I swing my stick, putting all my power into the swing, and the crack of blade to puck is music to my ears. “How do you feel about going to game seven, Coach?” I shoot again and somehow miss like the failure of a hockey player I am, so I shoot again. This one goes in. “Oh, I feel just so damn good. A jolly good time watching my boys slave away on the ice for nothing! When the fucking puck betrayed me and went in off my own man! I feel fucking dandy!”

I know it isn’t healthy for me to have conversations with myself. Some would even say it makes me a wee bit crazy, but in my defense, this is how I unwind when I feel too overwhelmed. Since I don’t like who I am right now—as a person, coach, or even a boyfriend to my baby girl—I decided taking my frustrations out on pucks would be better than a person or my pups. Thankfully, the crew of the arena knows to leave me be when I get like this. The lights are on, but I know how to shut them off, and I know the only door that is open is the side door that leads to the car park. I’m sure everyone has already gone home, but I can’t yet. Clara is home, and I don’t want her seeing me like this.

Before Clara, I was able to hide this part of myself, the part that beats up and belittles everything about me. My pups would just cuddle me through it, but Clara, she’ll want to distract me or talk to me. I’m too embarrassed. I don’t want her to be disgusted

with me, not when I love how she looks at me like I hung the stars in her sky.

Fuck me, I don't know why we had to lose.

The game was ours. It was. The boys were dominating, but the Griffins' goalie was playing just as well as Alex. It was a battle of the goalies, and those are my favorite kinds of games. It was all a fluke. One of my boys, I can't even tell you who, went to send the puck out of the zone, but it bounced off Jacquez's skate. It was a pure accident, and it slipped by Alex's pad. Even when he tried to trap it in his legs, it still got in.

Fucking piece-of-shit puck.

I hated the disappointment on Alex's face. How he felt he let the team down, when, really, he's the only reason we're still in this fucking series. I let my head fall back, and I yell at the top of my lungs, "Fuck!"

My voice echoes through the arena, and it doesn't make me feel better. I close my eyes, inhaling deeply through my nose before pushing my breath out in frustration. We have one more chance to keep this alive. I hope I was able to convince my boys that we can win this, but the defeat on their faces will haunt me tonight. When I hear a sound behind me, I pull in my brows before I look over my shoulder to the bench.

Where Clara is standing.

With the sweetest little smirk on her face.

My minx.

Clara's hair is down in wavy curls along her shoulders, her lips pouty and glossed up, but her face is free of makeup. She's wearing an oversized, long-sleeved Bears shirt

and some black leggings. Her eyes are bright and set just on me. “Hey, are you the amazing Coach McCoy?”

I don’t know what it is about this girl, but I feel the grim line of my mouth turn up at the side. “I don’t know about amazing, baby girl.”

Her eyes dance with excitement. “Well, I heard you’re the best, and since I don’t know how to skate or even shoot a puck, I think you should teach me.”

My legs are moving before I even realize I am. I perk a brow at her. “You don’t know how to skate?”

She shakes her head. “Nope, and I need a lesson since I’m dating the hottest coach in the world. Are you up for the challenge?”

She’s too much.

Too perfect.

Too everything.

I lean my elbows on the boards, caging her in so that our foreheads meet. “I’m always up for a challenge with you.” I kiss her nose. “Hey there, baby girl.”

Clara’s eyes glow with desire as she curves her lips. “Hey there, Riggs.”

“I thought you’d be home.”

“Nope. I came to the game, and then I decided I wanted to learn to skate.”

While she says one thing, her eyes say another. I came and I saw you lose, but I don’t

care. I only care about you, and I want to be with you. Who am I to push her away? Especially when all I want is to hold her closer than ever. I kiss her nose once more before standing. I exhale and notice a pair of skates in her hand.

“Whose are those?”

“Elliot’s. I went to her office and stole them. We’re the same size, but I’m not sure how to put them on.” I’m confused since it’s easy, but why wouldn’t I want to do it for her so I can be between her knees?

I nod to the bench. “Alrighty, baby girl, take a seat. Let me lace ya up.”

She does as I ask and toes out of her orange sneakers. I take her ankle in my hand, putting the skate on her foot before lacing it up quickly. She watches as I work, her eyes intent on what I’m doing. It reminds me of when she watches me cook. She has such expressive eyes. She wants to learn everything there is to know, and I adore that about her. Clara is a real treasure to behold.

Once I get her skates on, I stand up, and she takes my outstretched hands. I have to hold back my chuckle when her legs shake, making her look like a wee little lamb.

I must be the big, bad wolf ’cause I want to eat her whole.

“I got you, baby girl.”

Her eyes shine for me, and I see no fear, only trust. I direct her out onto the ice, and she clutches on to me like a life preserver. Once we’re in the center of the ice, I hold her hands with one of mine and then bring my stick between us. “All right, put your hands in the center, and I’m going to pull you so you can get used to the feel of the ice under your skates.”

She nods eagerly, her eyes flashing with excitement. I take her around the rink twice, showing off a bit by speeding up while enjoying the view of her hair flying behind her and the flush filling her face. Said face breaks into a big grin, her eyes wide and giddy as I pull her around a third time. Then I show her how to really dig into the ice, moving her skates to do all the work. She catches on quickly, as I knew she would, but when it's time to let go of the stick, her arms go flying, and I catch her around the waist. "Steady now."

A giggle escapes her. "That was scary! I lost my balance."

"I saw," I chuckle, kissing the side of her mouth. "Focus now. You can do it."

She sends me a little grin before I guide her by her hips, and she starts to skate. She's natural, all strength and beauty, as she skates away from me. When I catch up to her, I clap my hands, and she beams up at me. She takes my hand in hers, and we thread our fingers together. She looks down at them, and before I can catch her, she lands on her booty with an oomph.

She hisses as she leans onto her hip, rubbing her ass cheek. "Ow!"

I gather her up quickly. "Shit, baby girl. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, but that sucked."

"Yeah, your ass isn't big enough to cushion you from a fall," I tease, and she smacks my chest. I kiss her nose. "Told ya I was an amazing coach."

She gives me a pointed look. "You're the best coach I know." She threads her fingers with mine again, and we start to skate. "Talk to me."

I press my lips together, and she squeezes my hand. I look over to see her watching

me, support shining in those navy depths. “I feel like I failed. We should have won. I know that not all games are wins, but fuck, I wanted this one. I wanted to be done with the series. I wanted to move on to the next round and win the Cup.”

She nods. “Are you still playing for the Cup?”

I side-eye her, confused. “You know I am.”

“Then you’re not failing,” she says simply. “You’re still in this. The boys are going to rally, and let’s be honest, they play better in Michigan. Should they have won this game? Yeah, it was tight, but whatever. At least you’re still playing.”

I know she’s right, and hell, I almost said the same thing to my boys. But why didn’t I believe my own words when I was saying them? Why did I feel like a fraud in front of my team? Yet, this beautiful girl with her killer eyes and bratty attitude tells me almost word for word what I already yelled at my boys, and I’m hanging on every word she says. “You’re right.”

“I know. I usually am,” she says with an exaggerated wink.

I can’t help but snort at that. “Hardly.”

She squeezes my hand. “Whenever you start getting down on yourself like that, ask me. Have I ever lied to you?”

“No.”

“Do I sugarcoat things with you?”

I shake my head. “No. You’re a brat.”

“Exactly! So you know I’ve got you. If you suck, I’ll tell you, Grandpa.”

I gather her in my arms, bringing her close. Our chests touch, and she looks up at me, her lips parting as she giggles. I lean in until our lips are almost brushing, our eyes locking. “I’m tired of you calling me ‘Grandpa.’”

“Then stop acting like one,” she throws back, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Be my big, strong daddy who gets me all hot and bothered.”

My cock twitches in my pants as I blow out a breath. I don’t know how this girl can take me from such a bad mood to wanting to grin at every turn. She makes me feral to the point of madness. I want to take her to the nearest surface and spank her ass until it’s red with my handprint, before I wreck her pussy until this arena knows the chant of not only the Bears, but of my name.

But I can’t. Not yet, at least. She’s right; I am a great coach, and I’m nowhere near done with her.

I trail my hand down her arm to her wrist, where I know she has a hair tie. I snap it over her hand, and she quirks her lips when I gather her hair up into a high ponytail. As I wrap the hair tie around her thick mane, I kiss her nose then her top lip. When I know her hair is secure, I kiss her bottom lip before pressing my forehead to hers. “You know what, my love?”

She pulls her brows together. “Love? I’m your baby girl.”

I shake my head. “Nope. You’ve been upgraded.”

Her eyes twinkle with laughter, her lips twitching into a smirk. “I’ve been upgraded?”

“Yeah,” I say, gathering her in my arms and pulling her up on the tips of her skates.



“You have become a very important part of my life, someone I don’t want to live a second without. So, you’re my love.”

I watch as emotions move over her gorgeous face. Shock, excitement, giddiness, and, dare I assume, love. I see it bright in her eyes, and I wonder if she’ll say those three words. If she does, will I say them back? As those scary thoughts plague me, a sweet flush fills her cheeks, and I can’t help but smile. I know if I don’t let her go, I never will, so I move away a bit. “Well, I need to upgrade you.”

I lift my brows. “To?”

“I don’t know,” she laughs, the sound beautiful. “You’re not a pet-name kind of guy.”

“I could be for you,” I say, and her eyes dance for me.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Okay,” I say, squeezing her hips. “But for now, my love, it’s time for me to teach you how to shoot.”

She bobs her head up and down. “Okay. I mean, you keep calling me that, I’m bound to do anything you want.”

I chuckle as I pull her closer. “Anything.”

She nods, playfulness on her face. “Anything.”

My chest goes tight as I lean in. “Kiss me, my love.”

She closes the distance, and with a wicked little tilt of her mouth, she says, “Okay, snookums.”

The next second, we both dissolve in laughter. My body shakes violently as she cries out, her laughter so loud and deep, it hits me square in the chest. When she leans into me, still giggling and making my heart pound loudly, it's clear what I would say if she said those three words to me.

I think it's been clear. I only thought I couldn't see it.

### CHAPTER 26

Clara

The Bears' arena is almost like a small community of shops, restaurants, and in the center is not only the Bears statue, but a huge courtyard for people to hang out. Peepaw said he wanted a spot for people to tailgate before the games, and it's been one hell of a success. I love the trees out here, the large eastern redbuds that make the whole park look magical. I hadn't planned on coming here today. I need to clean out the bus, but when Riggs said he wasn't going to be able to come home before catching his flight to Michigan, the boys and I decided to stop by to wish him luck. While I got my fill of him the last two days, it's never enough.

I watch as Gretzky, Darcy, and Gordie run circles around the park, thankful that no one is around as I text Riggs.

Me: Hey.

Riggs: Hey, you okay?

I smile. Why wouldn't I be okay? I'm in love with an incredible, amazing man. Not that I say that.

Me: Great. What are you doing?

Riggs: Watching tapes and putting the final touches on my notes.

I bite my lip. I don't want to distract him or pull him from his work, but really, this guy is always watching tapes and taking notes. At this point, I'm pretty sure he could write out what his players will do before they even think to do it.

Me: Can I steal you for an hour?

Riggs: Of course.

God, I love how he just gives me what I ask for. No questions. He wants to be with me as much as I want to be with him.

Me: I'm outside the arena.

Riggs: Now?

Then my phone rings. I smile when a photo of him and me snuggling on the couch fills my screen. "I didn't know you were coming up here," he says without a hello.

"I know. I wanted to see you before you left. I brought the boys."

"What a nice surprise. I'm on my way."

His line goes dead, and I smile brightly. "Daddy is coming, guys," I call to Gordie, who is currently lying at my feet, breathing hard from running circles. Before he can give me a look or even acknowledge the news, I hear my peepaw's voice.

"Clara Drew, what are you doing here, sweetheart?"

I look over just as my peepaw pulls me into a tight hug. "Hey, Peepaw," I say, my heart kicking up. "With Coach McCoy leaving, I thought he'd like to see the pups before he left."

Peepaw's eyes crinkle at the sides as he smiles widely at me. He looks over to where Gretzky is chasing Darcy. "That's sweet of you. I'm sure he'll be thankful."

I nod just as Riggs's voice meets us. "I am, especially since this wee bit wanted to meet my boys." I turn just in time to see Riggs with the most gorgeous little boy in his arms. The toddler has the brightest blue eyes and sandy blond hair. He can't be more than three, with a little pouty lip and a wide nose. The little boy squeals when Riggs calls the boys over, even Darcy. Riggs likes to act like Darcy is a pain in his ass, but he loves him. Riggs leans down with the boy in his arms and tells the boys to sit. When Darcy plants his ass down, I don't blame him.

I almost sit at Riggs's sexy command.

"Okay, Jessie, this is Gretzky, Darcy, and Gordie."

Jessie giggles sweetly as the dogs lick his hand and wiggle for him. The look on Riggs's face knocks me on my ass. It's so serene, sweet, and my heart feels like it's shattering into a million pieces. I have to look away, but when I do, my gaze falls on a gorgeous blonde with the same blue eyes and pout to her lips as the boy. This must be the mom. Hopefully married to a player.

Or Riggs has a wife and kid he never told me about, and this is about to get awkward as fuck.

Peepaw beams over at her. "Hey, Jelanie. You and Jessie hanging out?"

She smiles sweetly, nodding. "Yeah, with Willy leaving tonight, we wanted to spend some time with him. It's been rough on Jessie this round."

Okay. This doesn't need to get awkward.

Peepaw sends her a supportive smile. “I know, but it’ll be worth it.”

She doesn’t seem convinced, and seeing the pain so visibly on her face has me worrying about Elliot. Her son will be here soon, and I won’t be there with her when they ultimately leave the team. I think my heart can’t ache anymore until I direct my attention back to Riggs. He’s laughing with Jessie, making the little boy grin, and I see awe in Riggs’s eyes.

He would be a great dad.

I swallow past the lump in my throat, and I don’t really hear anything else. My heart is in my ears, pounding hard, and I feel like I’m on autopilot. With no real emotion, I wave at Jelanie and Jessie and then Peepaw when they head inside. I don’t even worry about Peepaw suspecting us. My mind won’t allow me.

It isn’t until we’re alone that I actually meet Riggs’s gaze. He pulls in his brows as he hooks the leashes to the boys’ collars. “You okay, my love?”

His words warm my soul. I bite hard into the inside of my lip as I nod. “Yeah. Wanna take them for a walk?”

“That sounds lovely. We can head over to that ice cream shop you like.”

I can only nod as I take Gordie’s and Gretzky’s leashes since Riggs is trying to leash-train Darcy. He listens better to Riggs. Apparently, I’m too soft. Which I probably am because I’m two seconds from bursting into tears, and that would be a bad idea. I don’t want to stress Riggs out or put a damper on our little outing. So, I swallow past my emotions and walk beside him as we head out of the Bears compound. It isn’t until we’re on the sidewalk that leads to the center of town that Riggs asks, “Did you eat lunch?”

I don't look at him as I answer. "Yeah, I had leftovers from dinner last night."

We had an awesome feast of fried chicken and sweet potatoes last night. I had helped him make some kind of caramel butter, and it was downright amazing. He reaches out, squeezing my wrist. "That's my good girl."

Heat floods between my legs, but I ignore it. "Not really. I used all the caramel butter and maybe licked the carton."

He chuckles, the sound damn sexy. "Still my good girl whom I'll make more for."

I can't help but smile. "Promise?"

"For you, yes."

I swallow thickly as my emotions run rampant inside me. I love this man, and I'm pretty sure he's in love with me. He has to be. You don't call someone your love unless you love them.

Right?

"Wanna know a secret?"

His question pulls me from my thoughts, and I glance over at him. In the sun, his eyes look more caramel than dark chocolate. His shoulders are back, his beard a little wild today. It makes me think he's been yanking at it all morning during practice, something he tends to do. A little smirk is playing on his lips, and I can't help but smile back. "I love secrets."

Now, he's grinning. "I can't wait till I can introduce you as mine instead of Dan Davenport's granddaughter or my dog sitter."

My heart sings, but then it's ruined by my stomach clenching. "I'm ready for that," I admit. "I'm ready to hold your hand in public."

He grimaces, but then heat fills his gaze. "I want to hold you in public, kiss you so that everyone knows who you belong to."

Before I get too carried away by his words, I say, "Jessie is cute."

I don't miss the way Riggs's brows furrow at my abrupt topic change. "Yeah, he's a good lad. Loves dogs."

I swallow past the lump that is growing bigger by the second. "You looked really hot with him."

He chuckles. "I hope that wasn't in a weird way."

I snicker, shaking my head. "No. I mean you look good with kids. Like you'd be a good dad." He shrugs at that, but I don't miss the way his jaw tightens. "Did you and Peppa not want kids?"

He doesn't answer right away, and I feel my body tingling as I wait for the answer. Finally, he says, "I didn't trust her."

I angle my head. "What do you mean?"

"She wasn't mom material, and I had just lost my parents, who were the best parents in the world. I didn't see her as the type of mom my mom was, so I was scared to have kids with her. She wanted to, right away, but I wasn't ready. She would get so mad that I continued to use condoms with her, but I couldn't chance it. I think I always knew that things wouldn't work out between us." Tears burn behind my eyes, and I feel his gaze on me. When his fingers circle my wrist, I glance down at them



before looking up into his welcoming chocolate depths. He looks at me like I could be the mom he always wanted for his kids, and my heart continues to shatter. He licks his lips as he strokes his thumb along the back of my hand. “Not to jump the gun or scare you, but I don’t feel that way about you.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fucking fuck!

I avert my gaze as the tears flood my eyes. I look ahead, and I feel Riggs staring a hole into the side of my face. “Was that too much, my love?”

My voice cracks as I shake my head. “No, not at all. I mean, it’s obvious that this relationship is on the track for that.”

He stops me, and he pulls at my wrist so that my body turns to face his. “I never thought it would, but you’re right. I want a future with you when I never thought that would happen. I thought for the longest time I was broken, and I was, because you’ve fixed me, Clara.”

I shake my head as the tears flow, running down the sides of my face. “You weren’t broken, Riggs. Maybe a bit bent, but never broken.”

He steps closer, and he brings one hand beneath my chin to guide my face up. Our eyes meet, and I almost sob at the pure love in his gaze. He wipes my tears away. “My love, what’s wrong?”

I chew on my bottom lip as I search his gaze. I don't know why I ask him, and I hate myself for it, but still, the words leave my lips. "Do you want kids?"

He seems taken aback by my question as he continues to catch my tears with his thumbs. "I don't know. I didn't because, when I lost my parents so young, I never wanted to put my children through a loss like that. But things are different now." This time, a sob bursts out of me, and his face instantly changes. Fear and worry fill his features before he wraps me up in his arms. "Clara, love, what's wrong?"

I shake my head. "You aren't the broken one, Riggs. I am."

He cups my face, continuing to wipe my tears as he leans in, dusting his lips against mine. The dogs have sat at our feet and are whimpering as I cry. Riggs's voice is strained as he says, "My love, you're not making sense?—"

Not able to handle it, I cry out, "I can't have kids."

### CHAPTER 27

Riggs

I thought I hated losing. That kick in the chest kind of feeling when I know we didn't win really fucks with me.

But nothing compares to how much I despise seeing the girl I love more than anything in this life cry.

Clara's face is flushed, big tears falling from her sweet, wide eyes. Eyes that are bloodshot as her little fairylike nose runs with snot. Her lips are pursed as she tries to hold in the sobs, but it doesn't work.

She's a mess.

A stunning mess.

My mess.

And my heart aches at her pain. I know I said I didn't want people knowing about us yet, but that doesn't stop me from gathering her in my arms and cupping her face in my hands.

"Shh," I coo, wiping away her streaming tears. "Baby girl, calm down."

A sob explodes from her small frame, shaking her poor body. The boys whine as

Darcy howls for his mom. “Did I get downgraded? I thought I was your love,” she says on a shaky breath, and my heart breaks at how tragically beautiful she is.

“No, no, no,” I murmur, brushing my thumb along her trembling lip. “You’re my everything, my love. Even upgraded, you get called past nicknames.”

She nods slowly, her lips quivering. “O-okay. I didn’t know the rules to all these pet names.”

I hold back my smile as I hug her tightly, nuzzling my nose in her neck. She falls apart in my arms as I hold her tightly, like I’m trying to put her back together. “I wanted to tell you before, but I’ve never told anyone I’ve been with. Not that I’m ashamed. Or so I thought, because I guess I am. I don’t know. I think that’s why I’m attracted to older guys, because surely they don’t want kids. But I’m sorry. I should have told you from the start because you would be a perfect dad, and I can’t give you children.”

My eyes drift shut as emotion hits me. “Shh, Clara, my love. Breathe, baby.” She takes in a deep, shaky breath, her body trembling against mine. I hear her teeth chatter, and I pull back to look down at her. I wipe her nose with my thumb, wiping it on my slacks, as I brush more of her tears away. She just stares at me, blinking more tears down her face, and I give her a small smile. “You have to breathe, baby, because you’re the reason I’m finally breathing again.”

“Riggs,” she sobs, and I kiss her between her brows.

“Breathe,” I practically beg.

“You should be a dad,” she cries, and I shrug. Her words hit me like a bucket of pucks and I’m a goalie with no pads in sight. As much as I wanted to be a dad when my dad was alive, that feeling died with him. I’ve never wanted to love a child, only

to leave them at any moment the way my father left me. I know some think that the joys of raising children are worth the pain the child will experience, but that's not how I feel about it. I don't want my child to miss me or cry for me when I die. I don't want them broken like I was when my parents were put in the ground.

Then when I married Peppa, I never thought she was good enough to be a mom. She was very brash, unnecessarily mean sometimes, and she wasn't like my mom. Not like Clara. My love would be the best kind of mom. She would make everyone jealous and keep me in awe, but the fact that she can't have children doesn't change how I feel about her. She's so upset, though, her eyes still drowning in tears, and it's wrecking me.

I have to fix this for her.

Just as she's fixed me.

"I am," I tell her, and as if he knows, Gretzky jumps up on my hip, whining. He gives Clara a big, sloppy kiss, and she laughs. The sound eases the tension in my chest. "These are my boys, even your fool of a dog."

She gives me a sharp look. "Stop calling him a fool. He's a good boy, and you love him."

I nod, cupping her jaw. "He is, and I do. I'm just teasing." I kiss her nose, then her eyes before trailing kisses over her cheeks where the tears ran down. "Are you okay?"

She shrugs, leaning into me. "I don't know. I've never grieved not being able to have children until I saw you with Jessie. This pain came out of nowhere. I've never felt less than, but right now, I do."

I stroke her jaw. “There is nothing less than about you, my love. You are way out of my league, perfect in my eyes. The whole-ass package.”

She quickly shakes her head. “I’m not, though, Riggs. I can’t have kids?—”

“I don’t need them,” I tell her, pressing my forehead to hers, looking deep into her eyes. “I need you.”

Her lip quivers. “But you look so good?—”

“And I know for a fact that I look great with you,” I tell her, kissing her top lip. “I’m sorry you can’t have kids, and I know you probably convinced yourself I needed them, but baby, my love, I only need you. Oh, and our mutts.” At that, Gordie jumps up on her and kisses her while Darcy circles her legs with his leash. Gretzky is by her side, leaning his head on her thigh as he pants, obviously upset that my girl is crying. He loves her, probably as much as I do, if not more. “Please don’t feel less than. You are everything. Okay?”

She searches my eyes. “Are you sure? As much as I don’t want to let you go, I would.”

I scoff. “Well, I wouldn’t let you go.” Her eyes sparkle, tears hanging from her long lashes. “As long as I have you, I don’t need anything else.”

She leans her hands on my chest and then her forehead to my lips. I press a kiss to her skin as she says, “I don’t need anything else either.”

I cup her jaw, guiding her gaze up so our eyes can meet. As I get lost in her watery gaze, I feel a small smile pull at the sides of my lips. “Are you okay?”

She nods. “Much better.”

“Good,” I say as relief burns through me.

She’s still searching my eyes as she whispers, “Riggs?”

“Yes, my love?” A tear rolls down her cheek, and I catch it before directing my gaze back to hers.

“You know I love you, right?” she asks, pure emotion rocking me off my axis. “I’m in love with you. So in love with you, it hurts.”

I wrap my arm around her waist, the other clutching her jaw. “Just say it.”

Her eyes sparkle just for me, her lips curling up into that smirk I love. My little minx. “I love you, Riggs.”

Her words wash over me like spring rain. I look deep into her eyes, my heart jackhammering in my chest, as I whisper something I haven’t said to any human in over fourteen years. “Oh Clara, I love you too,” I tell her, my voice breaking a bit. “I’ve been in love with you since the moment you smiled at me, and nothing will ever change that.”

When the brightest, most stunning grin comes over my girl’s face, I realize why I haven’t had the urge to say those words to anyone before now.

Because I wasn’t meant to say those three words to anyone but Clara Drew McDavid.

### CHAPTER 28

Clara

I swipe away a tear as my sisters all look at me through our FaceTime call. The pity in their gazes is overwhelming, but I know they don't mean it in the way other people would. Other people would think my life is pointless without my being able to do what God intends for women to do. It's really frustrating that society thinks everyone should procreate. I was fine with loving my dog and being happy. But because of societal norms, I thought Riggs would want more than what I can provide for him.

Like my sisters, he just loves me and wants me to be happy.

He made sure I knew that.

"I think I've fallen for Coach McCoy," Austen says softly, and my lips turn up.

"Same. What a dreamboat," Eliza agrees as she wipes her face. She's a sympathy crier, always cries when anyone else does. "I'm so glad you told him."

I shrug, cuddling into Darcy's head. "I should have told him from the top, so if he did want to have kids, he could have dumped me."

Elliot snorts. "It doesn't matter when you told him, Clara, he wants you. Like he said."

I nod. "I just don't want him to resent me down the road."



“Sissy, he’s thirty-five. If he really wanted kids, he would have done it earlier or with his wife.”

“I know, but he didn’t think she would be a good mom. He told me that things changed when he met me,” I insist, my heart heavy. After I sobbed all over him and ruined his slacks with my snot, we went back to the compound, and it was time for him to go. While I felt like I was letting him down, his eyes never gave away a thing. He looked at me like I was still so important to him and kissed me just the same before he had to go.

“But he told you he wanted you, only you,” Louisa repeats. “Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t dig yourself a hole where you feel you belong. He told you he loved you.”

I smile as his words replay in my head.

“It sucks, Clara. It does. But you found a man who loves dogs as much as you do and who makes you happy. Don’t sabotage it,” Eliza stresses.

“Don’t pull a me and overthink it,” Elliot offers. “Just trust him. Which I know is easier said than done.”

“It really is,” Austen agrees. “But for what it’s worth, I believe him.”

Each of my sisters agrees, and I nod. “I do too.”

They smile at me as Gretzky nuzzles his nose in my neck, breathing deeply. Above my head is Gordie’s head, where he is sleeping soundly. I cuddle into Darcy, and I smile back. “Thanks, guys.”

“Always. You know we love you,” Louisa tells me.

“Exactly. You are perfect the way you are.” Elliot sends me a wide grin.

“You are, and no matter what happens, we’ll always be here for you,” Eliza reminds me, and I nod.

“But I know I’m happy you found Riggs,” Austen adds. “Even if I’m not a fan of the hiding thing. But then, Dimitri had to hide us, so I get it. You don’t want to mix hockey politics with love.”

“It isn’t really hiding as much as they’re not telling anyone right now. We all know how that goes since Elliot hid a pregnancy for six months,” Louisa accuses, and I can’t help but snort at that.

“You guys won’t ever let me live that down, will you?”

“Nope,” we all say together, and Elliot laughs. We join in, but then my phone shows another call coming in.

Riggs.

My heart flutters. “Hey, he’s calling. Let me get off here.”

They all wave, blowing me kisses before I switch over. I realize way too late that it’s a FaceTime call with my burly lumberjack, so instead of looking guilty, I send him a small little grin, happy to see him but still a bit overwhelmed from telling him about my condition. “Hey. Did you get settled?”

I know he did since he’s got no shirt on and he’s lying back in bed looking all freshly showered and yummy. That is, he’s lying back until he realizes there are three huge-ass dogs on me. In his bed. He pulls his brows together, and I continue to act like there aren’t three dogs lying on me in his bed, where he has specifically asked for

them not to be. “I am. Took a shower and unpacked for tomorrow’s skate, then hung up my suit. I may have it steamed before the game.”

I make a face. “I steamed it yesterday.”

“Did you?” he asks, and then he’s moving, taking me with him. I hear the zip of the bag, and then he smiles. “You did. Thank you, my love.”

I try to smile, but I know it’s not as bright as he likes it. “You know I’ve got you.”

“I know,” he agrees as he heads back to the bed, the camera moving every which way with each heavy step he takes. “How are you feeling?”

I bite my lip when it starts to tremble. “I miss you,” I admit. “I feel like the space is making me a bit insecure this time.”

His features soften as he runs his fingers through his beard. “Don’t let it. Nothing has changed between us.” His confidence is intoxicating as I gaze into his chocolate eyes.

“I know that, but my brain is being a little bit of a brat.”

He chuckles. “Now you know how I feel,” he teases, and that makes my grin grow. “Ah, there’s my baby girl.”

My lip wobbles as I take in his handsome face. The lines along his eyes that are more noticeable when he is smiling at me so contentedly, the way his eyes are dark chocolate and so scrumptious, how his lips curve for only me. “I’m sorry I waited so long to tell you.”

“You don’t owe me an apology. Like I said, this changes nothing.”

My heart swells, and it's hard to breathe as I get lost in his gaze. "How did I get so lucky to find you?"

He chuckles, his eyes bright. "I ask myself every time you smile, Clara."

We smile at each other, and I just love him so damn much. "I love you."

His eyes darken, and he exhales a hard, shaky breath, like hearing the words affects him so greatly. "I love you."

His gaze doesn't leave mine, but I know he sees when Gretzky licks my chin. I kiss my boy's muzzle just as Riggs says, "Can I ask why you can't have kids?"

My eyes instantly fill with tears, but I hurry to blink them away. I swallow past the lump that forms out of nowhere, and in a guttural voice, I say, "I never got a period. All my sisters started around twelve, but mine never came. I think that's another reason they hid me with everything inside them, because we were worried they'd kill me for not being able to procreate."

He shakes his head. "Can I bomb this place? Like, take them all out? I hate them. You know that, right?"

I smile. "We all do."

"I'm so thankful for your sisters."

"Me too," I say, my voice breaking. "Louisa took me to the doctor a couple days after they picked me up to make sure I was okay, and the doctor asked when I had my last period. Since I'd never had one, I went through some extensive testing to find out what I already knew. I don't ovulate, so I can't ever have a baby of my own."

He nods slowly. "You were eighteen?"

"Yeah."

"That's a lot to take in at such a young age."

I shrug. "It was, but I think I was so glad to be away from that awful place, I didn't let it get to me." I pause, choosing my words carefully. "But when I met you, I think I knew it would be different with you, and it scared me that you'd reject me."

He shakes his head. "Never," he says, his voice laced with so much emotion. "Do you want children?"

"I want your children," I admit, gazing into his eyes. "I want to watch you be a dad."

He nods. "I never really wanted kids after I lost my parents. It scares me, the thought of leaving them alone."

"That's why we raise them to live without us and carry on our love."

He curves his lips at that. "I never thought of it that way."

"I don't know... It's all in the future, ya know?"

"Yeah, our future. Together," he promises, and my heart explodes in my chest. "Who says we can't adopt or get a surrogate? You have four sisters. Surely one of them would carry our baby?"

"But it wouldn't be mine, and it costs so much."

He shrugs. "I've got the money. If you want a baby, I'll spend all my funds to give it

to you.”

Tears spill over and run down my cheeks. “Oh, Riggs.”

“I’m serious, Clara. I love you. And I’m great with it just being us, but if you want a baby down the road, I’ll do everything I can to make it happen for you. I’d give you the world, and I’d also burn it down for you. Whatever you want, my love.”

My lips tremble as I whisper, “I love you too, Riggs.”

“Sound like a plan, my love?”

“A great plan,” I agree, swallowing hard. “I don’t know what I want.”

“And we don’t gotta decide now, aye? We’ve got our whole lives, and ultimately, it’s whatever we want. If you want it to be just us and the pups, traveling this world and having all the uninterrupted sex, I am down.” Laughter bubbles out of me as his eyes burn into mine. “But if you want it to be the pups, some kids, a white picket fence, and me getting it in when the kids aren’t looking, I’m there.”

“Really?”

“Really, my love. As long as I’ve got you, I’m the happiest I’ll ever be.”

I feel like I’m floating in the sky, so utterly loved I don’t even know how to process it. I’ve only ever known my sisters’ love and Peepaw’s, but Riggs’s is a whole different kind.

It’s all-consuming, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.

“Same.”

He smiles. “Good. Now, stop it with all that crying. You’re breaking my wee heart.”

I wipe my face. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I wish I were there to wipe those tears away.”

“Me too.”

“You know I’d kiss you.”

“I know,” I say, my face flushing. “Probably put your hands in my shorts.”

He scoffs. “You would already be naked if I were there.”

“This is true.”

His eyes darken. “Also, I’d push the damn dogs out of my damn bed because they’re not supposed to be there,” he says in a growly voice. “All four of you know better.” Darcy starts to lick the phone, and I can’t help but bubble with laughter. “Your kisses don’t work on me, Darcy!”

I feign hurt. “Yes, they do!” Riggs snorts, and I flash him a pleading look. “Please? They make me happy. I don’t have you to cuddle me, so I’m cuddling with the dogs.”

He gives me a look, a pointed one that makes me all kinds of giddy. “You’re a real pain in my ass, baby girl, but fuck, if I don’t love you.”

I beam for him, a real smile, one that I know reaches my eyes. “I love you more.”

“Never,” he says, so seriously, even I can’t deny the fact. “Now, close your eyes, get some sleep.”

I make a face. “You don’t want to talk?”

“You’re tired, my love,” he tells me, his voice soft and soothing. “I’ll stay on the line until you’re asleep.”

My eyes flood with tears again at how incredibly amazing he is. “Okay.”

“That’s my good girl. Goodnight.”

“Night.” I blow out a breath. “Win tomorrow. For me.”

I love his chuckle before he says, “Always for you.”

And on my next breath, I’m met with blackness.

But I know I’m safe.

I’ve got Riggs and my pups.

While the future is unknown, nothing can touch the happiness these four give me.



### CHAPTER 29

Riggs

As Clara said, we play great in Michigan for some reason, and by the grace of the hockey gods, game seven is in Griffins' territory.

We're up by three.

My offense is on fire, fucking finally, and of course, my golden goose Cruz is at the top of his game. He hasn't let anything in, his eyes are sharp, and he is determined. While it's great for me now, I know I'll be losing him soon. It sucks, but I want the NHL for him. I want the best for all my players, even if it means they'll leave me. That's another reason I want this Cup so badly. I want to end this season with a bang since I know I'll be losing a lot of my players.

I did my job; I got them ready for the NHL, and I couldn't be prouder.

Now, I want the Cup for them.

Yet my heart is pounding in my chest, and I can hardly take a deep breath, no matter how hard I try. I feel I'm watching the clock at every turn. Begging time to go quicker so that this game can be over and we can go home.

I need to go home.

I need Clara in my arms.

I miss her. Desperately. And I hate that she's feeling insecure. I want to make those feelings disappear. I don't want my girl feeling anything but confident when it comes to me. To us. I never thought I could love anyone the way I love her, but damn it, I do. She's got me wrapped around her finger, and I have no intentions of freeing myself.

I'm hers.

And knowing I'm hers is a feeling I never thought I'd crave in my life.

I check the clock again, and when I look back at the ice, the Griffins are pulling their goalie. I'm not worried, though. This game is ours. I'm bouncing on the balls of my feet as I check the time again.

Fifty-three seconds.

I watch as my boys battle, and Alex continues to be the ninja he is. I feel Willy's hand clutch my shoulder, and I look up at the clock.

Twenty-one seconds.

My boys stand, all of us vibrating and smacking one another in excitement. I don't look at the clock anymore. Instead, I look at each of my boys, the pride I have for them burning deep inside me. This group of guys has always been special, and I can't wait to bring home the Cup with them. When the horn sounds and our fans who made the trip start to cheer, I close my eyes.

We did it.

We're four wins away from the cup.

As gloves fly and the boys all attack Alex, no matter how excited or proud of them I am, there is only one place I want to be.

With Clara.

Clara is great at a lot of things, but singing is not one of them.

She reminds me of the damn seagull from *The Little Mermaid* , yet she sings like she thinks she's Adele. It's another thing about her that I love so much.

She's unapologetically herself.

As I push the door open, I'm thankful she's awake, even though it's close to two a.m. She looks up from where she stands by the counter, pouring a glass of wine, and the most stunning grin comes over her face. I'm breathless at the sight of her, which is nothing new. She's wearing one of my old LA Kings shirts, with bare feet and her hair up in a high bun.

She's perfect.

"Congratulations!" she gushes, and I smile as I bend down to kiss the dogs that are barking and making a ruckus at my feet, but my eyes are trained on her. Fuck, I missed her. She starts for me, but I shake my head.

"Stop."

Her eyes darken, my mouth parting a bit in surprise as she does as I ask. She raises a brow at me, and I kiss the dogs once before I say, "Go to bed."

All three listen, running toward their beds, and Clara grins at me. "Shouldn't you be saying that to me?"

“Nope. Take your shirt off.”

Her lips twitch a bit as she pulls her shirt up and over her head, leaving her totally naked. All smooth skin and curves that I want to devour. “God, I want you.”

“Come get me.”

I shake my head and beckon her with my fingers. “No. You come here.” Her eyes flash with desire, her pupils blowing out as she starts for me, but I shake my head. “No, my love. Crawl to me.”

She licks her lips as she slowly drops to her knees. I pull one of my wingback sitting chairs toward me, turning it so it’s in line with her. I rip open my shirt and unfasten my pants, releasing my cock before I lower myself into the chair, my legs wide for her. Once more, she licks her lips as she lowers to her hands. “Yes, baby girl. I want you to crawl to me like the hockey king I am, and I’m going to fuck you like my own little slut.”

Her eyes darken, her mouth parting as she starts for me. Never a moment goes by when I don’t think Clara is the most beautiful woman on this planet, but there is something about the way she crawls to me. Her tits jiggle as her ass sways delectably. I grip my cock hard, the tip weeping for her as I give myself a hard tug. I rub my thumb along my tip, collecting the precome. When she stops between my parted legs, I cup her jaw and rub the fluid along her bottom lip.

Her eyes go wild for me as I gaze into her navy depths. “When it’s time for the world to know, they’ll know you as my queen, Clara Drew.” She licks my thumb, a small whimper leaving her lips and sending heat straight to my cock. “But when we’re in this house, when you’re in all your gorgeous, naked glory, you’re my wee slut.”

She nods eagerly.

“Your body was made for me.”

“Only you.”

“Good girl,” I mutter as she covers my hand with hers. She strokes me before licking my tip, my toes curling in my shoes. When she takes me into her hot mouth, I’m a goner. My head falls to the back of the chair as she runs her tongue along my length. She bobs up and down on my cock, and I swear I feel her everywhere. I open my eyes, looking down to see her watching me with tears in her eyes as she takes me to the back of her throat. Each time she does, she moans deeply, and everything goes tight inside me. Her wide eyes are stunning as my cock spreads her pretty lips, but I have no intention of filling her sweet mouth with my come.

I take her by her waist, and she squeals as I pull her up to my chest. Her chest presses to mine as I grip my cock and direct it right to her dripping center. She groans loudly as I thrust up into her, filling her to the hilt. Her knees fall to the sides of my thighs as I guide her up and down my cock, our eyes locking with heated passion. I move my hands to her ass, gripping each cheek and spreading them as I fill her over and over. Each time is deeper, and the sounds she makes have me going faster and harder. As she starts to squeeze me, I press her clit, and she screams my name in that hot, throaty way that I love.

I squeeze her ass as she strangles my cock with her hot center. “That’s right, baby girl, come on my cock.”

“Riggs, please. Harder,” she cries, her fingers biting into my shoulders as I continue to thrust up into her.

“If I go harder, I’ll fill you up. I want you to come on my cock again, love.”

She moans loudly, her body shaking against mine as I pinch her clit. She cries out,

jerking against me as I soothe the assault by rubbing her swollen nub. She mewls the cutest noise as she bounces on my cock. Her tits jiggle and look so damn appealing, I have no choice but to take one nipple in my mouth. She cries out as I bite her nipple, licking it and sucking it between my lips. I lift her off my cock, moving to her other tit before I gather her wetness and trail it to her ass. She moans loudly as I thrust back into her pussy, swirling her wetness around the ring of muscle I want so badly to bury myself in.

Her eyes meet mine, all heavy-lidded as she pants, and I slowly push a finger into her ass. She jerks against me, her head falling back as she moans my name. I lick my lips, breathless at the sight of her taking my cock and my finger in her sweet arse. “That’s it, my good girl. You love my finger in your ass, aye?”

“Yes. God, fuck yes. Riggs, please.”

“Let go, my good girl. Come.”

She bounces on my cock, my finger going deeper into her arse as she chants my name and squeezes me. When she comes with a scream, I take her by the back of her neck, bringing her in to capture her lips. Before I kiss her, though, I whisper against her lips, “That’s my good girl. Now, I’ll give you what you want.”

“Please,” she cries, but I cut off her pleading with my mouth, dominating her lips with mine. I stroke her tongue, taste the wine on her lips, before I tear my mouth from hers. We lock eyes, and my heart swells as I start to jackhammer into her. The sounds of my cock slamming into her wet pussy are downright shameful, but not even a goal horn is better than the noises her body makes for mine. It only takes me three more thrusts before my balls are pulling up and heat is exploding at my spine. I fill her up, our wetness running along my shaft as I still inside her.

We’re both breathless, our chests rising and falling as I drink her in. Her head is

thrown back, her whole chest, neck, and face flushed. Her lips are parted, and I know I've never seen a more beautiful woman in my entire life.

And she's all mine.

I kiss up the column of her throat, sucking her heated skin before she drops her mouth to mine. We kiss and nip at each other before we lock eyes. A sweet smile pulls at her lips, and she whispers, "I'm so proud of you."

My chest swells, and I didn't realize how badly I wanted those words from her. "Thanks, my love."

She curves her lips into a smile. "Only four more wins."

"Yup."

"You've got this."

I was confident before, but now, I feel like I'm on top of the world. "I love you," I tell her, searching her eyes. "So much."

She doesn't dare look away as she says, "I love you too."

We stay in each other's arms for a long time, my cock deep inside her and my heart pounding just for her.

There is something visceral about her love.

Being on the receiving end of it is a gift I never thought I would ever get.

### CHAPTER 30

Clara

Louisa and Ciaran are getting married Friday.

But today, we are celebrating the Knoxville Bears' victory. Or really, an annihilation. The Knoxville Bears swept the Hershey Bears with a display of pure domination. Elliot had the #BattleoftheBears hashtag going, but to me, there was no battle. It was the Knoxville Bears showing up to get their Cup. The games were incredible, and nothing in this world can touch the absolute satisfaction on my man's face. Don't get me wrong—he's still grumpy and doesn't smile in pictures, but he at least isn't growling at anyone.

Well, he's growling at Alex. It seems he always is, though.

They'll keep all of us entertained at family dinners for years to come.

A small smile pulls at my lips as I take in how the whole town square is decorated for the Knoxville Bears. Banners fly from all the businesses, orange and black balloons bounce in the summer breeze, big displays of the guys during the run decorate the streets. The Bears logo is painted all over the place, mainly on major streets, and the main road in front of the courthouse has even been renamed Bears Row. Huge Bears flags hang in the shop windows, and everyone has come out to celebrate our Bears.

But I'm only here for one person.



Or rather, I'm here to stalk one person.

Riggs stands with his players, his lips pressed in a line as he nurses a beer. His eyes are bright, though, more milk chocolate than dark today. He wears a nice tailored black suit with an orange tie. I know his cuff links are little Knoxville Bears logos because I had them made for him. He looks as if he's annoyed, and I know he is, but he is also very excited. I don't know why he's allowed his annoyance to come to the party, when it was his suggestion to keep our relationship under wraps until after Louisa's wedding. We don't want to distract Peepaw from the happiness of Louisa and Ciaran's day. I agreed even though I didn't want to, but I understood.

There is a chance that Peepaw will be upset by us being together, and we didn't want to ruin any of the upcoming events. I just don't like that Riggs looks like he's getting a root canal at the dentist, rather than celebrating an outstanding Cup win.

I roll my eyes as I bring my phone up to text him.

Me: Smile.

I watch as he digs his phone out, and then I see his brows come in. He looks around, his eyes searching for me, but I know he wouldn't be able to see me all the way from across the square. Plus, a fountain is blocking his view and is currently spurting orange water because Tennesseans tend to be a bit over the top when it comes to winning. I can see the frustration on his face when he can't find me before the text comes back.

Riggs: No. I want you by me. Your hand in mine. I want people to know that you are mine.

I feel as if electricity is running through my body at his words. He is so intense, and I adore that about him.

Me: It's better we wait till after the wedding.

Riggs: I have regrets about suggesting that.

Me: And I have regrets about agreeing, but it'll be all good. I'll just stand to the side and ogle you until you're able to slip away.

Riggs: What am I slipping away for?

Me: To ravish me against the nearest surface. You look so damn good today.

I glance over at him, and I can't help my smile at how his cheeks fill with color. He looks so bashful, so damn cute. So in love.

God, I love him.

Riggs: Where are you?

Me: Look ahead. By the fountain.

I look up just as he does, and when we lock eyes, my heart stops dead in my chest. His eyes are intense, shamelessly focused on mine. When he looks at me like that, like I'm the prey and he's the hunter, I feel like an exposed nerve. Like one touch and I'll explode. I lick my lips as my phone sounds in my hand.

Riggs: I want to eat you up, my love.

Me: I rather love when you eat me, snookums.

I hear his deep, rough laughter, and when I look back up, everyone is looking at him like he's lost his damn mind. His laughter always makes me hot, but watching others

react to his amusement as if he's grown six heads makes giggles bubble out of me. I love who he is with me. Before I can write him back, Louisa wraps her arms around my waist. I lean back into her, cupping her wrist with my free hand as Austen wraps us both in a tight hug. I press my cheek to hers, inhaling her sweet, floral scent. Austen has always been so classically beautiful, with her little button nose and long brown hair. She reminds me of an elf from Lord of the Rings with her sharp cheekbones and stunning blue eyes.

Louisa used to mirror Austen's looks, but over the years, she's smoothed out, gained the weight she needed, and now she's all curves and softness. Being in their arms is like being taken back to when I was six and there was a storm that scared me to my core. I fully expect to be hit by the bad memories of my childhood, but thankfully, all I feel is the love my sisters give me.

"Why are you over here by yourself?" Austen whispers against my temple.

"We are telling Peepaw after the wedding. We didn't want today or the wedding to have any drama if he decides to pull his regular shit," I explain, and Louisa lets out an exasperated sigh.

"I don't like that. I want you to be happy—don't worry about me." She smiles. Though, I shake my head.

"No. I won't allow anything to ruin your day." As much as I hate the thought of going to my sister's wedding without Riggs at my side, I will do it for her. "We can wait."

She waves me off. "No. You've waited enough. I can tell how badly you want everyone to know."

I smile shyly. "Yeah."

Austen chucks my chin. “Love looks good on you, sissy.”

My grin grows as a pair of huge arms wrap around Austen’s waist, pulling her away. Dimitri Titov stands like a thick wall behind my sister, all gorgeous with his Top Gun mustache and blazing light-blue eyes. Eyes that are only for my sister. He kisses Austen’s cheek loudly before whispering in her ear in Russian.

He may not realize I can hear him. But one thing is for sure—I’d rather not hear my sister’s boyfriend tell her that his cock is weeping for her.

Instead, I wish it were Riggs telling me that.

I glance up to look for him, but I don’t see him. My heart falls a bit, but then Elliot and Eliza come to stand with us. “Alex says he’ll meet Ciaran at the venue tomorrow to help with the arch. I would help, but I feel like this kid is trying to escape through my belly button.”

All our eyes drop to my sister’s extended tummy, and I grin. “That’s what you get for hiding him from us. Now he wants everyone to know he’s coming.”

Elliot doesn’t find me funny, but everyone else grins. “I just don’t understand how I didn’t show for months, and now, I look like I’m carrying eight kids.”

Dimitri snorts. “Not eight, maybe three.”

“Thanks,” she says dryly, and everyone laughs at her dismay.

Once more, though, I hear when Dimitri whispers quietly in Russian to my sister that he wants her fat and pregnant. Austen’s eyes widen, but I can see the shine in her gaze. With her voice low, she tells him he has to marry her first, and he nods, determination in his eyes. With a grin, he tells her to name a date, and the look of

pure happiness on my sister's face is overwhelming. I find myself looking at all my sisters, so much pride and exhilaration coursing through me from the knowledge that we made it.

We survived.

We're happy.

And all of us know what real love is.

Something I don't think any of us ever expected to happen.

A tightness gathers in my chest, but then I'm caught off guard when I hear Riggs's voice. "If I can have everyone's attention." All of us turn and look up at where Riggs stands with his team, the Cup in his hand as he looks out into the crowd.

No. He's looking right at me.

Breathless, I swallow as he continues. "I want to thank everyone for coming and for supporting us through this run. I have never in my life felt pride the way I did when I watched my boys skate with this Cup above their heads." He shakes the Cup in his hand, and the emotion on his face brings tears to my eyes. "I wanted this Cup badly this year, because not only did I know it was ours, but because this team is special. Each of these boys has the potential to go pro today. Some have already been called up and will start training in the NHL in the coming weeks, and while I'm sad to see them go, I'm glad they can go with the memory of our win."

I smile widely at him, and when I feel the wetness on my cheeks, I quickly wipe away my tears.

"This wouldn't be possible without you as our fans, and we are forever grateful for

you. I want to thank my boys for fighting and trusting my coaching. I want to thank Dan Davenport for giving me the opportunity to win for the great city of Knoxville. As much as this Cup is for us, it's for this city, this town. Now, let's celebrate."

The townspeople all cheer loudly as Riggs passes the Cup over and moves out of the way so Alex can take the mic. I watch as Riggs walks to the edge of the stage, and then my phone goes off.

I bring it up to see a text from him.

Riggs: Nearest flat surface is the post office. Go now.

My heart flutters, and I don't even tell my sisters where I'm going.

I have a one-track mind when it comes to Riggs.

### CHAPTER 31

Riggs

I'm leaning against the brick wall off the post office, out of sight of everyone, when my girl turns the corner. Her eyes meet mine, and I grin as I reach for her at the same time she does for me. Our lips touch as we wrap our arms around each other in a desperate embrace. I am a fucking eejit for suggesting we wait to tell everyone. She needed to be beside me on that stage. I wanted to thank her, tell her how much I love her in front of the whole goddamn town. Tell the world that I wouldn't have made it through this damn Cup run without her. The simple fact of knowing she was home waiting for me kept me going.

Clara is the missing piece of my whole existence.

I cup her jaw with one hand and squeeze her hip with the other as I drink from her sweet lips. She tastes like cinnamon apples, which I assume means she ate the fried apple pies on a stick that I was eyeing. Truth is, I'm convinced they taste better on her lips than the real thing. As my tongue searches her wanton mouth, I groan and press my hips into hers. I know she feels every inch of me, and I want her to know how badly I want her, how there isn't a moment in time when my body doesn't crave hers. When my heart doesn't beat for her.

I pull away, only a mere inch, as I open my eyes to meet hers. I stroke her jaw, in awe of her beauty. She has her hair up in a sleek ponytail, black and orange ribbons tied around the base. She's wearing a championship Bears tee with tight black pants and a pair of orange flip-flops. Before I kissed her, her lips were glossed, but that isn't the

case anymore. I press my nose to hers before licking her top lip. That makes her lips curve up, and the way her eyes draw me in hits me straight in the chest.

I search her navy depths, loving every single sparkle of light in them before she whispers, “You taste like beer and tequila.”

I give her a goofy smile that I don’t mean to. “The boys like shots.”

“I saw,” she says, and I hate the sadness in her eyes. She traces my lips, and I smile brightly for her. “Why do you smile so big for me, but when you’re up there giving a speech, you look like you hate life.”

I chuckle lightly before nipping at her finger. “Because you make me happy.”

“Winning makes you happy,” she retorts, and I gather her closer.

“At one time, maybe. But I never knew true happiness until you smiled at me.”

In an instant, her face shines like the sun, and I can’t get enough of how stunning she is. “You’re drunk,” she teases, and I shake my head.

“I’m buzzed.”

“Nope, drunk ’cause you’re being overly romantic.”

“Because I’m in love with the most incredible woman alive.”

She smiles even more as she traces my lips. “I love you too.”

I press my forehead to hers. “I’m sorry for asking you to wait to tell everyone.”



She shakes her head. “I don’t mind, Riggs. I know the truth.”

“And that is?”

“That no matter what, you’re mine and I’m yours.”

I bring her in closer, my eyes drifting shut as I brush my lips along hers. “Forever.”

“Forever,” she agrees, molding her lips to mine. We kiss for what seems like forever, unable to get enough of each other. When she opens her mouth for me, I move my tongue over hers, needing to taste all of her. Each stroke is demanding on my part, but she keeps up, her fingers biting into my sides as she meets me stroke for stroke. My whole body is on fire for her, and I want more. I part from her but stay close enough that my lips move against hers as I whisper, “Why the hell are these pants so tight?” I trace the seam between her legs.

Her eyes are hooded and dark as she answers. “Because I love seeing the length of your cock in those slacks just from looking at me.”

I chuckle against her lips, my body on fire for hers. “I would take you right here, my love, but for what I have planned, I need a bed—and you naked.”

She smiles as she searches my eyes, heat and desire looking back at me. “And my ass in the air?”

I groan, cuddling her closer. “Yes, and my cock so deep in that sweet ass, you’ll forget your own name.”

She smirks, her eyes twinkling with excitement. “But I won’t forget yours.”

My cock jerks in my slacks as I press my hips to hers. “You drive me wild, love.”

“I know. It’s been my plan since the start.”

“Don’t change,” I beg. “I love you, just the way you are.”

“Only because I let you spank my ass when I sass you.”

“True,” I tease, nipping at her lip. “But also, because I love you.”

Her lips curve up into a bigger grin as she cups my face. “I love you too.”

She kisses me, and I let her take control, her tongue moving along the seam of my lips before I open for her. Our kiss is passionate, demanding, and I don’t ever want it to end.

But of course, it has to.

Her phone starts to ring, and she pulls away, her brows drawing together. “You’re here. Who could be calling me?”

“You have four sisters,” I scoff as she reaches for her phone.

“Yeah, but they text,” she sighs. “Oh, it’s Austen. Hello? Yeah, I’m still here. Oh, okay. Yeah, I’ll be there in a few.” She hangs up and exhales. “They want to go to dinner to celebrate Louisa, for the wedding.”

I stroke my thumb over her lip. “Sounds like fun.”

“I wish you could come.”

“After the wedding, you’ll be sick of me. I’ll be glued to your hip.”

She chuckles. "I can't wait. How are you getting home?"

"I'll have someone drop me off."

"Text me?"

"Of course. I'll meet you at home, aye?"

She pouts. "I feel like an ass, but I'd rather go home now with you."

I chuckle, squeezing her hip. "We have our whole life, my love."

She sighs, and I kiss her nose. "I love buzzed snookums."

I snort. "Go have fun."

She kisses my thumb and then takes me by my shirt to bring me in closer. Against my lips, she demands, "Be naked when I get home."

"With a bow on my cock?"

"Yes, right on the tip," she says with a wink before kissing me deeply. This girl is a fucking dream. Our kiss turns desperate, but I force myself to pull away before I take her right here and now. My little minx sends me a sultry grin as she disentangles herself from me.

I catch her by the wrist, squeezing it as we lock eyes. "Love you."

She quirks her lips. "Love you more."

"Never."

“Debatable.”

“It’s not.”

She grins as she walks away, and I watch each step she takes. I bring my top lip between my teeth as I watch her ass sway side to side. The tight black jeans mold to each curve that I love to squeeze and bite. I shouldn’t let her go, but I want her to enjoy her sisters. I can’t keep her locked up with me all the time.

Even though I want nothing more than to do just that.

I exhale and then adjust myself as I shake my head. My love drives me insane to the point that I feel out of control. I groan inwardly as I push off the brick building and head the other direction so that no one will know I was copping a feel of the owner’s granddaughter.

It isn’t until I’m on the edge of the celebration that Alex steps into my path. I jerk back, surprised since I didn’t see him. “Fucking hell, Cruz. What is your deal?” He eyes me, his brow perked as he stares at me. “What?”

“Is something going on with Clara?”

I pull in my brows, my heart kicking up. “What?”

His caramel eyes bore into mine, and I know he knows the truth. Fuck. “I saw you kissing her just a second ago.”

My throat bobs as I swallow. I shrug. “She’s a pretty girl,” I admit, and then I smile. “But it was nothing. Just a wee drunken one-night-stand mistake. We thought something was there, but she realized it was wrong, just as I did. She works for me, and she’s a baby.”

The lie leaves my mouth so quickly, and I realize I am a bit drunker than I thought. I try to smile, but guilt washes over me almost instantly. I can't tell him the truth, though. I know he'll run his mouth, and I want to be the one to tell Dan myself. I don't want rumors starting. I don't want anything to ruin Louisa and Ciaran's wedding. It means too much to everyone.

"You hooked up with her?" he asks incredulously, and I shrug.

"Sure."

"When?"

"Over a month ago. It's no big deal. It meant nothing."

"You're right. She's a sweet girl. You're too rough and old for her."

I bristle at his words. "Old. Jeez, you're a real gobshite, ya know that?"

"I'm just saying."

"Fine, but she's an adult."

He doesn't like that, and even though he isn't her blood, I can tell he's protective. While I appreciate that, I'm the one who is supposed to protect her. She is mine. "I don't like it, Coach. As much as I want you to be happy, I know she's too sweet for you. You'll chew her up and spit her out."

I have to school my features because he's right—the me before Clara was like that, but now, that girl owns me, and I'd never hurt her.

"Which is why it was a stupid drunken mistake. Don't worry a bit about it, aye? All is

well. She's safe. I don't want her. I'm going to go sober up," I say, smacking his chest and walking past him. I exhale heavily, his words shaking me to my core, but I know they're not true.

I would never hurt Clara.

Not when hurting her would lead to my demise.

But why do I have the feeling that I might have just done that?

### CHAPTER 32

Clara

I jerk awake when I hear dry heaving.

At first, I assume it's one of the dogs, but when I look toward their beds, they're all sleeping soundly. I hear Riggs groan, and I can't help but giggle.

"Aw, poor Grandpa couldn't handle his liquor?"

He groans once more. "As soon as I'm done puking, your arse is mine."

His voice is so deep, gravelly, but not in a sexy way. Poor guy. I got home around eleven, but Riggs didn't get home till two. He stumbled in, drunk off his ass, and fell face first onto the bed. I was two seconds from yelling at him, until he gathered me in his arms, told me I was his world, and then promptly passed out. "I've heard that," I call to him as I cuddle deeper into the bed. "My ass was supposed to be full last night, but someone went drinking."

When he pukes, I snicker. "Have mercy on me, love. I'm dying."

My laughter echoes around the room as I watch him move from the toilet to the sink. I undressed him, which was a feat on its own, so he stands in only his tight black boxer briefs. His thick thighs are on display and begging to be licked. His stomach is tight and ripped, and knowing he's all mine is just downright euphoric. "I'm sure it was worth it."

He groans as he puts toothpaste on his toothbrush. “I don’t think it was. I can’t keep up with those boys.”

I grin. “It’s hard being a grandpa.”

He sends me a dark look, and I just grin wider at him. He shakes his head as he continues to brush his teeth.

“Did you have fun, at least?” I ask, hoping he did.

He nods before spitting. “Yeah. Just feel like shit.”

“There are aspirin and water beside the bed.”

“I took them, thank you.”

I watch as he spits again and then washes his face and beard. When he comes out of the bathroom in all his glory, my mouth goes dry. He makes me want to climb him like a tree and hump him. Since I know he’s not feeling well, I refrain.

“Did you have fun?” He crawls into bed, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me to him so we’re flush. He glides his hands along the backs of my thighs, up to my ass, before squeezing my bare cheeks.

I nod. “We did. It’s crazy how nothing has changed between us, even though all of us are involved with someone and Eliza is married, Elliot is pregnant. It was nice to just be us five.”

“I’m glad,” he mutters against my temple. “Do you have anything to do today?”

“Not really. Ciaran hired people to set up, but I think he and Alex are going to go



make the arch.”

“Make the arch?”

“Yeah, they’re making one out of all their favorite romance books that Lou and Ciaran love.”

He smiles against my temple. “Ciaran is such a romantic.”

I snort. “So are you when you’re buzzed,” I tease, and he kisses my temple.

He moves his hand to the small of my back and draws circles along my spine. “I should be more romantic when I’m not buzzed, aye?”

“No,” I say, gazing into his eyes. “If you do it all the time, I won’t swoon when you do.”

He quirks his lips. “I do love making you swoon.”

I kiss his mouth, tasting the mint of his toothpaste as he devours my lips. He brings me in closer, his cock growing against my stomach. He pulls back first, which is surprising, until he grazes his lips over my top lip. His eyes bore into mine, his depths so dark and inviting. I want to fall into them, drown in all his chocolate glory. “Think you’d want to go on a day-trip with me?”

I eye him. “Are you up for that?”

He grins. “I threw up. I’ll pound back some Gatorade and then eat some bacon. I’ll be fine.”

“Then, yes. Where are we going?”

“Nashville.”

“For?”

“I have a storage space there, and I need to grab a few things.”

I see a secret in his eyes, and I furrow my brows. “A few things?”

“Yeah, some of my parents’ stuff.”

My heart aches for him. “Sure, I’d love to.”

He brushes his lips against mine. “Also, do you have a passport?”

I nod. “I do.”

“Can I take you to Scotland?”

I giggle. “You know the answer, Riggs.”

He smiles. “What about your business?”

“I have employees. They’ll be fine, and Peepaw can keep the boys.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t figured out you’re here.”

“I live in an apartment above the dog resort, and when he asks where I am, I say I’m at Lou’s old place. But he’s been so busy with the play-offs, I don’t think he’s noticed.”

“Which is a win for me since you’re in my bed.”

“Well, you are a winner,” I retort, grinning at him. His cheeks flush a bit as I twirl his beard with my fingers. “My hot hockey king.”

His eyes flash with desire, and my heart skips a beat. “Before I ravish you, I need you to know, I want to introduce you to my parents.” Once more, my heart aches for this beautiful man. “We have a plot of land in Scotland, a small little house I haven’t visited in over two years. My parents are buried on our land, and I want to take you there.”

Tears spring to my eyes. “I’d love that.”

“When I said I had money, it’s because of the land and an inheritance. Peppa tried to take half, but I was smart and made her sign a prenup before we got married.” He searches my eyes. “So, if down the road, you want that baby we discussed, I promise I’ll make it happen.” A tear slips past without my realizing it, and he narrows his eyes. “Love, what have I told you about this crying? It kills me.”

I nod, quickly wiping the tear away. “It’s just, you say you’re only romantic when you’re buzzed, but Riggs, you blow me away at every turn.”

He cups my jaw, running his thumb along my bottom lip. “I don’t want you ever to question how much I love you.”

“I don’t,” I whisper against his thumb. “I feel it.”

He leans his forehead to mine, kissing my top lip. “I do too,” he whispers. “I still have regrets about suggesting we wait till after the wedding. I’m ready to ruin the wedding if it means you’ll be on my arm.”

I grin, stroking his jaw. “As much as I want the same, Louisa deserves the best day ever.”

He nods. “You’re right.”

“My peepaw is so unpredictable. He lost his shit when it came to Austen and Elliot with their guys, but then with Louisa and Eliza, he didn’t get upset to the point of trying to ruin lives. I just want everything to go smoothly. We’re good, no matter what. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah. I’m just gonna be in a state of pain the whole time, being so close but unable to touch you in that hot little number you’re gonna be wearing.”

I beam. “It’s okay. I’m sure there are spots we can sneak off to.”

“I’ll find them for a wee second of your time.”

He kisses me, and when he kisses me like that, all demanding need for me, I feel like I’m underwater. But I’m able to breathe as long as Riggs’s lips are on mine. He traces his hands up my back, and I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him even closer. When we part, we’re both breathless and heat burns in his eyes. “If we keep this up, we’ll never leave this bed.”

“Isn’t that the plan?” I ask sweetly, and he shakes his head.

“Day-trip, remember?” I nod, and he smacks my ass playfully. “I’ll ravish you tonight.”

“Promise you won’t get drunk, Grandpa?”

“The only drunk I’ll be getting is off you, my love.”

We share a grin before he kisses my nose and then starts to get up. I roll over to the other side and reach for my phone. I jerk back in surprise when I see thirteen missed

calls from Elliot.

“Oh no,” I gasp, hitting her contact. “Elliot has been calling. I put my phone on silent ’cause I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Riggs’s brows pull together. “Shit. Hopefully she’s not in labor.”

My heart drops as the phone rings, and my sister’s voice comes over the line. “Clara Drew, what the hell?”

“My bad. I had my phone on silent. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she snaps.

Perplexed, I ask, “Are you in labor?”

“No.”

“Okay. Then what’s going on?”

“I thought I knew what I wanted to say. But now that I hear your voice, I’m so fucking pissed, I can spit.”

Her voice is hard, and when I glance at Riggs, even he looks confused. “What’s wrong, El?”

“Is Riggs there?”

“Yes?”

“Put me on speakerphone.”

I do as she asks, my face twisted in confusion as Riggs steps toward me. “Okay? You’re on speaker.”

“Riggs, I want you to know you’re lucky I’m about to drop a baby, or I’d come over there and whoop your ass.”

“Elliot!” I chide. “What the hell?”

Elliot’s voice is like steel. “No, Clara. I want him to explain to me and to you why he had the audacity to tell Alex that my beautiful sister was a drunken mistake and that she meant nothing and that he doesn’t want her.”

I look up as Riggs’s face goes a shade of white I’ve never seen. He holds up his hands, palms toward me. “I can explain.”

“Please fucking do!” Elliot demands.

I shake my head and hang up on my sister as I lock eyes with Riggs. I don’t want to believe this, but he just admitted to it. My heart pounds in my chest as I cross my arms, hugging myself. I knew this was too good to be true. I knew I wasn’t destined for love, not when I’m not whole like other women. But even thinking that doesn’t seem right. Not with how his eyes are pleading with mine, not with how my heart still screams for him.

No. I am worthy of love.

His love.

But he has some explaining to do.

### CHAPTER 33

Riggs

Goddammit.

Fuck.

That fucking golden goose of mine is a dead man.

The look in her eyes, the betrayal, has my heart dropping to the pit of my stomach.  
“Clara, love, I can explain.”

She looks at me expectantly. “Please do.”

She’s too calm. Fuck. In a rush, I explain, “Alex caught us kissing, and I lied. I did. I told him it was a mistake and that we’d both realized it.”

“Why, though? If he caught us...oh well.”

“Because, obviously, he doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut. He’s a pain in my ass and loves to get under my skin,” I stress, my heart beating so hard, my vision is fuzzy. “I didn’t want it getting out or him teasing me in front of everyone. I didn’t realize he’d tell Elliot, though. I’m sorry.”

She lets out a breath, brushing her hair off her shoulders. “I mean, I understand that you didn’t want him to know, but why say that it was a drunken mistake? That I mean

nothing to you? You could have just ignored him.”

“You’re right, but I had to nip it in the bud. I didn’t mean anything I said.”

Her navy eyes burn with anger as she narrows them. “But didn’t you realize that saying that to him would get around to my family? You said it to my sister’s baby daddy, the sister who has a tendency for violence and holds a hell of a grudge. I don’t understand why you had to say those things.”

“I was drunk.”

“Sure, but a drunk mind speaks the truth,” she throws back at me, her eyes filling with tears.

“The fuck it does. I was trying to cover for us, and I failed badly,” I plead, but when I try to grab for her, she moves out of my reach. “Clara, don’t do that.”

“Don’t stand there and act like you can touch me when you said I don’t matter.”

“I never said you don’t matter. I said it was nothing because Alex was playing the big brother, and I had to say something to get him off my tail.” Her eyes narrow to slits. “I didn’t mean any of it. You know how I feel about you.”

She shrugs. “I know, but when you had the opportunity to say that, you said the opposite.”

“Because Alex is a gobshite and runs his mouth. Clara, I was trying to protect us, to keep things good for this wedding, like you wanted,” I practically yell, and she glares.

“Don’t yell at me,” she demands, her eyes dark but full of so much hurt. It’s killing me.



I blow out a breath. “You’re not hearing me. I didn’t mean it.”

“But now that Alex told Elliot, she’ll tell everyone else, or she’ll hit you at the wedding. She’s crazy and hormonal.”

“I can handle Elliot. And baby, I’ll go to Dan right now and scream my love for you. Do you want me to call Alex, set him right?”

She looks away, slowly shaking her head. “I just don’t know why you had to say that. You could have gone about it so differently. Calling me nothing, a mistake... I mean, fuck, Riggs, that’s really shitty.”

When I see the tears gather in her eyes, I reach for her again, and I don’t allow her to pull away. I wrap my arm around her, holding her to my body as I press my lips to her temple. “I knew when I said it, I’d fucked up. I’m so sorry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was out drinking, and you were with the girls.”

“Still, you could have told me when it happened so I could have gotten to Elliot first.”

“I’m sorry. I fucked up.”

A small sob moves through her body, and I hold her tighter. My soul feels like it’s shattering into a billion pieces as I hold her close. I kiss her temple and close my eyes, emotion suffocating me. “Please tell me how to fix this. I’ll do anything. I’ll go to Dan. I’ll go to each of your sisters. Hell, I’ll go kick Alex’s arse and let Elliot kick mine. Tell me, Clara. Please.” She slowly shakes her head and pulls out of my arms. I try to tug her back, but she moves away toward the closet. “Clara.”

“No, Riggs. I need some time.”

“Time? No fucking way. We can figure this out now.”

She shakes her head. “I need to go.”

“Go where? You’re home.”

She looks over her shoulder at me. “Or is this a mistake?”

I roar with anger. “Don’t you fucking say that. Nothing about us is a mistake, and you know it. I said what I did to get Alex off my back. I’ll call him right now.” I reach for my phone, but she shakes her head again.

“The words have already been said. I’m sure before Elliot called me, she called each of my sisters. God, this is such a fucking mess.”

A lump forms in my throat. “I’m sorry. Tell me what you want me to do.” She exhales heavily, wiping her face. Each tear that falls is like a knife to my chest. “I should have told you what I said so you wouldn’t hear it from your sister.”

She rolls her eyes as she reaches for a shirt to throw on. “That wouldn’t have made it better, Riggs.”

“What will?”

“I don’t know,” she says, and everything feels like it’s moving in slow motion.

“I didn’t mean it,” I plead. “I love you. You aren’t a mistake—you are everything.” I reach for her, taking her wrist in my hand and pulling her to me. She resists, but I’m stronger. Wrapping her up in my arms, I cup her jaw. “I was taking you to Nashville

to get my ma's rings, love. Would I be doing that if you were nothing?"

Shock fills her eyes as they search mine before her tears spill down her cheeks. With a shaky breath, she reaches up and strokes my jaw. "Don't come to the wedding tomorrow," she whispers, her tears falling quicker. "I'll do damage control, and then we can figure this out."

"Hell, fuck no," I demand, shaking my head. "We do this together. I fucked up, let me fix it."

"You don't understand," she insists. "I'm the baby. They all are so protective, and I can't have you there. It will set everyone on edge, and I'd rather my sister doesn't swing on you when she's pregnant. I don't want to ruin Lou's wedding. Please, just don't come."

"Clara—"

"Please," she pleads, her eyes swimming with tears. "I'll go over and explain what happened and see if I can get Elliot to calm down. Hopefully she didn't tell anyone else."

I don't like this at all. "Let me come with you."

"No," she tells me, her eyes imploring. "I gotta do this alone."

"It will mean more from me."

"I need to do this alone," she insists, her eyes still dripping tears.

"Clara. Why? Let?—"

“Please, Riggs, let me handle this.”

I fight back my own tears as I gaze down at her. “And you’ll come back home?”

She shakes her head. “Not tonight.”

“Clara—”

“Riggs, your words hurt me. Even if you were only saying them to get Alex off your back, they hurt. Let me process.”

“Process with me,” I beg, cupping her jaw so she can’t look away. “Let me make it up to you, prove that I meant not a single one of those words I said.”

She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, and much to my dismay, she shakes her head. “I can’t think straight when I’m with you.”

“Good. I like how you think when you’re with me.” Her lips tremble, and she moves out of my arms, breaking my fucking heart. “Clara, stay.”

She ignores me, and I watch as she throws on a pair of leggings before grabbing her charger. I follow her out of the room, the dogs hot on our heels. “I don’t like this.”

“I don’t like that you said what you said.”

“I said I’m fucking sorry! I didn’t mean a fucking word.”

She whips around, her eyes narrowed. “Don’t yell at me or cuss at me. You messed up, not me!”

“Clara,” I plead, sucking in a deep breath. “I don’t know what to do here. You’re

killing me.”

“Now you know what your words did to me,” she throws back at me.

“I didn’t mean them,” I roar. “Stop this. You’re overreacting.”

Her brows slam together, and her eyes look as if they could cut glass. “You said I was nothing, I was a mistake. But I’m overreacting? Okay, Riggs.”

She moves through the house, and I’m following right after her. Thankful that no one lives around since I’m in my boxers, I follow her to her car. She lets Darcy in, and when she stops Gordie and Gretzky, her tears start to fall faster. “Not today, boys. It’s okay. Mommy loves you.”

Her words make my insides explode. “That’s right. You’re their ma, and you can’t leave them—or me.”

Her eyes cut to mine. “I’m not leaving them or you. I’m giving us space.”

“I don’t want fucking space, Clara.” I hold the door, my eyes burning into hers. “Please, don’t leave.”

She gets in the car without another word, her tears like waterfalls down her sweet face. As she backs down the driveway, Darcy barks out the window, making me realize I love the fool as much as I do his ma. The boys whine beside me, and I reach down, cupping their scruff when I’m met with the taillights of her SUV when she turns to drive down the road. As the pain eats me alive, I’m reminded why I never wanted to fall in love. The problem with that thought, though, is that there was no way in hell I wasn’t falling in love with Clara Drew McDavid.

She was made for me.

Not a fucking thing will change that.

Feeling helpless, I let my head fall back, and at the top of my lungs, I yell, “Fuck!”

And the dogs howl beside me.

### CHAPTER 34

Clara

My tears flow freely as I drive away from Riggs. When I hit the main road, I pull over and let the sobs take over my body. I hate that he said anything. I wish he had just told Alex to fuck off like he usually would. Especially when I know his words aren't true. I know deep in my soul that he loves me, that I am everything to him. It's so frustrating because now I have cleanup to do. When all I want to do is go back home to my man and my dogs.

I wipe my face and pull out my phone. Before I can even check my sisters' locations, I find four texts from Riggs.

Riggs: I don't like this.

Riggs: Just come back.

Riggs. Let me go talk to everyone.

Riggs: Call me, Clara. I love you. So fucking much.

When Darcy licks my tears away, I cuddle into his muzzle. "And he calls you a fool."

Ignoring Riggs, I look at my sisters' locations to see they're all at Dirty Pages. Which means that Elliot has probably spilled the beans. Why can't life be easy? Rolling my eyes, I put the car back in drive and head toward town. My phone sounds with missed

calls and messages from Riggs, but I can't talk to him right now. I'm so fucking annoyed, and I need him to know his words have consequences.

Even if he didn't mean what he said, I won't allow him to think it's okay. I'm worth more than that.

When I arrive at Dirty Pages, I wipe my face free of my tears. As much as I knew it was bound to happen, a fight between Riggs and me, I didn't realize that it would hurt like this. That I would feel so lost without him. That ignoring him is like tearing my flesh off. God, I'm so in love with him.

Damn idiot.

I get out and leash up Darcy before locking the car and heading toward the store. When I push open the big, heavy black door with the Dirty Pages logo on the window, I shouldn't be surprised to see that my sisters are all standing together, mirroring one another in their stances, arms over their chests and glares on their faces. Well, except for Elliot. She's holding her belly containing my nephew, the need for murder in her eyes.

I sigh heavily. "Figures you'd run and tell everyone," I say to Elliot as Darcy takes off to sniff the store. "Couldn't give me a chance to talk to you?"

Elliot narrows her eyes. "It is our job to protect you, Clara."

I look at each of my older sisters, the four who raised me, love me, and, of course, my loyalty to them runs deep. Unable to speak, I realize that while they want to protect me, I have to protect Riggs. Protect our love. I swallow hard as I nod. "And I can't begin to thank you for that."

"Is it true? Did he say it?" Louisa asks, her eyes in slits. "After everything, he said



that?”

I lick my lips, fighting back the tears. “He did, but?—”

“No but,” Austen snaps. “You are not nothing.”

“I know,” I stress, showing them my palms. “But we all know how Alex is. While he is a doll baby when it comes to our sister, he runs his mouth like no other. Riggs was trying to keep everything under wraps until after the wedding.”

“Well, he failed miserably,” Eliza offers, looking deeply into my eyes. “You gave this man your soul, and he betrayed you.”

I exhale. “Guys, I need everyone to relax. Yes, what he said was trash and truly unfair, but he didn’t mean it. He was trying to get Alex off his back, and while he chose a shitty way of doing it, his intention never was to hurt me.”

“But surely you’re hurt,” Louisa says incredulously.

“Of course I am. It sucks to hear that, but I truly believe he didn’t mean the words.”

“Then why say them?” Eliza asks, searching my eyes. “We all know he’s gruff and kind of standoffish. What if this is truly how he feels?”

“It’s not,” I insist, shaking my head. “He had every intention of coming in to talk to you guys himself, but I knew you all would chew him up.”

“Fucking right,” Elliot snaps. “I want to roast his ass.”

I roll my eyes. “Guys, please, trust me?—”

“You’re naive, Clara. You can’t let him treat you like this,” Louisa says.

“I think you’re so in love with him that you aren’t seeing how bad this looks,” Eliza adds.

“We just want what is best for you, and he isn’t known for being lovable or kind,” Austen adds. “Even if he seems like he is with you. Maybe he’s masking it?”

“He’s not,” I assert, shaking my head.

“You don’t see what we do,” Louisa says.

Anger bubbles inside me as Elliot nods. “I know you love him, sissy, but a man who speaks like that doesn’t?—”

Unable to take their words any longer, I snap. “Let me stop you all right there.” I press my hands to my hips and raise my chin. “I know I am the baby. I know it has been your job since I was born to protect and love me, but you have to trust me when I say Riggs didn’t mean a damn word he said to Alex. That man loves me,” I say, my voice breaking.

“He loves me more than I ever thought I could be loved. I walked away from him today because I knew he needed time to realize he can’t speak of me like that. I watched tears gather in his eyes as he begged me not to leave. If I am so naive, so young and unable to protect myself, would I have done that?” I wait for an answer, but instead, my sisters all look away.

“I know you guys still see me as a baby. I know you want to protect me. I do. And again, I will never be able to pay you back for all the love you’ve provided me, but I need all of you to believe me when I say Riggs loves me. Cherishes me. Would give it all up for me.”

Silence fills the space between us. The tension is so thick, I'm surprised I can even breathe. I look at each of my sisters, waiting for someone to say something as they glance at one another.

"We just want what is best for you," Louisa says softly. "We don't like hearing someone say things like that when we know how much you care for him."

"I love him," I correct, holding my eldest sister's gaze. "And I know how protective you guys are. That's why I came right here."

"To defend him, to fight his battles," Elliot accuses, and I glare at her. I have to remind myself that she's pregnant and that we're so damn close. She's my best friend, my favorite person in the world, and I know she only wants to protect me from harm.

"Wouldn't you?" I ask, holding her gaze. "If Alex made this mistake, or even Ciaran, Dimitri, or Coleson? Wouldn't you guys defend the men you love?" I'm met with silence, and I know I've gotten through to them. "No one is perfect. Hell, none of us is. And I'm not saying Riggs is, but I love him, and he makes me feel things I've never felt in my life. Please trust me. Please don't hate him. Give him some grace. He's a good man. My man."

I don't tell them what his intentions were today. I almost want to forget that fact because I don't want the moment he gives me his momma's ring to be ruined by what happened today. As much as I hate secrets between my sisters and me, I feel that sometimes they're necessary. Also, I don't want them to dump on the idea of him asking me to be his. The answer is a given for me, but my sisters need time to warm up to him.

"So, tomorrow will be awkward," Louisa says then, and I shake my head.

“I told him not to come.”

Elliot’s mouth goes slack, and the rest of my sisters gawk at me. “Are you serious?” Eliza asks, and I shrug.

“We don’t have any intentions of making tomorrow anything but perfect. As much as we both want him to be there, I know you guys need time to process and trust him again. Hopefully this will help.”

Elliot looks away, shaking her head as Austen meets my gaze. “He was okay with that?”

“Not at all. He’s torn up about it, but he knows how important this day is for Lou and Ciaran.”

Louisa swallows hard. “He does love you.”

“He does,” I say softly, and thankfully, Darcy comes back to me, going between my legs for the support I didn’t realize I needed.

“I’m sorry, sis,” Elliot says quietly. “Want me to kick Alex’s ass?”

I scoff, shaking my head. “No. He was only looking out for me.”

She nods as her eyes fill with tears. I close the distance between all of us, and, to my surprise, Darcy follows with me. Riggs is doing great with him, and that only makes me miss him more. As I wrap my arms around my sisters, they hug me just as tightly, and we all can’t help but laugh when Elliot’s belly gets in the way. In their arms, I feel like things may have changed. I’m no longer the baby who needs protecting. I’m a woman in love, like they are, and they know they raised me to take care of myself.

On a sigh, I say, “Now, I’ve got the day to myself. What are we doing?”

We decide to have a girls’ night and then head to the venue early. Since I don’t have an overnight bag, I head over to my apartment to pack one. Once I’m in the car on my way, I pick up my phone to see all the missed calls and texts from Riggs. My heart swells as I dial his number, and he answers immediately.

“Where are you?”

“On my way to my apartment to pack a bag, I’m meeting the girls for a girls’ night.”

By his sigh, I know he’s not happy. “Come home.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” I say softly, fighting back the tears. “Aren’t you wondering how it went?”

“I don’t care,” he says simply. “I don’t care what they think of me. I only want you.”

I bite my lip, my tears spilling over as my heart hammers in my chest. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Clara—”

“I love you.”

“Damn it, love, you’re hell on my heart.”

“And you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I wouldn’t,” he admits, his voice low. “Would you come home if I said I’m slowly dying without you by my side?”

I smile through my tears, and I swallow. “No, but I would say I feel the same.”

“Then come home.”

“I will tomorrow,” I say softly, wiping my cheeks free of tears. “I love you, Riggs.”

His voice breaks as he says, “I love you more, love.”

I don’t say goodbye because it’s not goodbye, and I refuse to put that finality on our phone call. Instead, I hang up, and I cry because I do miss him, I do love him, and I want more than anything to go home to him.

But I know I can’t.

My sisters raised me to be a strong woman, and I need to remind Riggs of that.

### CHAPTER 35

Riggs

I feel like all I've done is drive for the last twenty-four hours.

I had to.

Or I would have gone crazy.

One thing was for sure; I couldn't stay in my so-called home without her. I realized very quickly that my lonely cabin isn't a home.

Home is Clara.

I know she told me not to come to the wedding, but I couldn't stop myself. I have no intention of walking over to where the ceremony is being held, but I just had to see her. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't function, and as I expected, the moment I set eyes on her, I felt as if I could breathe again.

My love stands at the end of all her sisters in a lovely light-blue dress that hugs the curves of her body before flowing down her legs. The top is tight, strapless, outlining her breasts and making it really hard not to close the distance between us and devour her. Her hair is up in a high bun, small tendrils falling along the column of her neck. A neck that is begging to be nibbled on.

Fuck, I miss her.

I lean against a tree in an overflow parking lot, watching as the wedding unfolds. Tears burn my eyes as I drink her in, and I run my fingers along my beard, wishing I were touching her. I hate that we fought yesterday. I hate that I was an eejit and I said what I did. I should have ignored Alex or even told the truth. Just said fuck it and forgotten about everyone else. I should have just focused on Clara, but I know for sure I'll never repeat that mistake.

I don't pay attention to Alex moving around the happy couple to hold Elliot's swollen belly, and I can't help but envy him. He has his world in his fingertips, and I was dumb enough to deny mine. From this day forward, I'll never do that again. I'll get her name tattooed across my forehead if she wants. I want everyone to know she's mine. As I gaze at the girl of my dreams, I vow along with the happy couple that I'll never do anything to have her question my love. I'm well aware I'm a bit of an eejit, but I know how to love that girl.

She was made for me to do just that.

Swallowing past the emotion in my throat, I take in where Dan sits and then Coleson and Dimitri Titov. The wedding is small, just how Ciaran and Louisa wanted it. He was upset when I said I couldn't make the wedding. While I let Clara down more than I care to admit, I let Ciaran down too, which is another reason I'm here. I have to make it up to both of them.

I watch as the minister says that Louisa and Ciaran can kiss, and then I furrow my brow when Alex starts to guide his heavily pregnant girl toward the aisle before he calls out, "Sorry, Elliot's in labor."

Everyone gawks, and even I'm surprised, but Elliot just says, "No worries! Everything is fine. I'm fine. Alex is fine. Just gonna go have a baby!"

I start toward the chaos, but before I can reach them, Alex and Elliot are in the car



and driving away. Everyone stands around the little reception area, all trying to figure out what to do. I notice a little bandstand by the cake and the champagne flutes. With my heart in my throat, I start for it just as I hear Louisa say, “Well, this day was never meant to be about us.”

Ciaran scoffs. “It’s only about us.”

I reach for the microphone, chuckling to myself since they’re both right. I tap on the mic and everyone turns, but my eyes are only for her. She parts her lips as she steps toward me, a flush running up her neck. “Riggs?”

I lick my lips, my mouth going dry at how fucking nervous I am. Get it together, Riggs. You want her. Tell her. “Sorry to interrupt this beautiful affair, and I know I said I wouldn’t come, Clara, but I couldn’t bear to be away from you any longer.”

I watch as Dan comes to stand beside her. “McCoy, what are you doing?”

I hold up a finger at him, and Clara sets her hand on his chest. She’s about to say something, but I can’t let her. “A couple days ago, I held what should have been the greatest prize of my life in my hands and gave a speech.” I swallow hard. “Now, I know that the greatest prize of my life is standing right there.”

Clara’s mouth drops open, and tears flood her navy eyes in mere seconds. I swear I hear her gasp my name, but then I notice that Eliza is recording me. I blow out a breath, and fuck it, I’m doing this.

My eyes burn as I hold Clara’s gaze with mine. “The speech I gave was unfinished and should have ended like this.” I clear my throat and squeeze my free fingers together. I want so desperately to close the distance between us, but I need the people she loves to know the truth. “I want to thank the love of my life, Clara Drew McDavid.” Her eyes widen, and my heart starts to slam into my ribs. “I have felt lost

my whole life until I found her. She completes me in ways I never knew were possible. When I'm feeling down, she's there to lift me up. She makes me laugh when I want to cuss and break things. She drives me absolutely crazy with her smart mouth, but she also makes me feel something I never thought I'd ever feel again. Alive." I watch as tears gather in her eyes. "I wouldn't have won that series without her. Without her support, her love, and her endless belief in me. Nothing in this world has ever felt right before her, but now, I feel like I'm seeing the world in a different light. And it's all because, at the end of the day, she is there to love me." A tear slides down her cheek, and I blink back my own set of tears that are threatening to fall. "I made the mistake of trying to hide her and our love, but that won't happen again. I want everyone here, everyone who loves her, to know that in my whole life, I've gotten one thing right, and it was falling in love with her." I put the mic on the stand and jump down from the bandstand to start for her. "And nothing will keep me from loving her for the rest of my life—not even her."

I don't know who reaches for whom first, but soon, we're a tangle of limbs as our lips meet. I almost cry out in relief when her tongue meets mine, and I devour her whole. I don't care who is here. I don't care if I'm too old for her. I don't care if she's too young. I don't care if I lose my job. I have her, and she's all I need.

I sense people talking, but I don't hear anything but the beat of my heart. I only feel her lips on mine, and everything else just fades away. How it always does when it comes to her. When I pull back for a breath, our eyes meet, and I feel like I've been kicked in the chest. Her eyes are dark, hooded, and only for me. She reaches up, cupping my jaw, stroking my cheek. "I love you, Riggs."

I sigh deeply before I press my forehead to hers. "Say it again."

She curves her lips, her eyes shining just for me. "I love only you."

From behind her, Dan complains, "I don't understand why all y'all fell for hockey

players! This is all my fault, isn't it?"

"Yup. You brought us into this life," Louisa giggles.

"And we wouldn't want it any other way," Austen gushes.

Eliza snorts. "Once you find a hockey man, there is no going back to normal men."

Against my lips, Clara says, "Because a hockey man loves you fully."

"And forever," I add, kissing her top lip.

I then drop to one knee.

Her eyes widen.

While I know it's tacky to propose at a wedding, it's also tacky to go into labor, so Louisa can hate both me and Elliot. I don't care. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the faded green ring box that my da used when he proposed to my ma. Clara covers her mouth, tears spilling down her cheeks as she holds my gaze. I open the box to my ma's platinum thistle-leaf, two-carat diamond ring. It had been given to my da by his ma, and so on back through the family. I hadn't given it to Peppa because I couldn't find it when I decided to propose to her, but even when I did locate it, I didn't give it to her. I think I always knew it was meant for another hand.

Clara's.

"If you thought I wasn't going to go get this ring because of a fight?—"

"I knew you would," she says softly, cutting me off. "I knew if I went, I'd give in and say yes, when I needed you to realize your mistake."

“Love, I knew the mistake the moment the words came out of my mouth,” I insist, gazing up into her eyes. “But it’ll never happen again. Everyone will know how much I love you. How much you complete me and how my life is not worth living without you. I will love you fully for the rest of my existence.” I grab her hand, squeezing her fingers with mine. “I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but I want the good with the bad, but only with you. I want to make a life with you that we’ll leave behind for the world to be in awe of. I want you to drive me insane daily and love only me. As long as you love me, everything else will fall into place. I just need you. Say you’ll be my wife, Clara.”

She leans down, cupping my face. She runs her thumbs along my cheeks, catching the tears I hadn’t even realized were falling before she presses her nose into mine. “And you say you have to be drunk to be romantic.”

I grin up at her. “Since I’m an eejit when I’m drunk and the hangover is rough at my old age, I have to be romantic sober.”

She curves up her lips in a smile that if I didn’t need to hold on to her, would knock me on my ass. She wraps her arms around my neck, and I do the same to her waist as our lips almost touch. “Okay, Grandpa, I’ll marry you, with one promise.” Her eyes dance with mischief, and I shouldn’t expect anything less from my little minx.

“You name it.”

“Never let me forget how important I am to you.”

“Done.”

As our lips meet, I realize that promise was the easiest one I’ve ever made. I hear everyone clapping and cheering us on, but all I can think is that, for the longest time, I thought fate was a moody little cunt. But she isn’t. She had a plan.

She had to drag me through the storm so that I could truly feel the sunshine that is Clara.

My lass.

My baby girl.

My love.

My wife.

### EPILOGUE

Clara

Ten years later....

It was a real pain in the ass to get twenty-six people to Scotland, but somehow Riggs made it happen.

Not that I'm surprised. That's Riggs.

Whatever I want, he gives it to me with a grin on his face.

Since the day I agreed to marry him, he has turned my life into an epic love story. I've had the pleasure of watching him coach and mold young minds. When it'd get hard being apart, I'd go on trips with him, and I even brought the boys since we all would miss him so much. I was able to watch him win the AHL Cup two more times before he decided to retire last year. He was tired of being away from me, and we wanted to add to our lives.

Which is what my sisters have been doing since the jump, it seems.

Once Elliot had Alejandro Jr., Alex married her a week later. He was pretty insistent on their son's parents being married. Elliot didn't fight it, nor did she fight getting pregnant again, because they then got pregnant back-to-back with Nicolas and Abram. At one point, she had three kids all under the age of three. She survived, though, and continues to work like the boss bitch she is. She is doing social media for

not only the Bears, but for the Assassins since Alex was traded back to them. It's awesome because we've gotten three years with them so close, and I couldn't be happier.

Austen got pregnant before she and Dimitri got married. Now, she is the mom of four, and she is still kicking ass at stats for the Assassins. Dimitri is still playing for the Assassins, but he plans to retire soon to be a stay-at-home dad. I know I'll miss all the cute pictures of Erik, Ivan, Alexei, and Mila cheering on their daddy in their little Assassins jerseys. Though, Dimitri tells me now I'll have pictures of them in their own jerseys.

I can't wait.

Like the mom she has always been, Eliza ended up having five boys. I'm not sure if it was really a choice or if my brother-in-law couldn't keep his hands off her once he was healed. It took almost two years for Coleson to get back to the NHL, but he did it, and he brought home the Cup with the Panthers. He played for about five years before he was reinjured. By then, they had all the boys, so he figured it was time to be home with his family. They live in Knoxville and run Drippy Drip once more. I get to see my nephews, Noah, Leo, Caden, Marshall, and Ryker, daily since they come to help me with the dogs when their parents need to work together at the shop.

We didn't know at the time, but Louisa was pregnant with Lara at her wedding. As much as she and Ciaran like to tease that Riggs and Elliot hijacked their wedding, it was really Louisa puking in the bushes that hijacked it. Not that any of us knew; she hid it well. Apparently, we're good at hiding things, we McDavid sisters. Ciaran was traded a lot, but the good thing about it was that my sister was able to open seven more Dirty Pages all over America. She is thriving and somehow is still the greatest sister and mom. We all thought that Lara would be an only child, but Louisa popped out Clyde eight months ago. A surprise baby who is loved more than all the romance books in the world, as she likes to tell us. Though, I'm pretty sure she'd take an hour of uninterrupted reading time any time of the day. They're currently in North

Carolina, but rumor is, Ciaran may be retiring next year and they plan to come back to Knoxville.

Which means all of us will be in the same place once more. Well, except Austen, but Nashville was always her home.

As I watch my family frolic through Riggs's family estate and get settled, I have one place I need to be. Ten years ago, I came to meet Riggs's family, and I have returned now for one reason. My heart is full, and my soul is singing for the man who holds my hand as we make our way toward his family plot. When we reach the beautiful headstones engraved with photos of his parents and him as a young man, my heart aches a bit. I never got to meet the people who gave me the love of my life, but there isn't a day that goes by that I don't silently thank them.

It's the little things—how Riggs will hold me or make me eat. How he'll clean out the bus for me even though I say I can do it on my own. How he makes me laugh and continues to promise me the world. Never once in the last ten years have I forgotten how important I am to him.

He reminds me daily.

And I remind him.

Riggs moves toward the graves, and I can't help but bask in all his silver fox glory. My man is aging like a fine-ass wine, and he is still as insatiable as he was when we met. Our love has gotten stronger, and I know my life wouldn't be the same without him. I watch as he crouches down and removes some leaves before gripping the headstone of his parents. "Ma, Da, the last time I introduced you to someone, I told you I'd love her forever. And while it's only been ten years, I've kept my word." I crouch down beside him, leaning into his side. "Now, I've come to introduce you to your grandkids."



I take Shepherd's chubby little hand in mine and whisper, "This is your grandson, Shepherd William, named after you, Mr. McCoy."

"This is wee Kennedy Rose, named after you, Ma." Riggs waves little Kennedy's hand, and my heart explodes when she grins widely at her dad.

We spent eight years just loving each other and traveling like we wanted, but we knew something was missing. A piece of him and me. So, we started the process, and once more, Riggs gave me the world. The twins look just like him but have Elliot's hazel eyes. Instead of asking Elliot to carry the twins, we had a gestational carrier since I didn't want to put my sister through another pregnancy. All four offered me their eggs, but Riggs felt that Elliot looked the most like me.

Once more, my sisters were there for me, and I know that will never change. We all went through something that had the potential to break a person, but together, we're strong. Nothing can touch us, especially when we're loved by such incredible men and our children.

The emotion is clogging my throat, and I see the tears gathering in my husband's eyes. There isn't a day I don't wish his parents were here to see what a gorgeous family he has made. Clearing my throat, I say, "I'm sorry we didn't bring your three granddogs, but we didn't want to put them through a trip on a plane at their age."

As I wanted, Riggs chuckles, and Shepherd squeals happily. He loves his brothers, probably a lot more than his sister. My husband's face breaks into a grin at the sound, and my heart soars. I never thought I could love this man more. He meets my gaze, and his grin widens. He leans in, and I cup his face with my free hand. "Always smiling so wide for me," I say, stroking his cheek, and he cups my hand as his eyes burn just for me.

"Always for you." He kisses the top of Kennedy's head, then Shepherd's. "You make me so damn happy, wife."

I was upgraded to wife after our wedding, and it's my favorite of all my pet names. Though, anything he calls me has the power to make me fall for him all over again.

I lean into his side, and he kisses my temple before laying his head on mine. "Same, snookums. Same."

The End.