



The Love Comeback

(Glaciers Hockey #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: She was my first love. I was her first heartbreak. Now she's back—with a kid who might steal my heart before I earn a second chance at hers.

Running into my high school sweetheart at an NHL meet-and-greet wasn't part of the plan. Neither was teaching skating lessons to the nephew she's raising on her own.

The moment I see her, it all comes rushing back—the way she used to smile at me like I was her whole world, the future we almost had.

I let her go once to chase my hockey dreams.

Biggest mistake of my life.

She's tougher now. Guarded. Fiercely independent.

But there's still a spark when our eyes meet—something unfinished, undeniable, electric.

I'm not the same guy who walked away.

Now, I just have to prove it.

The only question is... will she let me back in?

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Chapter One

Ella

“Hockey is the best !” Colton shouts as the final buzzer sounds, pumping his fists in the air.

I smile to myself as my ten-year-old nephew bounces on the seat, where he’s been standing to get the best view of the Atlanta Glaciers playing on the ice below. I’ve been Colton’s guardian for almost five years now, and I’m pretty sure he’s having one of the best days of his life...

But me? I’m just trying not to stare at the man on the ice who broke my heart nine years ago.

“Can we go to the meet-and-greet?” The excitement in Colton’s voice is palpable. “They said it’s open to our section! I saw it on the screen! ”

With a frown, I gaze up at the monitors.

Sure enough, the section we’re sitting in—section 109—is flashing across the screen.

My stomach tightens at the thought of seeing my ex-boyfriend up close, of speaking to him, but ...

I can’t tell Colton no. He loves hockey.

It's the entire reason I surprised him with these game tickets this past Christmas.

Plus, it's a great introduction to our new city, a fresh start, and a chance to bond after the move...

But seeing the players face-to-face was not on my bingo card, not something I had even remotely planned for when I made these arrangements.

"Okay," I finally concede, turning my frown upside down to the best of my ability. This move has been hard enough on Colton. What's one more sacrifice? "We can go to the meet-and-greet, but then we've gotta get home. You start school tomorrow."

His excitement dampens. "Let's not talk about that."

I give him a curt nod, ruffling his dark hair as we head out of the section.

Honestly, Colton could easily pass as my son.

We have the same shade of chocolate brown hair and the same hazel eyes—which my big sister Katie also had.

The differences are mostly in his facial features, like his strong nose, freckles, and lips.

They all reflect his father—and the older he gets, the more I see Brett in him.

"Do you think they'll sign my jersey?" Colton tugs on my arm as we make our way toward the back of the arena. There, the hockey players are seated at a long table, and with me being, well, me, we're at the back of the line.

"I'm sure they will," I reassure him as I gaze through the crowd. I'm not tall enough

to scope out where each of the players are seated, but I do see that they're signing posters. "It looks like you'll get a free poster."

"Cool!" Colton is bursting with enthusiasm, and I usually try to mirror that. But instead, I'm stuck pulling my black coat tighter around my body, terrified of what my ex will think of me after all these years.

He's a professional hockey player, living his best life.

While I'm just a middle school math teacher who's since been married and divorced—and got custody of my nephew in the middle of it all.

My heart jumps to my throat, grief pulsing through my body.

It's been five years since Brett and Katie's car crash, but I still feel the loss every day.

"Ugh, this line is gonna take forever," Colton groans, raking a hand over his face. "What if they don't wait for us?" He peers up at me, worry etched across his features.

"They'll wait for us." I squeeze his shoulder.

He nods, leaning into me as we slowly but surely move through the line of eager fans. My eyes flick up to the row of hockey players now, their foreheads still glistening with sweat from the game. It only takes me a split second to find the man I was hoping to avoid.

My stomach somersaults at the sight of his olive skin, fiery amber eyes, and dark waves matted to his head.

He's as handsome as ever, and it's almost as frustrating as it is nice to see him.

He was my first heartbreak—and ugh , did he break me, ending our nearly four-year relationship the day before I left for college.

I pretty much spent the first semester of my freshman year bawling like a baby.

“I think I wanna be a goalie,” Colton muses, once again bouncing with excitement. “Kade Santos is so baller!”

Baller?

I giggle and then swallow hard.

“Well, we’ll have to see about that. You don’t know how to skate, so we’d have to get you lessons...

” My voice fades as my brain immediately starts thinking about what lessons would cost. My new job here in Atlanta as the head of Meadowlark Middle School’s mathematics department came with a decent raise. But money is still tight.

Thankfully, I don’t have to explain any of that to Colton as we make it to the first hockey player who grabs one of the tiny posters and scribbles his signature on it with a Sharpie.

“I wanna play hockey,” Colton says to him.

“Yeah?” The blond-headed guy looks up with a grin. “You should tell your mom to sign you up.”

My cheeks blush a dark crimson from embarrassment. I don’t want to have to tell these hockey pros that I can’t afford it on my meager teacher’s salary .

“ Ella ?” A deep, baritone voice cuts right through my chest. “ Ella Smart , is that you?”

With a mouth that suddenly feels like it’s full of cotton balls, I adjust my gaze to the end of the table, where my ex is now boring holes into my head.

“Hi, Kade,” I choke out, butterflies coming from nowhere and fluttering all the way to my heart. “It’s me.”

“I can’t believe you’re here...” Kade’s voice trails off, and now I’m regretting being at the back of the line. He has some time to talk to me. His eyes drop to Colton as the other players finish signing the poster and we make it to him. “Is this...?”

“Colton,” I tell him, confident that he’ll know.

“Holy ... you’re all grown up, dude!” He holds up a hand for Colton to high-five, and my nephew has never looked more confused in his whole life.

“You know Kade Santos? He knows me?” Colton whips his head around to me, demanding answers that I’m reluctant to give him.

“I dated Kade in high school. We were together when your mom gave birth to you,” I tell him, keeping it short and simple. Never mind the fact that Kade actually held Colton the day he was born.

“You dated Kade Sant—”

“It was a long time ago,” I cut him off, feeling heat creep up my neck.

There was a time that I’d imagined cheering Kade on at a professional hockey game—back when we were in high school.

Long before Kade was ever a hotshot NHL goalie.

But that dream never came to fruition. We broke up.

Which means, I never got to be the one who cheered him on through his college or professional days.

“How are you, El?” Kade asks, his eyes intently focused on me. “What’re you doing here in Atlanta? Did you just come for the game?”

“That’s a lot of questions.” I chuckle, feeling nervous as everyone starts staring at us. “Um, I just moved here.”

“We moved here,” Colton corrects. “And I start stupid school tomorrow.”

“Don’t use that word,” I warn him, nudging his arm.

Kade’s thick, dark brows furrow, his eyes bouncing between us. That’s when it hits me that he doesn’t know.

How can he not know?

I brush my hair out of my face, not really wanting to drop the bomb that my big sister and her husband died and now I’m the sole guardian of Colton in front of all these people. Instead, I stand, hovering in the awkward silence, while Kade tries to piece together the scene before him.

“You guys wanna see the locker room?” Kade asks. “Does that sound like a good plan?”

Colton eagerly nods. “Yeah! That’d be so cool!”

Kade turns to me as he rises from his seat. “Are you okay with that?”

“Sure.” I nod, taking in his six-foot-four frame. “As long as it’s not too much trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” he says before turning to his teammates to let them know he’ll be stepping away for a minute. I forgot how intimidating his size was—which makes sense since he’s a goalie, but still...

He always made me feel so ... safe .

And then he shattered my heart.

I swallow down those memories as I nudge Colton to follow him. He jogs to walk side-by-side with Kade, peppering him with questions about hockey. My Converse squeak on the floor as I walk a couple steps behind.

“Dude, this is so awesome !” Colton erupts as soon as we enter the empty locker room. There are bags and things scattered about, but all the other players are still out in the lobby.

I crinkle my nose at the scent of cologne mixed with body odor. I guess some things don’t change between high school athletes and professional ones. Well, other than the fact that the cologne smells a lot more expensive than Axe body spray.

“It’s so crazy to see you.” Kade bumps my arm, and I peer up at him, catching my breath at the sharpness of his jaw and the dark stubble lining it. I’m livid at how handsome he’s become. Meanwhile, I’m still the same pale-faced nerd that I’ve always been .

“So...” Kade nods toward Colton, who’s busy studying the pictures on the wall.

“You two...?”

“I got custody of Colton after Katie and Brett passed away five years ago,” I tell him.

“Car crash.”

“Oh my gosh...” Kade’s voice grows thick with emotion. “I’m so sorry, Ella. If I’d known ... I’d...”

“It’s okay.” I hold up a hand. “Apart from the grief, having Colton in my life has been nothing but good. Well, the best I could make it, anyway.”

“Right...” He eyes me, and I hate the sympathy in his irises. He has no idea how hard it’s been, but I wouldn’t change it.

Well, I would change the car crash, and I think about that often, but as far as everything else goes...

No.

I love my life, and even though caring for Colton comes with its own challenges, he’s given my life purpose. And I like to think I’m making my sister proud.

“And where’s ... what’s-his-face?” Kade pulls me out of my thoughts.

“Landon?” I furrow my brow. “We didn’t work out.”

“You married him,” Kade says flatly.

“And it didn’t work out,” I repeat, not really in the mood to try to explain how Landon couldn’t handle the pressure of becoming a parent, so he left .

My gaze jumps to Colton. The divorce was painful not just for me, but for him , too. Landon chose not to stay in Colton's life. So...

It's just us.

I wave a hand. "But there's no need to talk about any of that."

"Okay, well ... how's your mom?"

"She's doing ... about as good as she can," I relent. Kade knows my mother well. We were together when she got her early-onset dementia diagnosis our senior year. "Her memory has gotten worse."

"Gosh, I'm so sorry to hear that." He shakes his head. "Is she still living back home?"

"No, actually." I think back to how difficult the past year with my mom has been.

She still has good days, where she remembers my name and asks about Colton.

But last year, she wandered out of the house in the middle of the night.

"The doctor recommended 24/7 care about a year ago, so she's been living at a memory care facility here in Atlanta.

It's why Colton and I moved here—to be closer to her. "

It's not at all what I pictured for my mom, but it's what she needs. She's safe, with around-the-clock care—plus, they let her garden, which she loves. And her caretaker, Chandra, is amazing; I trust her with my mom.

"You've been through a lot, El." Kade's voice is soft as it cuts through my thoughts,

his gaze holding a mix of empathy and guilt. “And it sounds like you’ve been handling everything on your own.”

The weight of all the responsibilities I carry hits me like a ton of bricks as Kade’s concerned gaze lingers on me.

Despite my best efforts to put on a brave face for Colton, the reality of managing everything alone gnaws at me sometimes.

From juggling work and taking care of my mother’s needs to being the sole guardian for Colton—it can be overwhelming.

I don’t have any help from my dad—he left when I was just a baby—or from Brett’s parents, since they live across the country.

But before I can say anything in response, Colton spins around. “You know, I really want to play hockey, but Ella says I need to learn how to skate first.”

Kade’s brows raise. “I know a guy who can help.”

Wait, what?

“I’d be more than happy to give you some skating lessons. It would be a great excuse to catch up with you guys,” he adds, eyeing me.

“Um...” I start.

“ Yes! ” Colton cheers, then turns to me. “Please? I want this so bad.”

I sigh, raking my fingers through my hair. “How much?”

“Huh?” Kade looks confused. “We could do lessons maybe ... twice a week? After school, at the practice rink?”

“I meant, how much will it cost?” I ask, already wary of the way Kade’s mouth is peeling upward into a grin.

“Free .”

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Chapter Two

Kade

“What’s wrong with you?” Cam asks. “You’re sweating bullets.”

“Yeah, I have that skate lesson today,” I tell my best friend, my voice coming out gruff.

Everyone knows about my one that got away , but no one knows it was the pretty brunette that showed up at our game last week.

I haven’t been able to get Ella out of my head, especially after everything she told me. She’s taken on a lot .

And it pairs so well with her resilience.

“You never give skating lessons.” Cam raises a brow. “Did you just feel sorry for that kid, or?”

“It’s not like that at all...” I pause, leaning against the rink’s railing, recalling the concern on Ella’s face over the cost of skating lessons.

But the truth is, I’d do just about anything for the chance to spend more time with her.

Even if it means giving her adorable nephew free skating lessons.

I made a huge mistake breaking up with her, and I haven't stopped thinking about her after all these years.

"I just want to help out," I say with a shrug, trying to play it cool. "And Colton seems like a great kid."

Cam smirks at me knowingly. "Right. It's all about the kid."

He's onto me. And he's not wrong. The fact that Ella is now living in my town—and she's single —feels like a second chance. But also, finding out that Colton lost his parents crushed me. Skating lessons are really the least I can do.

Before I can say anything else to Cam, Ella and Colton enter the rink, and I'm left with the sight of Ella in a pair of dark wash jeans, Converse, and an olive sweater that brings out her hazel eyes.

She looks as beautiful as ever.

Though I'm not sure she'd be open to me telling her that. She was so closed off at the game, and my guess is that, given everything she's been through over the past nine years, she might be that way with everyone. But that doesn't mean I won't shoot my shot by asking her to dinner.

"You know, you can just explain it to me later." Cam chuckles, shaking his head and making his way to the locker room. Practice has been over for a solid hour now, but I wanted to make sure the ice was fresh for Colton when he got here .

"You ready?" I call out to Colton, who looks so giddy, he might burst at the seams.

"I'm ready!" Colton calls out, and I catch Ella smiling from behind him.

She takes a seat on the bleachers and crosses one leg over the other.

I meet Colton at the rink entrance. My eyes keep bouncing to Ella every chance I get, even as I teach Colton how to lace up his rental skates and make sure they're secure.

He eats up the information like he's starved for it, and Ella's smile remains pleasant, though the look in her eyes is distant. I wonder if she still feels the spark between us that I do—or if my mistake of ending us put it out. I suppose it could go either way, but the way I'm feeling...

If she gives me a signal that she's still interested, I'm not letting her get away this time.

I teach Colton the basics of skating. He's not steady at first, and it becomes pretty clear that he hasn't spent much time on the ice. It'll put him at a disadvantage to the other kids that have been skating since they were toddlers.

But he's got talent and athleticism on his side. It comes out quickly as I work with him on the basics of starting and stopping.

Ella's face shows some surprise, and I chuckle.

Colton's forehead is beaded with sweat as we start the slow process of skating around the rink, adjusting speeds as we go. The concentration on his face is one that mirrors a younger me. I had my mind made up at his age that I was going pro, and fortunately for me, I did.

My twin brother Nate, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. He quit playing when we were juniors in high school due to a shoulder injury.

"You know," I tell Colton as we come to a stop, "the whole point of this hockey thing

is to have fun. It's fine to be serious, but we can also just have fun."

He peers up at me thoughtfully. "Yeah, I know. But I want to be really good like you guys are. My dad played hockey."

I swallow hard at the mention of Brett. "Yeah, he was great at hockey. Almost went pro, actually. He was better than some of the guys who did."

"Yeah, I know. But he quit because my mom got pregnant with me." Colton laughs. "I don't know why that meant he had to stop playing hockey though, 'cause I know he could've been rich."

"Yeah, well, when you're in college, things aren't always easy to navigate," I say carefully. I know that Ella's older sister was twenty-one when she got pregnant with Colton—Katie and Brett had only been married a year, both still in college.

"Do you think I'll be good?" Colton asks, his brow pinched with worry.

"I think you're showing some really great promise." I reach out and squeeze his shoulder. "You're a natural on the ice. "

"Did you hear that?" Colton shouts out to Ella, his voice booming with pride. "Kade said I'm a natural on the ice!"

"That's great!" Ella calls back, a bright smile on her face.

"When's our next lesson?" Colton peers up at me as we make our way toward the exit.

"Two days." I grin and open up the gate for him.

“You think I’ll be good enough to play hockey?”

I shrug. “I don’t see why not. We’ll have to work hard, and practices might need to be longer than an hour.” I glance over at Ella, noting that she’s listening intently. “If that’s okay with Ella.”

“If he wants to have a longer skating lesson, that’s fine ... as long as you’re okay with it,” she answers. “I don’t want to put you out.”

“You’re not going to put me out. I don’t think you could ever do that.”

Ella narrows her eyes. “I’m not so sure about that ... but thanks for taking the time to give him lessons. It really means a lot.”

“Yeah, of course, anything for you,” I say, knowing just how strong my language is coming on. I want her to know that she still matters to me ... and that I’m not mad at her for the way she shut me out of her life after we broke up.

“Well, thanks,” she says flatly .

I lean against the wall, unable to help myself. “So, what’re you up to these days? You didn’t stay long after we sorted out the skating lessons.”

“I just got a job as the head of mathematics at Meadowlark Middle School,” she answers. “So, basically, I’m a glorified math teacher with more responsibilities.”

“That’s cool.” I smile, thinking of the way she was always so nerdy. “And what about your personal life? Are you dating? The dating scene sucks around here...” I’m trying to play it cool, but I don’t know if it’s coming across that way. However, Ella seems unbothered by it.

“I don’t date. I have Colton.” She gestures to the kid as he throws his now-empty water bottle into a black bag. “It never really works out, and I’m pretty careful about who I bring into his life, especially after...”

“Her dumb ex-husband,” Colton quips, rolling his eyes.

“Well, okay then.” I raise my brows, sometimes forgetting how much a ten-year-old knows.

“I’m starving.” Colton turns to Ella. “Can we get some food?”

“How about pizza?” I offer. “My treat, since you guys were nice enough to come hang out with me.”

Ella scrunches her nose. “We’re just here for skating lessons.”

“Yes!” Colton’s shout drowns out her comment. “That would be so cool! ”

Ella sighs. “Um, okay. Yeah, we can. But then we’ve gotta get home. It’s a school night.”

Colton huffs, but grins while doing it. “Sweet!”

“There’s a really good place just a couple of blocks from here. In my opinion, it’s the best in the city. I’ll send you the pin, and we can meet there?” I dig my phone out of my hoodie pocket and then look across to Ella, who pulls her own phone out. “Is your number still the same?”

She shakes her head. “I changed it years ago.”

Maybe that’s why none of my apology texts ever got answered.

“Okay, here.” I hand her my phone, letting her add her new number in place of her old one. She stares at my phone screen for a moment, and I realize it’s probably because her old contact picture is the same—her senior picture. She’s changed in a lot of ways, but in a lot of ways, she hasn’t.

Ella clears her throat as she hands me back my phone, and I quickly send her the pin with the location of my favorite pizza joint, The Wedge.

“I’ll meet you guys there in about twenty minutes—sound good?” I ask.

“Sounds good.” Ella stands to her feet and slings a messenger bag over her shoulder. I hold her gaze a little longer, and something flickers in those pretty hazel eyes of hers, the emerald shifting to gold in a flash.

It draws out the old feelings ...

The ones that I’m pretty sure are gone on her end, given how monotone she is with me.

She used to be full of life, bouncing off the walls in the same way that Colton does. The change makes my heart ache. As I head for the locker room to rinse off and grab my things, a cascade of memories flood back into the forefront of my mind.

I recall the way she would arrive at my high school hockey games, long before they began. It was a ritual as sacred as any pre-game strategy—her good luck kiss.

One particular memory surfaces. It was a crisp autumn day when our team faced off against our biggest school rival.

Tensions were high. Ella had arrived almost an entire hour early that day, covered head-to-toe in our school colors.

She hid behind the concrete pillar of the arena's entrance, waiting for the right moment to reveal herself.

"Hey goalie!" She shouted with exuberance, sprinting toward me and jumping in my arms. I caught her mid-air and spun her around, her laughter echoing through the empty arena.

Ella always knew how to make me smile, even when the pressure of the upcoming game loomed over me like a storm cloud. Those moments with her were like a soothing balm to the nerves, washing away any doubts or fears.

As I set her down gently, she leaned in, her hazel eyes sparkling with mischief. "Good luck out there today, Kade. Knock 'em dead."

I grinned, already feeling invincible with her by my side. "I've got my lucky charm right here," I replied, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

The memory fades as quickly as it came, leaving me standing in the locker room alone with the sound of the shower running in the background. I strip off my sweaty gear and let the warm water wash away the remnants of the day.

It takes me less than fifteen minutes to get to the pizza place, and when I park my truck, I see Ella and Colton heading for the front doors.

I jog to catch up with them, ensuring that I'm there to pay for the buffet.

I don't want any part of our night to feel like a burden to Ella beyond just her time.

"Thank you for dinner," Ella says as the three of us take a seat with full plates.

"Yeah, thank you," Colton echoes.

“You’re more than welcome.” I smile and scoop up a piece of cheese. “I’m just happy to have some cool people to hang out with.”

“You’re a pro hockey player,” Colton chides. “You probably have all the coolest people in the world to hang out with—and like, models, too.”

Ella rolls her eyes. “Colton.”

“Well, quite frankly, it’s not all that glamorous,” I say, noting the watchful look on Ella’s face. “And I don’t bother with models, anyway. They’re not really my type.”

“Huh,” Colton hums. “Well, my new friend Aaron says that all hockey players date models and stuff.”

“Nah, definitely not true.” I laugh, shaking my head. “We’re not NFL players. That’s what they do. Not us.”

Ella lets out a soft but timid laugh, and just the fact that she found anything coming out of my mouth remotely funny makes me feel like I’m on cloud nine.

She picks up a slice of pizza. I can’t help but stare at the way her perfect pink lips part to take a delicate bite, her eyes briefly meeting mine before flicking away.

Colton continues to hammer me with questions about hockey.

I answer him to the best of my ability, trying not to get distracted by the woman sitting across from me that I was once madly in love with.

I can’t for the life of me figure out why my eighteen-year-old self ever let her go, but based on the way she’s acting toward me...

She really is gone.

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Chapter Three

Ella

“Kade is so cool,” Colton says from the backseat. “He’s cooler than anyone I’ve ever met in my entire life.”

“Yeah, he’s a great hockey player,” I say flatly, trying my best not to sound bitter. Don’t get me wrong, I’m really thankful that Kade is giving Colton skating lessons—and for free, at that—but also, I’m tired of hearing about how amazing my ex-boyfriend is.

Especially considering he chose hockey over me.

“Yeah, and he took us to eat pizza!” Colton beams, still reflecting on what happened two days ago. “And we get to see him again tonight!”

“I know.” I pull into the parking lot, carefully navigating my decade-old Tahoe into the staff parking spot. Thankfully, his upper elementary school is attached to the middle school, so I can walk him there in the mornings before heading to work. It allows me to skip the car line.

“Is something wrong?” Colton asks as he unbuckles his seatbelt. “You don’t sound very happy. Do you not like Kade?”

“No, no, I am happy. I’m so happy that you’re getting some skating lessons, and I’m happy that you’re getting to do something you love. Kade is a good guy, too.” He just

broke my heart into a million pieces and then thought, somehow, I'd still want to be friends.

But that's not something I care to discuss with a ten-year-old.

"Oh, okay, cool." Colton pushes open the door, and I follow suit, slinging my bag over my shoulder. "My friend Aaron said relationships with exes can get messy."

"Oh?" I can't hide my surprise. "And how old is this Aaron kid, exactly?"

"He's my age," Colton answers as we head toward his elementary school. "His parents just got divorced. Aaron's dad chose to stay in his life, though."

My heart breaks at the mention. I breathe in the crisp January air. Colton had a really tough time understanding why Landon didn't want to see him after our divorce. Sometimes, I think I was more heartbroken for him than for myself.

But before I can say anything in response, Colton adds, "Makes sense, though. Aaron is so cool!"

I can't help but chuckle at Colton's innocence, grateful that he's still shielded from some of the complexities of adult relationships. For now, at least.

"Well, you're pretty cool, too." I squeeze his shoulder and smile down at him. "I'm glad you're making friends at your new school."

"It helps when you know a famous hockey goalie." Colton grins and wiggles his eyebrows at me as we hop up onto the curb. "I'm pretty sure everyone at the school thinks that I'm cool."

"Well, just make sure you're not boasting," I say, giving him my mom look. I might

not be his biological mom, but no matter what, I'm still his mother in one way or another. And I owe it to my sister to make sure he turns out alright.

"I know, I know." Colton gives me a hug as we reach the front blue doors of the school. "I love you."

"I love you, too." I give him a solid squeeze, planting a kiss on his head. "Have the best day, and I'll see you as soon as you get out."

"Roger that." He scampers off.

I watch him until he disappears inside. It's hard to see him growing up so fast, and while I'm only twenty-seven, it feels like I'm aging quickly, too—and so are my dreams of adding to our family of two. But that would require me to put myself out there and actually date someone.

Someone who could leave us...

My heels click on the pavement as I make my way back to Meadowlark Middle School.

I wrap my black peacoat around my body tighter, fighting off the loneliness that has hovered over my shoulders for years.

It's a little self-inflicted, I know that.

But after the devastation of my divorce, I vowed to myself that I wouldn't date anyone again until Colton was an adult.

He's been through enough loss in his life, I'm not going to risk putting him through another messy breakup or divorce .

My phone buzzes in my pocket, jarring me from my thoughts, and I fish it out. My mom's name is on the screen, and I answer the call.

"Hey," I say. "Isn't it a little early?"

"Ella." The voice that greets me isn't my mother. It's her caretaker, Chandra.

My heart immediately jumps to my throat. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, of course," she quickly adds. "I didn't mean to scare you. Your mom is insisting there's a box of pictures—the ones that have your sister's cheerleading days—and I cannot find it. I was really hoping you could help me."

"Oh." I let out a sigh and press my palm to my forehead. "It's okay. That box should be in her bedroom closet, toward the back."

"Your mom said it was under the bed," Chandra hums. "She swore by it."

I swallow the knot in my throat. "Do you think it's getting worse?"

"No, I don't," Chandra comforts. "Even I forget where things like this are."

"True." I blow out a breath. "You're right. I'm sorry. I just..."

"You're getting settled in this big city. You need to focus on that. Don't worry about what's going on here. It's all okay, I promise." I can hear the smile in her voice, and it brings me relief.

"Okay, well, I hope you find the pictures. If not, let me know, and I can stop by after school to help look for them."

“Will do. Have a good day,” Chandra says before hanging up.

I shove my phone into my pocket and then finish the walk to work.

When I arrive, I pull open the front doors and head straight for the teacher’s lounge.

As the head of mathematics, I teach four classes and then spend the rest of my days working on the school programs, as well as collaborating with the gifted and talented.

And I’m starting in the middle of the school year, which adds total chaos.

“Morning, Ella,” Terry, the vice principal, greets me as soon as I step into the lounge.

Her blonde hair is pulled up in a tight bun on the top of her head, and her penetrating green eyes are something out of a magazine.

She’s in her mid-forties, and her youngest kid is in high school. “How’s Colton been settling in? ”

“He’s doing great.” I hang my jacket up after shedding it. “I’m actually really impressed at how well he’s been fitting in.” Thanks to Kade for giving him newfound confidence.

“That’s excellent!” she says, her voice genuine. “I’m so happy to hear that. It makes things much easier on us when our kids are adaptable. I remember when I first moved my three kiddos here. It was tough.”

She squeezes my shoulder and then slips past me to exit the lounge.

Most of the teachers have already found their way to their classrooms, but I don’t teach any classes for the first hour, and I’m supposed to be meeting with

Valerie—she’s the head of the science department—to put together a robotics team application for students.

I pour myself a cup of coffee and wait for the tardy bell to ring before heading to Valerie’s classroom. My heels click down the hallways lined with red and blue lockers. This school is large—three times the size of the last school I taught at.

I giggle inwardly at the few stragglers in the hallway who duck from my gaze as if I’m going to do something about them being late for class.

After a five-minute walk, I arrive at Valerie’s classroom, decorated with frogs and Lily pads on the exterior door. The door is slightly ajar, but I knock anyway and then peer inside.

“Ella!” Valerie exclaims, her red hair in a mess of curls as she stands from her desk. Her face is sprinkled with freckles and framed with a pair of black-rimmed glasses. She looks to be about five years older than me—but no more than that. “It’s great to see you again.”

“Likewise.” I smile. “So, I guess we should get started on this robotics application?”

“Yeah, of course, c’mon in.” She nods toward the desk. “Also, I meant to tell you that my son Aaron is actually in Colton’s class.”

“Oh, really?” I raise a brow.

“Yes! I didn’t put it together at first, since Colton’s last name is different from yours.”

I nod, unsure of how much to explain to her about my situation. “Colton is actually my sister’s son. She and her husband passed away about five years ago. I have

custody of him.” I keep the smile plastered on my face, waiting for her to say something overly sympathetic.

But she doesn’t.

“You’re a strong woman, then,” she says instead, giving me the brightest, warmest smile. “I can already tell.”

“Thank you,” I say, relief flooding my system, appreciating the way she didn’t make it the sole focus.

“I guess our boys have really bonded over their love of hockey. Aaron wouldn’t stop talking this morning about how Colton knows the goalie for the Glaciers. Is it true?” She peers up at me as she takes a seat in her desk chair, and I pull up the extra seat .

“It is true,” I admit. “Kade and I went to high school together.” And he was my first for everything. “He’s been giving Colton skating lessons.”

“Wow.” Her eyebrows disappear beneath her bangs.

“I figured Colton might’ve met him at the meet-and-greet they do after home games.

But skating lessons? I’m impressed. No wonder Aaron has latched onto Colton the way he has.

He’s been begging to try out for the spring travel team.

” She lets out a sigh. “But my goodness, it’s expensive. ”

My heart sinks. “Is it? I haven’t even looked into the cost of hockey...”

“Yes. It’s a big commitment.” She frowns. “If Aaron makes the team, of course, my ex-husband and I will need to work together to figure out a way to pay for it. I was hoping that I’d have a future scientist on my hands, but I think he’s leaning toward being a professional athlete.”

I burst into laughter at the pained, playful expression she gives me. “I mean, he could be both. Aren’t there a few big athletes who became doctors?”

“Maybe.” She giggles with me. “Who knows? Right now, the only thing he wants to be a doctor of is hockey.”

“We still have eight years to change their minds.” I shoot her a goofy wink. “But until then, I guess we have to support them in whatever they want to do.”

“Unless they’re going to do drugs. ”

“Touché.” I set my bag onto my lap and pull out the roster of students. “So, all these kids said they were interested in applying for the robotics team?” I can’t hide my surprise at the four pages of names.

“Yeah.” Valerie sighs. “Which is why we’ve now been tasked with developing an application for it. But honestly, I think most of those kids were told it would be like Transformers or something...” Valerie laughs, shaking her head.

The two of us spend the next forty-five minutes creating the application and discussing the selection criteria, while swapping stories about the difficulties of wrangling middle schoolers. Valerie’s passion for science is contagious, and I can’t help but be uplifted by her enthusiasm.

By the time the next bell rings, I feel so much lighter.

My new life in Atlanta isn't perfect, but it's beginning to feel a little less lonely.

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 3:45 am

Chapter Four

Kade

“You’re glued to your phone today,” a voice says from behind me. “Are you reading all the hate comments after your embarrassing loss last night?”

I roll my eyes, shifting in the booth at Hidalgo’s to see my not-so-identical twin brother Nate as his palm connects with my shoulder. “You’re late.”

“Yeah, well, Mallory was practically having a breakdown over what to wear to that luncheon with the investor.” Nate slides in across from me and grabs a tortilla chip, popping it into his mouth. “She’s super stressed out over this new job.”

I pick up my water and take a sip. “It’s a pretty big deal to be working for the biggest real estate investment company in the city. I’ll give her that. I’d probably be worried about what to wear to a luncheon, too.”

“You’re way too empathetic,” Nate snorts. “If you had to sit and listen to her debate between navy blue and black, you’d probably be feeling the same way I do.”

“Maybe, but at least you have someone,” I say, my voice coming out more bitter than I expected.

I’m not bitter about being single, but the more time I spend with Colton and Ella, the more I start to feel like I’m missing out.

I'm twenty-seven years old now, and I'm ready to settle down—and have a few kids, too.

“Dude, you're a professional hockey player. Just pick out some random chick in the crowd and go for it. You have way too many options.”

“Yeah, but I don't want just anyone,” I mutter, shaking my head. “Besides, I'm not some sleaze trying to pick women out of the crowd. When I'm on the ice, I'm there to focus...”

“You don't have to tell me that,” Nate grumbles, grabbing another chip. “I know what it's like to play hockey.”

“Sorry.” I wince, reminding myself that while Nate is always supportive, he doesn't appreciate hockey being shoved in his face—even if he runs the biggest sporting store in the area. “I'm just saying, I'm not going that route.”

“That's probably for the best.” Nate chuckles, his smile returning. “If you were to choose someone from the crowd at random, you might end up getting hurt—or robbed. Probably better to get set up by someone you know.”

I lean back against the booth as the waiter approaches the table. We both order the California burrito with extra guac on the side. As soon as he leaves, I let out a sigh. “Ella just moved here.”

Nate nearly spits out his water. “Wait, Ella Ella?”

I nod, shrugging and trying to play it off, but I'm sure my brother can read the look on my face. “She moved here a few weeks ago, and I've been giving Colton skating lessons.”

Nate's brows furrow as he sets his glass down on the table. "Who's Colton?"

"Katie's son, but Ella has full custody of him." I explain what happened to Colton's parents, unsurprised at the sadness that clouds my brother's expression. It's one of the most somber looks I've seen on him in a long time.

"Man, she's really been through the wringer," Nate finally says once I'm finished explaining. "I can't imagine getting custody of a five-year-old when you're only twenty-two. That just sounds brutal. I wonder if that played into the reason she got divorced."

The mention of her having been married to someone else makes my stomach sick, but I shrug it off. "I don't know. She didn't talk to me about any of that."

Nate narrows his gaze. "Hmm. I wonder why."

"Probably because we have history. "

He snorts. "You had history a decade ago."

"She was my high school sweetheart."

"Key words being high school ." He shakes his head. "Dude, high school relationships are so small in comparison to the real thing when you get out into the world. You remember Sarah? Yeah, I don't have any feelings for her, and while we have history , I don't think I'd ever say it meant much."

"You and Sarah dated off and on for six months your freshman year," I counter, folding my arms across my chest. The material of my Henley scratches my arms, but I ignore it. "I was with Ella for nearly all of high school, right up until college, and we were much different than you and Sarah."

“Right, I get it,” he breathes out with some annoyance. “But if you’re thinking about going there with Ella again, I’d highly recommend against it. Like, do you really wanna be with someone that has a kid?”

“Okay, well—” I feel myself growing defensive as I mull it over. I really like Colton. And I’ve always wanted to be a dad...

“Exes are exes for a reason,” Nate continues when I don’t complete my thought. “That’s the thing. You can easily run back to the person because the old spark is there, but guess what? So are the same old problems.”

“People change,” I say carefully, mostly thinking about myself.

“Yeah, okay.” Nate huffs as our food is set before us. “I just think it’s a bad idea. Nothing against Ella. I honestly liked you two together, but dude, you broke up with her because of college . So, clearly your feelings weren’t as strong as you’re thinking they were...”

I was an idiot.

I shrug it off as Nate digs out his phone from his blazer pocket and starts to text someone back. I take the moment to eat my lunch, my mind running back to the past. I did break up with Ella for a stupid reason, but everyone was putting so much pressure on me...

‘You won’t be able to focus on college hockey if you’re worried about your long-distance girlfriend.

Don’t you want to go pro?’ I frown as my parents’ words swirl around my head.

‘If you throw hockey away, it would all be for nothing. And then you’ll be stuck

trying to provide for Ella on a grocery boy's salary.

Don't you think she deserves better than that? '

I know I shouldn't have caved to the pressure, but I was just a kid—and I was pretty lost about it all. I broke things off with Ella the day before she left for college. I thought I was doing what was best for both of us.

It was a huge mistake.

Which didn't take long to realize. In fact, I tried to make up with her a few weeks later. But it was too late. She wouldn't answer my calls.

Then she found someone new ... and married him.

"You'll find someone." Nate's voice breaks my thoughts, and I look up mid-bite, my brother giving me one of his famous 'I'm a little worried about you' faces. "You've just got to put yourself out there more."

"Yeah, I know," I grumble, adjusting my focus back on my burrito. I mean, I've dated since Ella, but the relationships with those girls never lasted. "Ella just sparked something in me, I guess." She reminds me of everything I've ever wanted wrapped up in one person.

"That's the thing with exes—they can get under our skin faster than anyone because they've already been there."

"You just said that Sarah wouldn't get to you." I tear into the burrito filled with chicken, rice, beans, and spices.

"Just because Sarah doesn't get under my skin doesn't mean that I don't have an ex

that would. Do you remember that girl I met when I was in London a few years ago?" He looks up at me, a frown pulling at his lips.

"Yeah, what's her name? Erin? Something like that?"

He nods and sets his fork down. "I only knew her for a month, while I was there on business, but she left the kind of impression that I'll never forget. I thought I'd never feel something like that again—until I met Mallory."

"So, you wouldn't pick her over Mallory?"

"Oh, heck no," Nate immediately says. "Mallory is by far the best thing to ever happen to me, and not to mention, she outdoes any woman in the room every time. Not that I've looked," he adds. "She's just the kind of woman that is high caliber and challenges me. You need to find your Mallory. "

"Hmm." I drum my fingers on the table, my eyes drifting around the restaurant. I understand, I do. However, no one I've ever been with has come close to the way Ella made me feel. She's the best I've ever had.

"I know you think Ella is it," Nate says, basically reading my mind. "But it's only because she's fresh in your mind right now. You're giving Colton skating lessons, so you're seeing her all the time. That's all this is. She's stuck in your head."

"And she's amazing as ever."

"You mean she's hot, right?"

"No," I scoff, shaking my head. "I mean, she is . But it's so much more than looks. You can throw a rock into a crowd and hit a pretty woman anywhere, but that doesn't make them right for me."

“Okay, well, no one should be throwing rocks into crowds.”

“You know what I mean,” I shoot back at my grinning brother.

He ignores me and digs into his lunch. His phone vibrates on the table.

I focus on finishing my meal, giving up on the conversation.

It’s not like I’ll sway Nate’s opinion about me pursuing Ella.

Besides, she’s not even interested in me anymore.

That’s been very clear, given that she does the same thing every time I give Colton a skating lesson:

Avoid me.

Well, maybe she doesn’t completely avoid me—she’s cordial, but that’s it. Even at pizza. Ella loves pizza, which is why I offered to take her and Colton to The Wedge. And yet, she still barely told me a thing about what’s going on in her life. She just let Colton talk away—and I’m good with that...

But I want to hear from her, too.

My brother’s phone vibrates again, and this time he picks it up. “Got you a date.”

My head jerks up. “Wait, what?”

“One of Mallory’s friends. She’s really excited to go out. See?” He raises his brow.
“No more Ella.”

Yeah, we'll see about that.

Bzz. Bzz. Bzz.

My phone rattles insistently against the coffee table, the vibration echoing through my living room. I pause the television and scoop it up, glancing at the caller ID before answering.

"Hey, Mom," I greet, my voice light despite the knot that forms in my stomach. "How's your cruise going?"

"Oh, it's going wonderfully, as always," she chirps. In the background, I catch the low hum of chatter, punctuated by a piano playing jazz music. "We've made friends with a couple from Australia! Did you know that kangaroos can be dangerous? This whole time, I assumed they were cuddly creatures."

My lips curl into a smile at the mental image of my mom trying to snuggle up to a kangaroo. "Yeah, they can be feisty."

"Your father says hello," she continues. "Here, let me put you on speaker."

"Hey, son," my dad chimes.

"Hey, Dad. Are you having fun?"

"Yes! The weather's been great. And your mom's been making friends everywhere we go, as always."

She giggles. "We're having a blast. And we've really gotten used to the five-star service and dinners."

Not sure how we'll cope when we get back home.

” She laughs, the sound a comforting and familiar chuckle.

“Which is why we already booked our next one! Did you know they give discounts if you book another cruise while onboard?”

That explains why they've been on four cruises in the past year.

“We're going to Tahiti in a couple months!” she squeals.

“That's great. I'm so happy for you guys.” I mean it. My parents worked really hard when I was a kid and made a ton of sacrifices to ensure Nate and I had opportunities they didn't. It's exactly why I paid off their house and retired them early so they could travel and live the dream.

“Anyway, we were able to stream the game last night. That was a tough loss...” Mom says.

“Yeah, it was,” I admit, feeling the weight of the defeat settle on my shoulders.

It's not like I need reminding—as the goalie, I can't help but feel like it's my fault whenever my team loses.

But I've learned over the years to compartmentalize those feelings and focus on improving for the next game.

Though something tells me this call is only going to make me feel worse...

“You looked a bit ... off,” Dad adds. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Can’t win them all. The defense fell apart in the third...”

“We’re not trying to pile on. We just worry.” Mom sighs. “This isn’t the first shaky game you’ve had in the past couple weeks. And it just seems like you’ve lost ... focus.”

There it is. The pressure I knew was coming. I know my parents mean well, but it’s exhausting to feel like I’m constantly under the microscope.

“I am focused,” I assure her, but the words feel flimsy, even to me.

“Nate said Ella’s in town?” Dad asks. “And that you’ve been giving her nephew skating lessons twice a week...”

Freaking Nate ... always throwing me under the bus with his big mouth.

“His name’s Colton. And yeah, I’ve been helping him out.”

“We know it’s your personal life, but don’t let it interfere with your game. This is your prime, and you’ve worked too hard to get here,” Dad says.

It’s true—it has taken a lot to get here. And to my parents’ credit, their high expectations are probably part of the reason I got to where I am in the NHL, but it still grates on my nerves sometimes.

“We just don’t want to see you lose your edge. Distractions—even good ones—can cost you at this level,” Mom adds.

“Colton’s not a distraction. He’s a kid who’s been through a lot in life and needs someone. And I like spending time with him.”

Now Ella, on the other hand...

“We’re not saying you can’t have a life. Just be careful where you invest your time and energy, okay?” Mom cautions.

“Yeah. I hear you—”

A loud bell rings in the background, cutting through our conversation.

“Oh, shoot,” she exclaims hurriedly. “We’ve gotta go! Trivia is about to start. We love you!”

“Love you,” I say before disconnecting the call.

I let out a deep sigh, rubbing my temples as my parents’ words sink in. They’re not wrong—distractions have no place in the game. But Colton isn’t a distraction. If anything, he’s given my life even more purpose. And honestly, our skate lessons have become the highlight of every week.

And so has seeing Ella...

My heart thuds at the thought of her, her hazel eyes filled with a kind of warmth that always drew me in, her laughter that used to be a melody to my ears.

Before I ruined everything .

Every part of me wants to just wrap Ella in my arms and sweep her off her feet and tell her everything is going to be okay. But deep down, I know I can’t let myself get carried away by these feelings. Especially considering she’s made it pretty obvious that I have no chance.

I'd just be torturing myself.

Maybe it's a good thing Nate set me up on that date after all ...

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 3:45 am

Chapter Five

Ella

“I love Mondays!” Colton beams as he climbs into the car. “I’m so ready to skate. Kade said we might start working on harder drills today.”

“That’s exciting,” I say, keeping a smile on my face as he climbs in and tosses his backpack across the backseat. Kade’s been pouring himself into Colton, and it strikes a nerve in my chest—so much so that I have to just ... not watch .

“Aaron told me today that you’re best friends with his mom,” Colton says, changing the subject, and I’ll take it, considering most of our conversations involve Kade these days.

“Well, Valerie and I do work together.” I drive toward the ice rink.

I’ve been eating lunch with Valerie every day since the morning we made the robotics team application, and I must admit that it’s starting to feel like we might be friends.

Which is nice, since I don’t really know anyone here in the city.

“Why can’t you just say that you’re friends?” Colton makes a face. “It’s not that big of a deal to be friends. Grown-ups are so weird.”

“Tell me about it,” I snort, which makes him laugh. His eyes light up and he leans

back, content with our conversation. I run through options for dinner tonight. Though cooking isn't my strong suit, I never have enough time to spend on it, and by the time we get home...

I'm too tired for complicated recipes. So we usually end up eating some variation of chicken and rice.

I navigate through the parking lot, noting a pretty redheaded woman wrapped in the arms of one of the Glaciers' hockey players leaning against a sports car.

I'm sure that Kade is friends with them, and the fact that I have no idea who most of the people are that he hangs out with only serves to make the disparity feel greater.

"I'm going to be a pro one day," Colton says as he unbuckles his seatbelt. "And when I am, will you come to my games?"

I raise my brows as I grab my bag. "Of course. I'd be at every single one of your games—and I'd have one of those great big signs. Maybe it'd say, 'That's my little boy out there!'"

He crinkles his nose in disgust. "Please don't do that."

"Oh, I will," I tease him, climbing out of the car as he lets out a pained huff. My eyes flicker back to the couple standing by their car, watching us. I swallow hard as they smile and wave...

Like they know us.

"That's Cameron Hastens," Colton points out, waving back at him. "And I think that's his wife or something. I only know 'cause Aaron says he's with some redheaded chick that kind of looks like his mom—and that he wishes his mom

would've married Cameron instead."

"Wow, okay," I mutter, ducking my head and guiding him toward the front doors.

"You need to tell Aaron that he shouldn't compare people like that."

"Yeah, and Aaron's mom is way too old for him. She's, like, thirty-five."

"Is that when they start serving senior citizen meals?" I giggle, making Colton laugh along with me. "Maybe I'll be on the discount menu soon."

"You're only twenty-seven." Colton nudges me. "When you turn thirty, you'll probably have to worry."

"Good to know," I say. "I'll write that down." I hold open the door for him and he slips through, his skating bag slung over his shoulder. He picks up into an excited jog, and I hang back, per usual.

By the time I'm through the doors, Colton is already fitting his rental skates to his feet while Kade leans over the rails, a grin on his face.

My heart flutters in my chest, but I ignore it.

It doesn't matter how handsome Kade is, or that he's giving Colton skating lessons that I can't afford.

Though I know I could express my gratitude better.

It's just so hard to open up to someone who hurt me so badly...

Even if it was years ago.

It's not like I hold it over his head, and that's what I remind myself as I take my seat on the bleachers.

There's no unforgiveness when it comes to how things went down between us.

He did what was best for himself, and I can't fault him for that.

There's just a part of me that's worried about getting too close.

Because I might start to fall for him again.

My mind throws out the obvious answer, and I know that's it. I'm self-aware. I've been through therapy, thanks to my divorce. Well, that, and I'm trying to be as best of a mother figure to Colton as I can.

Anyway, I know my limitations. I know I have trust issues.

And therefore, I know that Kade is a bad, bad idea.

"Alright! Ready?" Kade's voice booms through the rink, sending a shiver down my spine as my mind tries to remind me that I know what that voice sounds like in the dark and quiet, too.

"Let's go!" Colton pumps his fist into the air and skates out onto the ice with a level of confidence that he didn't have a couple of weeks ago.

It makes my heart happy to see him skating with ease—and so joyfully.

Despite everything he's been through, Colton has a heart of gold and joy that lights up a room.

May we all be more like Colton.

Kade cheers for him as he skids to a stop in one graceful move, and I can't help but smile at the sound. I shout some praise as well, but Colton only sees Kade. He's beaming down at Colton with pride written all over his face, his eyes alight with so much joy. It's palpable, even from the stands.

He'll make a great dad someday...

The thought comes with a startling thump in my chest, and I push it all away. This is exactly why I have to be careful around Kade. He's so charming, it could be a sin. Everyone loves Kade, and if they don't, then they're crazy, honestly. He gives everyone everything...

Well, except for me.

I scoff at myself, ignoring the little pang of hurt that reverberates in my chest cavity. It's unwanted, and considering how long it's been since Kade and I broke up, it shouldn't even be there. I should be able to see Kade and not think about what happened between us all those years ago.

But I saw forever with him ... and he only saw hockey.

It's a decision that's clearly paid off. He's a professional hockey player now, and can probably have just about any girl he wants...

Meanwhile, I'm a single parent—and divorced.

Ugh .

With a sigh, I dig into my bag and fish out my phone, deciding now is as good a time

as ever to check in with my mom. I hit the call button and put my phone to my ear. It rings a few times, and then, as soon as her voice comes over the line, I breathe a little easier. “Hey, Mom. How’re things?”

“It’s fine and good,” she says shortly. “How’s Colton? Does he have skating lessons today?”

“Yes, he does,” I say, noting that she’s currently in her lucidness. “And I think he’s starting to like Kade more than me.”

“Well, Kade always was a charismatic kid, more so than his twin brother ... Nate? I think that’s his name.”

“You’re right,” I tell her. “It’s been about a decade since we’ve even really talked about the Santos brothers, you know? And now, here I am, watching Kade Santos teach Colton how to skate.”

“I bet that would make Brett happy.”

I swallow the grief. “I know it would make him happy. Colton’s definitely got his dad’s talent for this. It’s clear as day.”

She laughs softly, though it holds an air of sadness. “Well, Colton’s got one of the best coaches he could possibly have, too, so I’m sure that’s helping.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” My voice falls flat.

“I’m really glad you reconnected with Kade,” Mom chimes. “I sure liked him. He was a good kid. He just had to grow up. Seems like he’s done that, and he’s successful, too.”

And can date models if he wants.

I hold my tongue and instead make an “uh huh” kind of noise. I don’t feel like expanding on the subject of Kade after sitting here and mulling over how amazing of a father he’d be.

It’s just pure torture to continue.

“Well”—I clear my throat—“I was just hoping to call and check in on you. I hadn’t heard from you in a few days, and you know I get worried.”

“Oh, I’m fine. You worry too much about me, El. I’m right as rain here. You know Chandra keeps a close eye on me, too. The woman will barely let me walk outside without following me like a little dog.”

I laugh, but it fades to a sigh. “I know it’s a little much, but she’s just trying to do her best. I don’t know what we’d do without her.”

“I know, I know ,” Mom mutters. “I’ll keep her around—and I kind of like her, but don’t tell her that.”

“You got it.” I giggle, shaking my head as my eyes flicker back out to Colton and Kade. They’re laughing, skating patterns on the ice through cones Kade set up. Colton is grinning ear to ear, and Kade is going easy beside him. He makes it look so effortless, and I hate the way it’s mesmerizing.

“Well, I’m about to eat dinner,” Mom says, cutting into my thoughts. “I’ll let you go. Tell Kade ‘hi’ for me.”

I don’t think I’ll do that.

“Okay, love you, Mom.”

“Love you, El. Have a good evening. Oh and—”

“Yes?”

“Be easy on Kade. He was just trying to make everyone happy all those years ago. He was under a lot of pressure.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say quickly. The guys start skating in my direction.

“Talk to you later, mom. Love you.” I hang up just as they make it to the gate, feeling a mix of emotions.

I’m grateful for days like today, when I can talk to my mom and she remembers details about my life.

But I’m also sad, knowing it’s only a matter of time before her dementia takes over.

I plaster the sweetest look I can muster on my face as Kade and Colton approach. “Hey, lessons are already over?”

“Yeah.” Colton’s shoulders slump. “Kade says he has plans tonight, so he needs time to get ready.”

“Oh?” I cock a brow, unable to hide my intrigue—mostly because Kade’s cheeks are lighting up in a shade of crimson. “Big plans with the team?”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s a ... date .” His voice comes out awkward.

I ignore the way my heart drops in my chest.

“Well, that’ll be fun.” I stand to my feet, my knees feeling like they might give out at any moment. “I hope you have a great time.”

“Yeah, we’ll see. It’s kind of a blind date,” Kade explains with a shrug. “Nate set me up with her, so who knows how it’ll go.”

I nod. “Those are always fun. Though, I’ve never been on one.” I turn to Colton, who already has his Converse on again. “Let’s get going. We need to get out of here so Kade has the time he needs to get ready.”

“Okay,” Colton hums, slinging his bag over his shoulder as he hops up.

I give Kade a smile and a small wave, then lead Colton through the doors and into the lobby. He looks up at me with a curious look on his face.

“How come you didn’t marry Kade? He’s super cool.”

My smile falters as I push open the door for him. “It just didn’t work out.”

And he didn’t want to marry me.

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 3:45 am

Chapter Six

Kade

“You’ll find someone. You’ve just got to put yourself out there more.”

My brother’s words echo in my mind as my foot taps nervously on the floor. My eyes are glued on the front door. Maybe I should’ve picked a better place for me to meet up with Mallory’s friend than The Wedge. Maybe I should’ve gone upscale, or even rented out a club or something, but honestly...

I just want a normal date at my favorite place.

Plus, it’s close to the rink, so I knew I could make it here on time after my skating lessons with Colton.

But everything starts to fall apart the moment I see a brunette step through the door in a black bodycon dress and strappy stilettos .

Oh shoot. I can’t be sure it’s my date, but the way she looks at me when she sees me tells me everything I need to know. It’s her.

And she is not happy about the place I picked.

I give my date a small wave, trying to swallow the nerves as the overdressed model struts to the red pleather booth. Her perfectly manicured eyebrows furrow as she eyes the casual setting, and I can practically see judgment oozing out of every pore.

“Hi, I’m Kade.” My voice comes out stilted, and she looks at me like I’m insane.

“Zena,” she says promptly, not even bothering to smile as she curls her lip up at the booth seat. It has a tear right down center, and her brown eyes laser focus on it. She hesitates, hovering like it might stain her expensive-looking dress.

“I can put my jacket down,” I say quickly, grabbing the leather coat from beside me and half-standing to toss it over the seat.

She stays silent for a minute, but then slowly eases into the seat. “Thank you.” She flips her dark waves over her exposed shoulders, eyeing me. “So ... you’re Nate’s twin brother.”

“Yep, that’s me.” I shift in my seat, trying to regain a bit of confidence. “You’re Mallory’s friend, right?”

She gives me a funny look. “Um, yeah. Obviously.”

I swallow hard, taking in her striking features. She has a lot of makeup on, and it’s clear she put a ton of effort into her appearance. She looks great, but ... she’s not really my type.

What is my type ?

Ella.

“What can I get you two?” The waiter cuts through the awkwardness to take our order, and now I’m really glad I didn’t opt-in to the buffet.

I order a regular meat lovers and a chocolate malt. After a solid five minutes, Zena decides on a veggie pizza with no sauce. She makes the waiter go back and ask to see

if they have wine.

Lucky—or maybe not so lucky—for me, they have wine.

Zena lets out a sigh. “So, hockey?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Hockey. I’m the goalie for the Glaciers.”

“Hmm.” She purses her burgundy lips together. “I’ve never been to a hockey game. Or watched one.”

“Well, maybe you should come to one of my games?” I offer it up carefully, not sure how this woman will respond.

“Maybe. I take it you make good money, though?” She leans back against the booth, her shoulders drooping slightly.

“I do well for myself, yes,” I say, trying to stay humble—and vague—about my finances. “My brother said that you’re a model. What kind of modeling do you do?”

“I do independent modeling gigs, but lately it’s mostly been fitness-related,” she answers.

“Oh, that’s cool,” I reply. “I don’t really know much about models. Honestly, I’ve never really dated one.”

“Yeah, it shows,” she snorts, just as the waiter sets down her glass of wine and my milkshake. She swoops up the wine glass and takes a long sip of the red liquid, looking at just about anything but me.

“I got us tickets to the circus after this,” I say, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans.

“I thought it might be fun.”

“The circus?” She laughs as she sets down her glass. “Are we ten years old?”

I nearly choke on the air I just breathed in. “Um, what?”

“The circus is for kids,” she huffs. “But okay. Can you at least take me home to change first? Because there’s no way I’m going to the circus dressed like this. I thought we’d be wining and dining tonight. That’s what a high-caliber woman like me deserves, you know.”

“Of course,” I agree, my insecurities rising to the surface and making my stomach do somersaults. And suddenly I no longer have an appetite for my milkshake. “I never meant for this date to be any kind of insult. I thought maybe it would just be different from the norm around here.”

She scrunches her nose. “I see.”

I don’t know how to read this woman. So I opt for silence for a few moments, and thankfully, the waiter comes with our pizzas, setting them down in front of us.

“Thank you,” I tell him, while my date stares down at her food like it might reach out and eat her before she can eat it. The waiter gives me a weird look and then walks away.

Zena downs more wine .

“So, what was your childhood like?” I ask clumsily, picking up a pizza slice and folding it so it’s easier to hold.

She sets down her glass of wine and glares at me. “Why do you want to know about

my childhood ? Do you think you're some kind of therapist or something?"

Okay, this is not going well .

"I'm just trying to get to know you," I reiterate. I mean, isn't that the point of a date?

"How about you tell me how you were raised, then," she retorts, taking a long sip of her second glass of wine. Meanwhile, my untouched milkshake is starting to melt. "Because I'd love to know how you ended up becoming a millionaire who thinks it's okay to take your dates to trashy pizza parlors."

The insult stings. How is Mallory friends with a woman like this? Is The Wedge really that bad? Of course it's not bad. It's the best, most authentic pizza in this city. Plus, Colton and Ella loved it.

I take a deep breath. "I just like authenticity."

"Huh."

"Not everything good is luxurious and not everything luxurious is good."

"You must've been raised by poor people who fed you a lot of McDonalds." She says the words in a joking manner, but quite frankly, it's not funny.

Because it's true .

"My parents worked really hard for my brother and me, and it's because of them that I'm even able to play hockey.

They worked multiple jobs to make sure we never went without.

I think that's powerful, and not something to be ashamed of.

"There's an edge in my voice, but that's because I'm officially annoyed.

And hurt. And I want this date to just be over.

"Oh, sorry." She cringes a little. "I didn't think you actually grew up poor. Otherwise, I wouldn't have made that comment." It's the first genuine sounding thing that's come out of her mouth, and I start to relax again. Maybe she's just nervous, too.

"It's okay," I lighten my voice. "So, your family must've been well off, then?"

She nods, finally picking up a piece of her pizza. "My mom and dad were real estate brokers in Los Angeles and New York. They made a killing, and our nanny was literally the best person in the entire world."

"That's really cool."

"Yeah, she made a killing, too. Maybe that's what your mom should've done instead of working dead-end jobs. It would've made everyone's life a lot easier." She thoughtfully takes a bite of her pizza, and I try not to frown at how insufferable she is.

"Maybe." I keep my reply short and focus on eating for the next ten minutes.

Zena starts rambling about her privileged upbringing and the private school she attended with her four sisters.

She also goes on to complain about her Mercedes Benz being cheaply made, her landlord getting mad at her for being two months late on her rent, and the way her dad cut her off from his credit cards this previous month...

It's exhausting.

I'm down to my last slice of pizza. She's maybe eaten one slice of her own, but she's on her second bottle of wine. I watch her curiously as she fills up on alcohol, knowing when this night is over, I won't be taking my brother up on any more blind date offers.

I may never date again.

"You know, I'm not really feeling like a circus," Zena says, finishing off her glass and setting it down with a clank on the table. "We should go to a club or something."

"We should not," I say carefully. "I don't do the whole clubbing scene. It's not something I'm interested in."

"Yeah, because you'd rather go to a circus." She burst into a cackle that rattles my chest in all the wrong ways.

I let out a sigh and rake my fingers through my hair, tugging at the strands until it starts to hurt. Clearly, this is not gonna work, and I need a minute.

"I need to run to the restroom real quick," I say, eyeing my now-melted milkshake that I've yet to touch. As I stand up from the table, my elbow knocks into the glass, sending it flying sideways, spilling all over the table...

And Zena .

Oh no.

Her eyes go wide as the soupy ice cream soaks her black dress and subsequently my jacket. "You've got to be kidding me!"

“I’m so sorry,” I say, reaching for some napkins. “I didn’t mean to do that. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.” I just keep repeating my apology, as if somehow that’s going to make this all better.

“I’m so over this,” she mutters, smacking my hand away and then sliding out the booth. “What a waste of time. I’m ordering an Uber and getting out of here.”

I watch in pure humiliation as she drunkenly saunters, soaked in milkshake, toward the door. The waiter returns with more napkins as soon as she exits, and I let out a pained sigh.

“She wasn’t worth it, dude,” the young guy tells me. “I know her type.”

“Thanks for trying to make me feel better,” I mutter. I grab my jacket, wipe the milkshake off it, and then pull out the circus tickets I took the time to print out. I don’t want to waste the night, no matter how bad it started.

So ... I pick up my phone and call the only person I can think of.

“You wanna go to the circus with me? I’ll buy Colton a ticket, too.”

“Your date didn’t go well?” Ella’s voice resounds on the other line.

“Not at all... But I know you love the circus—and I’m sure Colton will, too. So, come with me? I’ll come get you two?”

There’s a pause, then a sigh.

“Okay.”

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 3:45 am

Chapter Seven

Ella

“I can’t believe Kade invited us to the circus!” Colton chimes, pumping his fist in the air. “You never let me do stuff like this on a school night.”

“You’re right,” I mutter, chewing on the inside of my cheek. “But tonight’s an exception.” I keep a smile on my face as headlights fill the glass of my front door. I normally wouldn’t have agreed to this with Kade, but...

I felt sorry for him.

“He’s here! He’s here!” Colton grabs my arm as he rushes for the door, dragging me behind him. I give into the pull, my Nikes squeaking across the floor. Colton rips the door open and Kade gives us both an amused look, his fist clenched in a mid-knock position .

“Whoa, you guys are ready to go.” He chuckles, flashing me his perfect freaking smile. My heart does a little flip-flop, but I ignore it. The only thing my heart is good for is keeping me alive.

“It’s gonna be so much fun,” Colton breathes, dropping my arm as he falls in step beside Kade. “I don’t remember the last time I went to the circus.”

“It’s been a few years,” I say from behind the two of them. I feel like a third wheel—not that I care. In fact, I love the way that Colton is grinning up at Kade and

Kade is grinning right back.

Colton needs this.

I watch as Kade opens the back door of his truck for Colton to climb in and then turns to the passenger door, gesturing for me.

“Thanks,” I tell him, giving him a half-smile as I slip past him. I’m immediately hit with the scent of leather and Kade’s cologne as I scramble in. Even though he’s changed brands since we were together, there’s still something strikingly familiar about it all.

“You need to get buckled up,” I say to Colton, steering my mind away from the past. “We don’t want to be late.”

He gives me a funny look but then scoots back in the seat as Kade jumps in. He pulls the seatbelt strap across his lap without any protest, and a big grin stretches across his face as Kade shifts the truck into reverse .

“So...” My voice trails off as he heads out of the quaint neighborhood street. Part of me wonders what Kade thinks about the tiny little house I’m renting, or if he thought about it at all.

He eyes me. “So?”

“So, the date didn’t go well?” I keep my voice low as he merges onto the highway, heading toward downtown. My mouth feels excessively dry as he frowns, his shoulders slumping slightly.

“No, it didn’t. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. I even spilled my milkshake on her dress.” He chuckles and I raise my brows, wrapping my arms

around myself a little tighter. “And then she drank enough wine for a whole army.”

“Oh...” A giggle tries to slip out, but I clamp my hand over my mouth, shaking my head. “I’m so sorry, that’s not funny.”

Kade lets out a heavy sigh, glancing back in the rearview at Colton before catching my gaze. “It was pretty disappointing, but also ... now, saying it out loud, it’s a little funny. I’m not sure I would’ve felt like that before I picked you guys up.”

“Girls are gross,” Colton hums from the backseat. “My friend Aaron doesn’t think so, though. He wants a girlfriend.”

My heart jumps to my throat as I spin in the seat. “Wait, what? No girlfriends!” Kade burst into a fit of laughter at my freak-out, and I shoot him a glare. “I’m serious .”

“You act like it’s not innocent.”

“Aaron said he wants to kiss Lilly Evans.” Colton curls up his lip. “I don’t know why he’d want to kiss her. I mean, how would he know if she brushed her teeth? ”

“That’s a very valid point,” Kade says. “He wouldn’t know. And you know what’s crazy? You don’t even know the answer to that question when you’re my age.”

Colton’s eyes go wide. “I thought all adults brushed their teeth.”

“Nope,” Kade says, nonchalantly shrugging as he pulls into the circus parking lot. “Some adults don’t brush their teeth. Some don’t shower. It’s just part of it.”

“I’d totally not shower.” Colton breaks into a grin. “I mean, Ella makes me shower once a day, but I still don’t understand why showering once a week isn’t good enough. It’s not like I get that dirty.”

“Nah.” Kade shakes his head. “You gotta shower. Especially because you break a sweat on the ice. I sometimes shower twice a day.”

“You do?” I can’t help my surprise as he pulls into a space and puts the truck in park.

“Uh yeah.” He laughs. “The last thing I want is for someone to think I reek. That would just be bad.”

“I guess I’ll keep showering, then.” Colton lets out a pained sigh.

Kade and I exchange glances, both of us trying not to laugh as we climb out of the truck. I don’t know what it is about being around Kade, but he always seems to brighten the mood. Well, my mood .

“Will there be clowns?” Colton asks as we head for the front doors, where a whole line of people are waiting outside to get in. “I don’t think I like clowns.”

“They’re just grown-ups who act silly with a bunch of face paint on.” Kade chuckles, shrugging his broad shoulders. I hate the way I’m drawn to stare at him, my mind running circles with how attractive he is.

It should be a crime.

“What’s your favorite part of the circus?” Colton turns to me as we linger in the back of the now-moving line of people.

“I like the acrobats,” I say with a grin. “They do all the stunts I wish I had the courage to try.”

Colton makes a face. “All they do is flip in the air and stuff. I mean, I can do that on a trampoline.”

Kade's laughter fills the air, the deep boom echoing through my chest cavity.

I force a smile and then divert my gaze to the entrance, where two circus workers, clad in bright red uniforms, are diligently scanning tickets.

He pulls out the tickets as we approach the doors, and they scan the barcode, ushering us into the bustling spectacle inside.

"Whoa," Colton says as soon as we step through the doors, his eyes as big as saucers. "This place is huge!" He surveys the expanse of the circus tent, the enormity of it all reflecting in his awe-struck gaze .

"Pretty cool, huh?" Kade says, leading us toward the lower tiers of seats because of course , Kade would get the best possible seats.

The anticipation crackles in the air, mingling with the scent of buttered popcorn and cotton candy.

"It's so cool!" Colton squeals, his face aglow with excitement, and I can't help but smile.

We take in the brightly colored streamers hanging from the ceiling, the dazzling lights, the energetic music. It's a scene straight out of a dream. And our seats are in the very front row, so close to the action that we'll likely feel the heat from the flamethrowers.

"You guys want any popcorn?" Kade turns to us as we take our seats, Colton planted in between Kade and me. "I could go for some."

"Me too!" Colton says the words enthusiastically, but his eyes are already glued to the clowns circling around the edge of the tent's arena. I can't decide by the look on

his face if he's intrigued or terrified by them.

I then glance over at Kade, who gives me a funny look, motioning to Colton. He's clearly thinking the same thing about my nephew, and both of us stifle a laugh as Colton jumps back in his seat when a clown approaches.

"Nope. I don't like them," he mutters, avoiding eye contact with the red-nosed, orange-headed clown. In Colton's defense, even I cringe a little at the fluffy, off-white vest with pom-poms sticking out everywhere.

Maybe I don't like clowns either.

"Yeah, but back in the day, this was the main form of entertainment," Kade says with total ease as the clown performs a handstand. Everyone cheers, and Colton joins in. There's something about the sight of Colton having a good time that makes me feel lighter.

And I hate that I love how Kade brings it out in him.

"I think it would be so cool to be in the circus," Colton declares as the night wears on, and the wonder in his eyes seems to grow with every flip of an acrobat and every blow of a flame.

"You know what's crazy?" Kade shoots me a smirk as he leans into Colton, who pops another piece of popcorn into his mouth. "Back in high school, Ella wanted to be in the circus, too. So much so that she actually tried to train to become an acrobat."

"Oh my gosh," I gasp, my hand flying up to cover my mouth. Embarrassment floods my cheeks as Colton turns to me.

"Really?"

I shoot Kade a glare, though I have to admit that it's playful. "Yes . But it was only for a few weeks, and I learned very quickly that it wasn't for me." I rake my fingers through my dark hair, thinking back to the way Kade cheered for me—never once reminding me of one big problem with my dream .

Colton shoves another handful of popcorn in his mouth. "How come it didn't work?"

I glance over at Kade, who's got a grin a mile wide on his face. "I'm terrified of heights."

My nephew's brows furrow as if he's confused for a moment, and then he looks over to Kade—and then back to me. "Then why would you ever consider becoming an acrobat?"

"Because I was silly." I laugh, shaking my head as Kade begins a deep humming chuckle. It vibrates my chest, its low sound heavier than the music playing overhead in between acts. My heart palpitates with the past memories of us, but I quickly push them away.

I'm only here because his date didn't work out.

I turn away from his gaze, which I can still feel lingering on my skin as I do my best to focus on the horse and trick rider galloping into the ring. I take a deep breath, pretending like I'm not moved by Kade. He's always had a way of getting under my skin...

But I can't afford to let him break my heart again.

My eyes flicker to my nephew, my mind replaying the turmoil of my ex-husband leaving us. That's the thing with relationships that involve children. It's not like it would just be my heart potentially being broken. It would be Colton's, too.

“Man, this is the best night ever .” Colton’s voice rings out as he stands to his feet, cheering as the trick rider hangs off the side of her horse, her bright pink costume glowing under the circus lights. “I think I want to come to the circus every night.”

“Oh, I could totally arrange that,” Kade immediately chimes in return. However, as soon as his gaze meets my glare, he quickly clears his throat. “But unfortunately, I can’t do that. It wouldn’t be a good idea to be here every night. You know, you have ... you have homework and stuff.”

Colton makes a face. “Meh, yeah, I guess so. But it would still be cool to spend every night hanging out with you.”

Kade squeezes Colton’s shoulder. “Yeah, it would be cool for me, too.”

I rip my gaze away and do my best to swallow the warm feeling that follows the exchange.

I have to keep my distance from him.

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 3:45 am

Chapter Eight

Ella

The drive home from the circus is quiet. I keep my gaze fixed out the window, nervous that if I look at Kade for too long, I might forget all the reasons I should keep my distance.

“That was really fun,” I finally say, my voice barely above a whisper. I glance back at Colton, who’s passed out in the backseat, his head lolling against the window, mouth slightly open. “I think you wore him out.”

Kade chuckles, the sound warm and familiar in the confined space of his truck. “I think the circus wore him out. Did you see his face during the motorcycle cage? I thought his eyes were going to pop right out of his head.”

I smile. “Yeah, he was pretty mesmerized. I haven’t seen him that excited in a long time.”

“Really?” Kade glances at me quickly before returning his eyes to the road. “He seems like a pretty excitable kid to me.”

“Well, hockey makes him excited,” I admit, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “And you , apparently. But this was different. This was pure joy, you know? The kind kids should have all the time.”

Something shifts in Kade’s expression, a softness I’m not prepared for. “He deserves

that.”

“Yeah,” I whisper, swallowing the knot that forms in my throat whenever I think about everything Colton has lost. “He does.”

We fall into silence again as Kade navigates through the late-night traffic. The radio plays softly in the background. I catch myself almost reaching to turn it up—a habit from our high school days when we’d drive around with the windows down, singing at the top of our lungs.

“So”—Kade clears his throat—“how’s the new place? Getting settled okay?”

I almost laugh. “Depends on your definition of ‘settled.’ I’ve managed to unpack the kitchen and most of Colton’s room. Everything else is...”—I wave my hand vaguely—“a work in progress.”

“Moving’s the worst.”

“Especially when you’re doing it mostly by yourself,” I add, then immediately regret it. I don’t want his pity.

Kade’s eyes flicker to me again. “I could help, you know. I’m pretty good at unpacking boxes.”

“I’ll bet,” I say, trying to keep my tone light. “But we’re managing. Just takes time.”

He nods, not pushing it, and I’m grateful. The last thing I need is to feel indebted to Kade Santos. The skating lessons are already more than enough.

I glance back at Colton again, his face peaceful as he sleeps. “Tomorrow morning’s going to be fun. Getting him up for school is going to be like waking the dead.”

Kade laughs. "Sorry about that. Maybe I shouldn't have suggested this on a school night."

"No, it's fine," I say, surprising myself with how much I mean it. "Some things are worth being tired from."

The words linger in the air for a moment.

Kade glances over at me, a curious look on his face. "Do you remember how we used to stay up until midnight together every year on our birthdays?"

"Of course I remember," I reply softly, a pang of nostalgia washing over me.

"We'd watch movies and eat junk food and count down to midnight with our sparkling apple cider like the ball was about to drop.

" I chuckle at the mental image of us huddled together on the old plaid couch in my mom's den, the clock on the DVD player blinking 11:58, a pile of movies and an empty bag of Cheetos at our feet.

Every year, we made a pact to keep each other awake until the very second our birthdays began.

"And then we'd both pass out by 12:05, every time, without fail." He laughs. "Gosh, I miss those days."

"Me too," I admit with a wistful smile. "Things were so much simpler back then."

I briefly glance at him, noticing the hint of nostalgia in his eyes as well. It's as if we're both caught in a moment of shared history, a past that still lingers between us despite all the years that have gone by.

As we turn onto my street, I feel a strange mixture of relief and disappointment. Part of me can't wait to get away from this confusing proximity to Kade, but another part—a part I'm trying desperately to ignore—wishes the drive could last a little longer.

Kade pulls into my driveway and puts the truck in park. The headlights illuminate the modest rental I now call home. It's nothing special—just a small three-bedroom with chipping paint and a slightly overgrown lawn—but the rent is reasonable, and it's close to school. That's all that matters.

“Well,” I say, unbuckling my seatbelt, “thanks for the ride. And for inviting us tonight. It was—”

“Let me help you with him,” Kade interrupts, nodding toward the backseat where Colton remains fast asleep.

“Oh, that's okay,” I say quickly. “I can wake him up.”

“He's exhausted,” Kade points out. “And I'm right here. It's no trouble.”

I hesitate, my instinct to refuse his help warring with practicality.

“Okay,” I relent. “If you're sure you don't mind.”

“I don't mind at all,” Kade says, already opening his door and stepping out into the night.

I grab my purse and head toward my front porch, fishing for my keys as Kade opens the back door of his truck.

I watch as he gently unbuckles Colton's seatbelt and scoops him up with ease.

Colton doesn't even stir, just instinctively wraps his arms around Kade's neck and nestles his head against his shoulder.

Something squeezes in my chest at the sight.

I push it away and focus on unlocking the front door. When I finally get it open, I step aside to let Kade carry Colton in.

"Sorry about the mess," I mutter as Kade carefully maneuvers through the entryway, stepping around a stack of moving boxes. "We're still kind of in transition."

"No worries," Kade says, his voice low to avoid waking Colton. "Which way to his room?"

"Second door down the hallway, on the right," I direct, following close behind.

The hallway is narrow, forcing us to walk almost single file. I'm acutely aware of Kade's broad shoulders, how they nearly fill the space, how I have to be careful not to bump into him as he carries Colton. It's a strange intimacy, one I wasn't prepared for when I agreed to let him help.

Kade pauses at Colton's door, waiting for me to open it.

When I do, the soft glow from his nightlight spills into the hallway, illuminating his bedroom—the only truly finished room in the house.

Hockey posters cover the wall, and his bedspread features cartoon T.

rexes playing ice hockey. It would be comical if it weren't so endearing.

Kade steps carefully over a scattering of Legos on the floor and gently lays Colton

down on his bed. He stirs slightly but doesn't wake, even as I slip off his shoes and pull his comforter over him.

"He sleeps like a rock," Kade whispers, his voice tinged with amusement.

"Yeah," I agree, brushing Colton's hair from his forehead and kissing his cheek. "He could sleep through a fire alarm, I think," I whisper as we back out of the room together.

I pull the door almost closed, leaving it open just a crack the way Colton likes it. Then we're standing in the hallway,

"Thanks for your help," I say, wrapping my arms around myself, the awkwardness between us suddenly amplified by the quietness of the house. "You didn't have to do that."

"It was no problem," Kade says before following me into the living room, his eyes scanning the chaos around us.

"Ignore my mess." I let out a self-conscious laugh. "Between work, visiting my mom, and Colton's activities ... I unpack a box or two when I can, but..."

"It's a lot to handle on your own," he finishes for me.

I shrug, not wanting to admit how overwhelmed I sometimes feel. "We get by."

Kade shifts his weight, hands sliding into his pockets. "Look, I meant what I said earlier. I'm happy to help out, if you want. I'm pretty handy, too. So if you need any furniture built or—"

"Kade, you're already doing skating lessons," I protest. "I can't ask you to—"

“You’re not asking,” he cuts in. “I’m offering. Big difference.”

I run a hand through my hair, torn between my stubborn independence and the reality that I could really use the help. “I don’t know...”

“Think about it,” Kade says, taking a step toward the front door. “No pressure. But the offer stands.”

I nod, following him to the door. “I will. And really, thank you for tonight. It meant a lot to Colton.”

“It meant a lot to me, too,” Kade says, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity that makes my heart stutter. “I’m glad you guys could save me from a totally wasted night.”

I manage a small smile. “Well, your disaster date was our gain, I guess.”

He laughs, the sound dissolving some of the tension between us. “Definitely. Anyway, I should go. Let you get some rest.”

“Yeah,” I agree, even as something within me wants to ask him to stay, to help me unpack just one box, to sit with me on my couch and talk about nothing in particular. “Drive safe.”

“Always do,” he says with a grin that takes me straight back to high school, to stolen kisses in his truck and promises we were too young to keep.

I watch as he walks down my front path, the porch light casting long shadows behind him.

“Hey, Kade?” I call out as he’s about to climb into his truck.

“Yeah?” He turns around.

I bite my lip, suddenly feeling a rush of nerves. “Colton’s having a sleepover at Aaron’s Friday night. Would you ... maybe want to come over and help me build my bookshelf? It’s from IKEA, and it’s got about a million screws...”

His eyes widen in surprise, but a small smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “I’d love to,” he says without missing a beat. “Just let me know what time works for you.”

“Great. I’ll text you Friday.”

“Sounds good.” He grins and hops into his truck, the engine rumbling to life in the quiet night. I stay in the doorway until his taillights disappear, trying to ignore the way my heart feels a little lighter than it did before.

It’s only when I close the door that I realize I’m smiling.

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Chapter Nine

Kade

My grip tightens around the handle of my toolbox as I stand on Ella's front porch, suddenly feeling like a teenager again.

It's just a bookshelf.

I've faced down 100-mph slap shots with less anxiety than I'm feeling right now about helping my high school sweetheart put together some Swedish furniture.

But there's something about the way Ella looked at me when she asked for help—a mixture of reluctance and need—that has me determined to be useful to her, even if it's just for one evening.

I knock twice, shifting my weight as I wait. The neighborhood is quiet, peaceful—exactly the kind of place where a kid could ride his bike safely or play street hockey with friends. It's not flashy by any means, but I can see why Ella chose it for Colton.

The door swings open a moment later, and there she is, wearing a faded university t-shirt and jeans with her dark hair pulled back in a messy bun.

A few stray strands frame her face, and there's a smudge of what looks to be dust on her cheek.

Something inside me aches at the sight of her looking so much like the girl I used to know, yet undeniably changed by everything she's been through.

"Hey," she says, a small smile playing on her lips.

"I come bearing tools and moderate IKEA assembly skills." I hold up my toolbox.

"Perfect." She steps aside to let me in, closing the door behind me. "Sorry about the mess. I've been unpacking all day, and since we're putting together the bookshelf, I went ahead and brought in my boxes of books from the garage..."

My eyes scan the space, noting the careful organization despite the chaos. There's a method to the madness—boxes labeled by room, essentials already unpacked, a clear path through it all.

I set my toolbox down. "This is nothing to apologize for. Moving is a marathon, not a sprint."

"Tell that to my back," she jokes, reaching up to massage her shoulder. "I've discovered muscles I didn't know existed."

I resist the urge to offer to help with that as well. Instead, I nod toward a large, flat box leaning against the wall. "Is that our victim for the evening?"

"That's the one." She walks over to it and pats the box. "The instructions claim it's a two-hour project, which in IKEA time, probably means a minimum of four hours."

"Good thing I cleared my schedule," I say, grabbing the box, careful not to bump into anything.

The living room may be cluttered, but I can see touches of Ella everywhere—a

framed photo of her and Colton on the mantel, a stack of math textbooks on the coffee table, a worn throw blanket draped over the arm of the couch.

This place isn't just a house; she's making it a home.

"Nice neighborhood," I comment as I lay the box flat on the floor. "Quiet."

"That's why I picked it," she says, kneeling beside the box but keeping a careful distance from me. "Close to school, safe community, and the rent was ... manageable."

I catch the slight hitch in her voice, the careful way she phrases it. I've learned enough about Ella's situation to know that finances must be tight. Single teacher raising her nephew on her own—I can do the math.

"Smart choice," I say, not drawing attention to it. "Colton seems to be settling in well."

"Better than I expected, honestly," she admits. "But that's partly thanks to you and the skating lessons."

I wave away her gratitude as I open the box, but inwardly, her words warm me. "Happy to do it. That kid's got natural talent."

Working methodically, I group similar parts together, sort through the hardware, count screws and dowels, and make sure we have everything we need.

"You're organized," Ella observes, watching me from her position a few feet away.

I shrug, feeling strangely self-conscious. "Just how my brain works. I like to see what I'm working with before I start."

“I remember,” she says softly, then clears her throat. “So, what’s first?”

I grab the instructions and quickly scan them. “First, we need to attach these side panels to the base. Can you hold this steady while I get the screws in?”

She nods and moves closer, kneeling across from me.

The base piece sits between us like a divider as she holds it in place.

I work the screws in one by one, hyper-aware of her presence just inches away.

Her hands are smaller than I remember, and there’s a small scar across her right knuckle that I don’t recall.

“Where’d this come from?” I ask, nodding toward the scar, trying to keep the conversation light.

She glances down at her hand. “Oh, that? I broke up a fight between two seventh-graders a couple years ago. One of them had a pencil.”

“Seriously?” I look up, catching her eyes. “You broke up a fight?”

“I’m a teacher,” she says with a small laugh. “We do more than just equations.”

“Clearly,” I mutter, impressed. The Ella I knew in high school would have shied away from confrontation, especially physical confrontation. “So you’re basically a superhero, huh?”

She rolls her eyes, but I catch the slight flush of her cheeks. “Hardly. Just doing my job.”

We work in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the turning of screws and the occasional rustle of the instruction sheet the only sounds.

“Hand me that screwdriver?” I ask, pointing to the tool lying beside her knee.

She reaches for it, and as she passes it to me, our fingers brush.

It’s brief—the lightest of touches—but it’s like an electric current shooting up my arm.

Her eyes meet mine for just a second before she quickly looks away, withdrawing her hand like she’s been burned.

“Thanks,” I mutter, trying to ignore the way my heart is suddenly hammering in my chest. Is it possible she felt that too? Or am I reading too much into a simple moment of contact?

“So,” she says, her pitch slightly higher than before, “how’s the season going? I heard you guys won against Philadelphia last night.”

“Yeah, it was a good game,” I say, grateful for the change of subject. “Defense really stepped up, made my job easier.”

“Colton’s been watching your games while I grade papers,” she tells me. “He’s glued to the screen whenever the Glaciers are on.”

Pride swells in my chest, though I try not to show it. “He’s a good kid. Smart, too.”

“Too smart sometimes,” she agrees with a laugh. “Asks questions I don’t always have answers for.”

“Like what?” I ask, genuinely curious, as I work on attaching the next panel.

She sighs, helping to hold the piece steady. “Like why Landon left. Why his parents had to die. Why we had to move.” Her voice softens. “Hard questions.”

My hands falter for a moment. “I’m sorry, El. That can’t be easy.”

“It’s not,” she admits. “But it’s life. Our life, anyway.”

There’s a quiet strength in her words that makes my chest constrict. I want to tell her how amazing I think she is, how I admire the way she’s stepped up for Colton, how she’s rebuilt her life around him without complaint. But I’m not sure if those are words she wants to hear from me.

Instead, I focus on the task at hand, guiding her through each step of the assembly. She’s a quick learner—always has been—and soon we’re working in sync, me screwing pieces together while she holds them steady, passing tools before I even have to ask for them.

As we work side by side, attaching the backing to the frame, our shoulders almost touching, I find myself hyper-aware of her breathing, the subtle scent of her shampoo, the way her brow furrows in concentration.

It’s intimate in a way I wasn’t prepared for, this simple act of building something together.

We eventually reach the point where we need to stand the bookshelf up and position it against the wall. I stand to my feet, dusting off my hands on my jeans.

“Ready for the moment of truth?” I ask, offering her my hand without thinking.

She hesitates for just a second before taking it, allowing me to help her up. Her hand is warm in mine, soft. I hold on a moment longer than necessary before letting go, missing the contact immediately.

“Let’s do it,” she says, positioning herself on one side of the bookshelf while I take the other.

“On three,” I direct. “One, two, three...”

Together, we lift the structure, careful not to strain the newly assembled joints.

It’s heavier than it looks, and I watch Ella’s face to make sure she’s not struggling.

Her expression is determined, focused, and I’m reminded again of how strong she is—not just physically, but in every way that matters.

Together, we maneuver the bookshelf against the wall, and I step back to assess our work. It’s level and solid—a job well done.

“Not bad.”

“Not bad at all,” she agrees, standing beside me to admire our handiwork. “Thanks, Kade. Really.” Her gratitude is sincere, her eyes meeting mine with a warmth that makes my heart stutter.

“It’s no problem at all.” I smile. “So, what’s next?”

Ella dusts off her hands and turns to survey the room, her eyes landing on a cardboard box labeled “Books” in perfect handwriting.

“Might as well start filling this thing,” she says, gesturing toward the bookshelf.

“Otherwise, it’s just going to be an expensive dust collector.”

She kneels beside the box of books and cuts through the packing tape.

“Just start grabbing them and we’ll sort as we go,” she says.

I reach in and pull out a handful of paperbacks, most with creased spines and dog-eared pages. Among them, I spot familiar titles—classics she’d talked about in high school, science fiction that had once prompted late-night debates, and a few newer novels I don’t recognize.

“Your collection has grown,” I observe, carrying the stack to the bookshelf.

She smiles, a genuine one that makes the corners of her eyes crinkle. “Books are the one thing I splurge on.”

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I arrange the paperbacks on one shelf while she brings over a stack of hardcovers. Our hands work in parallel, filling the empty shelves with pieces of her life. It strikes me how intimate this feels—helping someone organize their books is like getting a glimpse of their soul.

A soul I used to know so well...

“You know what I remember?” I say, pulling out a well-worn copy of some advanced mathematics text. “How you always had a book at my games.”

Ella pauses, a small paperback midway to the shelf. “You noticed that?”

“Every time,” I confirm, smiling at the memory. “You’d sit in the stands with a novel propped open, but somehow never miss a play.”

“Multitasking,” she says with a small shrug, but I can see the hint of color in her cheeks. “I had to have something to do during the boring parts.”

“Boring parts? In hockey? I’m wounded, Ella. Truly wounded.” I clutch my chest.

“Sorry, not sorry.” She laughs, and I can’t help but smile at the sound.

“It’s okay, though. I always played better knowing you were there. Even if your nose was buried in a book.”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and smiles but doesn’t make eye contact.

As I reach back into the box, my hand closes around something heavier, bound in a hard cover with embossed letters. I pull it out and immediately recognize the distinctive blue and gold of our high school colors, the year stamped in gold lettering on the spine.

“Well, well,” I say, holding up the yearbook. “Look what we have here.”

Ella’s eyes widen slightly. “Oh, that.”

“Our senior year,” I confirm, studying the cover. “I think mine’s buried in my parents’ attic somewhere. Can we look at it?” I ask, already turning it over in my hands. “For old times’ sake?”

She hesitates, and for a moment, I think she’s going to refuse. Then her shoulders relax slightly, and she nods. “Sure, why not? It was a lifetime ago, right?”

We both settle on the floor, our backs against the newly constructed bookshelf.

I’m acutely aware of the careful space she leaves between us—not touching, but close enough to share the yearbook.

I place it on my lap and open to the first page, where the inside cover is filled with signatures and short notes from classmates.

“‘Stay cool, don’t change,’” I read aloud. “Profound advice from ... who is that? Mike Lewis?”

“Yep,” Ella confirms, leaning slightly closer to see. “Star of the baseball team and master of generic platitudes.”

I turn the page to find more signatures. “Oh, and here’s Miss Edwin wishing you ‘a

bright future full of mathematical wonders.””

“She was my favorite teacher,” Ella says, her finger tracing the neat handwriting. “She’s the reason I became a math teacher, actually.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know about each other anymore,” she says softly, but without bitterness.

I turn the pages slowly, moving past the standard school photos and activity shots. We stop at the faculty section, laughing at familiar faces that somehow look both exactly the same and impossibly young in retrospect.

“Mr. Hargrove!” I exclaim, pointing to a stern-looking man with a mustache and bow tie. “Remember how he used to throw chalk at kids who fell asleep in history?”

“Couldn’t get away with that now.” Ella laughs. “He’d be on administrative leave so fast...”

“And there’s Coach Bennett,” I say, my voice softening. “He changed my life, you know.”

Ella nods. “I know. He saw something in you that nobody else did.”

“Not nobody,” I correct her gently. “You saw it too.”

Our eyes meet briefly before she looks back down at the yearbook.

We continue flipping through the pages, finding images of clubs and sports teams, candid shots from school events.

I'm in quite a few—hockey team captain, most likely to become famous, prom king.

But Ella's there, too, more than she probably realizes—honor society, math league, candid shots in the library or by her locker.

"We look so young," she murmurs as we reach the senior portraits section. "Like babies playing dress-up."

"Speak for yourself," I joke, pointing to my senior photo where I'm sporting what I thought was a very sophisticated goatee. "I was clearly a mature and distinguished gentleman."

She bursts out laughing, the sound so genuine and uninhibited that it catches me off guard. "Oh my gosh, that terrible facial hair! I'd forgotten about your 'distinguished gentleman' phase."

"Hey, you said you liked it!" I protest, though I'm laughing too.

"I lied," she admits, eyes twinkling with mischief. "It looked like you glued cat hair to your face. But you were so proud of it, I couldn't bear to tell you."

"Betrayal," I gasp. "All these years, I thought I looked good."

"You looked good despite it, not because of it," she clarifies, still chuckling.

We continue turning pages, stopping occasionally to comment on a familiar face or recall a shared memory. It strikes me how many of these moments I'd forgotten—not because they weren't important, but because remembering them without Ella had been too painful.

But now, sitting beside her on the floor of her new home, surrounded by half-

unpacked boxes and the bookshelf we built together, those memories don't hurt anymore. They feel like unearthed treasures.

"We had some good times, didn't we?" I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

She looks up at me, her expression softening. "We did," she admits, and there's no hesitation in her voice. "A lot of good times."

The moment stretches between us, comfortable and warm. Outside, the last light of day is fading, casting the room in a soft golden glow. Inside, something else is happening—not quite rebuilding, but perhaps clearing away the debris to see what foundation still remains.

Chapter Ten

Ella

I close the yearbook, my fingers lingering on its worn cover as I glance around at the boxes still waiting to be unpacked, evidence of my new life scattered across the living room floor. A life so different from anything I'd imagined back when those yearbook photos were taken.

"We should probably get back to it," I say, setting the yearbook aside. "I've got about a million more boxes to go through."

Kade nods, stretching his long legs out in front of him before standing and reaching for another box, this one smaller than the others.

He opens it carefully, pulling out a stack of framed photos wrapped in newspaper.

He unwraps the first one, and I watch as his expression changes, softening into something like reverence.

"This is a great photo. When was it taken?" he asks, holding up a black frame containing a photo of me and my sister, our arms around each other, laughing at something off-camera.

"That's from Colton's fifth birthday party. Just a couple months before the accident," I reply, a familiar ache blooming in my chest.

Kade looks at the photo more closely, his thumb brushing over the glass. “She looks so happy here. You both do.”

“We were,” I say softly, taking the frame. “It was a good day. Colton was over the moon because Brett had built him this elaborate dinosaur-themed obstacle course in the backyard.”

“I bet that was something to see,” Kade says, his voice gentle.

“It was ridiculous.” I laugh. “Brett spent three days building it, and Colton ran through it exactly twice before deciding he’d rather play with the box it came in.”

I set the frame on the mantel, adjusting it slightly until it sits just right.

My throat tightens with emotion, but I push past it as Kade unwraps another frame, this one a portrait of Katie and Brett holding newborn Colton between them, their faces glowing with a joy so pure it’s almost blinding.

He looks at it for a long moment before passing it to me.

“I remember this day,” he says simply.

I nod, unable to speak for a moment as I stare at my sister’s face.

She was radiant, exhausted but exhilarated.

I remember standing next to Kade in the hospital room our senior year, watching as Katie placed tiny Colton in my arms for the first time.

Kade held him shortly afterward and was a complete natural.

I run my finger along the edge of the frame. “I keep these photos everywhere, even though sometimes it hurts to look at them. Colton needs to see their faces. He needs to know who they were, how much they loved him. I can’t let him forget.”

“That’s important.” Kade nods in agreement. “But I can see how that could be hard.”

“Yeah ... when I first got custody of him, I packed all the photos away,” I admit.

“It was too difficult to see their faces every day. But then, one night, I found Colton sitting in his closet with a picture of them he’d hidden under his pillow.

He was just ... talking to it. Telling them about his day.

” My voice catches. “That’s when I realized how selfish I was being.

My grief didn’t matter more than his need to remember them. ”

“You’re an incredible person, Ella. Most twenty-two-year-olds would’ve crumbled under that kind of responsibility.”

I shrug, uncomfortable with the praise. “I did what anyone would do. He’s family.”

“No.” Kade shakes his head firmly. “Not everyone would’ve stepped up like you did. Not everyone could have handled it.” Kade looks down at his shoes. “I’m so sorry you had to go through all that. I wish I had known. I would’ve been there.”

“We weren’t exactly in touch,” I say, swallowing the hurt.

“I should’ve been,” he says firmly. “After everything we went through together, I should’ve checked in on you. I could’ve found you again on social media. I could’ve gotten your new number from a mutual friend. I just ... I thought you were happy

with Landon. I didn't want to intrude."

I bark out a bitter laugh. "Well, that didn't work out quite like I planned."

Kade hesitates, then asks, "What happened? If you don't mind me asking."

I sigh. "The short version? He wasn't prepared to be a parent. We were newlyweds when Katie and Brett died and I got custody of Colton. Landon stuck around for about a year before deciding it was all too much for him. Too much responsibility, too much grief, too much ... reality, I guess."

"What a jerk," Kade says with surprising vehemence.

"Yeah, well, the way he left made getting over him pretty easy." I shrug, trying to appear more nonchalant than I feel. "Colton and I did a lot of therapy. It helped. Colton's in a good place now, all things considered. And I'm ... I'm okay. We're okay."

Kade nods, watching me with those intense amber eyes that seem to see straight through me. He moves closer, stopping just a foot away from me. "Well, it's okay if you're not okay sometimes too, you know? You don't have to be strong all the time, El."

The nickname, so casual on his lips, breaks something loose inside me. I've spent five years being strong—for Colton, for myself. Five years of keeping it together, of solving problems and making decisions and shouldering responsibilities that should've been shared between two parents.

"I'm tired sometimes," I whisper, the admission feeling dangerous. "Of being the only one. The only parent, the only decision-maker, the only one who knows where the Band-Aids are or how Colton likes his sandwiches cut or what to do when he has

nightmares about the crash.”

To my horror, tears well in my eyes, hot and unexpected. I blink, trying to force them away. “I’m sorry, I don’t even know why I’m telling you all this.”

Kade doesn’t hesitate. He closes the distance between us and wraps his arms around me, pulling me against his chest. The embrace is so sudden, so unexpected, that I freeze for a moment before melting into it. His body is solid and warm, his heartbeat steady against my cheek.

“You’re doing a great job,” he murmurs. “Anyone can see how much Colton adores you. How much he’s thriving. That’s all because of you.”

I close my eyes, allowing myself this moment of weakness, of leaning on someone else.

His hands are gentle, one resting between my shoulder blades, the other at the small of my back.

The embrace feels both familiar and new—the same Kade who held me in high school, but different too.

Stronger, steadier, more sure of himself.

“Thank you,” I manage, my voice muffled against his shirt. “For listening. For understanding.”

“Always,” he replies, and I can feel the word rumble in his chest.

We embrace each other for what feels like both an eternity and not nearly long enough. I should pull away—I know I should—but for just this moment, I let myself

be held, supported, seen. For just this moment, I'm not the only adult in the room, the only one carrying the weight.

And it feels dangerously good.

When we eventually pull away, my cheeks flush warm with embarrassment.

I'm not usually like this—all emotional and needy.

I've spent five years building myself into someone who doesn't fall apart, who doesn't need anyone else.

And here I am, practically crying on Kade's shoulder after one evening of unpacking boxes.

Pull it together, Ella.

"Sorry about all that," I mutter, taking a step back and tucking my hair behind my ear. "I don't normally..."

"Don't apologize," Kade says, his voice gentle. "Really. It's okay."

I nod, not trusting myself to say more. The moment stretches between us, a bit awkward now, the ease from earlier replaced by something heavier.

I clear my throat and turn back to the boxes.

"Let's finish up this one," I suggest, gesturing to the box of photos we've been working on. "I still need to figure out where everything's going to go."

Kade nods, moving back to the box. The air feels different now—still warm, but

charged with unspoken things.

“This place is going to look great once you’ve got everything set up,” Kade encourages, returning to the easy conversation of before. “Good bones, as they say.”

“Yeah, it’s coming along nicely,” I agree, relief washing over me at the change of subject. “Colton’s already talking about wanting to paint his room blue like the Glaciers’ jerseys.”

“Smart kid.” Kade grins and reaches into the box. He pulls out another frame, this one holding a photo of Brett in his college hockey uniform, arm slung around Katie, both of them laughing.

“Man, Brett was something else on the ice. I always thought he could’ve gone pro if he’d wanted to.”

“He probably would’ve.” I nod. “But everything changed when Katie got pregnant with Colton their junior year of college. But he never complained about giving up hockey. Not once. Said being Colton’s dad was worth more than any trophy.”

Kade smiles. “That’s just who Brett was.”

“Oh, most definitely.”

We continue to work in silence for a few minutes. It’s nice, how comfortable it feels.

Kade pulls out another frame, this one different from the family photos we’ve been unpacking. It’s smaller, silver, the glass slightly scratched from years of moves. He turns it over, and I see the exact moment he registers what he’s looking at .

“Oh wow,” he breathes, a smile spreading across his face. “Look at us.”

I know exactly what it is—Kade and me on graduation day, his arm around my waist, both of us beaming in our caps and gowns, blue and gold tassels catching the sunlight. His face pressed against mine so close that our cheeks were touching.

“I can’t believe you kept this,” he says, studying the photo with a nostalgic smile.

I feel my body tense. That picture was taken just two months before everything fell apart. Before Kade sat me down the night before I left for college and explained that he needed to focus on hockey. How hockey was the most important thing in his life...

The memory hits me like a physical blow, and I have to force myself to breathe normally.

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“It was a good day,” I say, my voice coming out more clipped than intended. I take the frame from him, not letting my fingers brush his, and set it on a side table without looking at it for too long.

Kade’s brow furrows slightly at my shift in tone. “It was. Remember Mrs. Halsey trying to organize everyone alphabetically, and nobody would listen to her?”

“Vaguely,” I lie. I remember everything about that day—the smell of freshly cut grass, the way my graduation gown stuck to my skin in the early summer heat, the weight of Kade’s class ring on the chain around my neck. A necklace I removed two months later when he broke my heart.

Suddenly, there’s a war raging inside my head.

Part of me wants to sink back into the connection we were rebuilding, to let down my guard and see where this might lead.

But another part—the part that remembers sobbing in my dorm room while my roommate awkwardly patted my back, the part that knows what it feels like to have Kade Santos decide you’re not worth the trouble—that part is screaming at me to protect myself.

“It’s getting late. We should probably call it a night,” I say, closing up the box we’ve been unpacking, unwilling to relive any more memories right now.

“It’s only eight-thirty,” Kade points out, checking his watch.

I shrug, not meeting his eyes. “It’s about my bedtime.”

“No problem. I can head out. But ... are you okay?” Kade asks.

I force a smile, though I can feel how stiff it is. “I’m fine. Just tired. It’s been a long week.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but he nods anyway.

I start gathering the empty boxes and flattening them, my movements jerky and uncoordinated. The comfortable atmosphere from earlier has evaporated, replaced by a tension that makes it hard to breathe.

My mind can’t stop picturing a different life—one where Kade didn’t break up with me, where we stayed together through college, where I never married Landon, where maybe Kade and I would have been the ones to take in Colton after the accident.

It’s a dangerous train of thought, full of “what-ifs” that lead nowhere useful.

I check my phone, even though I know exactly what time it is. “Yeah, it’s getting late,” I say again, more to myself than to Kade.

He watches me for a moment, confusion evident in his amber eyes. “Ella, did I say something wrong? If it’s about the hug—”

“No, no,” I cut him off, waving a hand. “Nothing like that. I’m just suddenly very aware of how much I still need to do around here.” I gesture vaguely at the remaining boxes. “And I’ve already taken up enough of your evening.”

“You haven’t taken up my evening. I offered to help, remember? And I’m happy to stay longer.”

There's something in his expression—a mixture of concern and something deeper—that makes my chest tighten. This is exactly what I'm afraid of. This pull toward him that I can feel even now, even after everything.

“Thanks, but I've got it from here,” I say, moving toward the front door in a not-so-subtle hint. “I really appreciate all your help with the bookshelf and the unpacking. It would've taken me twice as long on my own.”

Confusion flickers across his face as he follows me, clearly caught off guard by my sudden shift. “Ella, are you sure everything's okay? Did that graduation photo upset you? ”

I stop, my hand on the doorknob. Something about the genuine concern in his voice makes me pause. “It's not the photo, exactly,” I admit, staring at the floor. “It's just ... it reminds me of a difficult time.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes. “The breakup,” he says softly.

I nod. “It was a long time ago. I'm over it. But sometimes memories just hit, you know?”

“I know,” he says, and there's a weight to his words that makes me feel like he does understand. “I've thought about that day a lot over the years. About how I handled it. I was young and stupid and—”

“It's fine,” I cut him off, not ready to hear whatever explanation or apology he might offer. Not tonight, when I'm already feeling so raw and exposed. “Like I said, it was a long time ago. Water under the bridge.”

He studies me for a moment, and I can almost see him debating whether to push the issue. Finally, he nods. “Okay. But if you ever want to talk about it...”

“I’ll add it to the agenda,” I joke weakly, trying to lighten the suddenly heavy atmosphere. “Right after ‘solve world hunger’ and ‘teach Colton to put his dirty clothes in the hamper.’”

Kade smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Fair enough.”

I open the door, letting in a rush of cool evening air that feels good against my flushed skin. “Thanks again for your help tonight. With the bookshelf and ... everything.”

He steps out onto the porch, then turns to face me. “Anytime, El. I mean that.”

The sincerity in his voice makes my resolve waver for just a moment. Which is exactly why I need to keep my distance.

“Goodnight, Kade,” I finally say, my voice firmer than before.

I close the door before he can respond, leaning back against it and letting out a long, shaky breath. It’s better this way, I tell myself as the sound of his engine fades into the night. Better for everyone.

But as I turn back to face my half-unpacked living room, now empty and silent without his presence, I can’t quite convince myself that I believe it.

Chapter Eleven

Kade

The rumble of the jet engines is the only sound breaking through the thick silence that's settled over the cabin of our team's private plane.

We lost our away game tonight, and it shows.

The cabin lights are dimmed, most of the guys are either sleeping or lost in thought, headphones blocking out the world.

Coach Wilson sits up front, already reviewing game footage on his tablet, the blue light illuminating his furrowed brow. Typical. We haven't even made it back to Atlanta, and he's already breaking down everything that went wrong.

A lot went wrong. Starting with me.

I twist the cap off my water bottle, then back on. Off, then on. The rhythm is mindless, but comforting. I should've stopped that last goal. It was savable—the kind of shot I usually anticipate.

“You're gonna break that cap if you keep that up.”

I look up to find Cam sliding into the seat across from me, his usual post-game suit replaced with team sweats.

“Sorry,” I mutter, setting the bottle down. “Just thinking.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” He stretches his long legs into the aisle, wincing slightly.

“That’s kind of the problem. You’ve been ‘just thinking’ for about two weeks now.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you let in that last goal because you were somewhere else entirely.” He doesn’t sugarcoat it, but there’s no malice in his voice.

That’s Cam—brutally honest but never cruel.

“And it’s not just tonight. You’ve been off your game since—” He pauses, eyes narrowing.

“Since right around when you started giving those skating lessons to that kid.”

My jaw tightens. “Colton has nothing to do with it.”

“Maybe not Colton,” Cam says carefully. “But what about his mom?”

My shoulders tense. Am I really that obvious?

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

Cam snorts. “Sure you don’t. That’s why you practically sprint off the ice after every practice when it’s lesson day.

That’s why you’re constantly checking your phone.

That’s why you’ve got that look on your face right now.

What's going on with you, Santos? And don't you dare say nothing.

We've known each other too long for that. ”

I hesitate, fidgeting with the water bottle cap again. Talking about Ella right now feels like exposing a raw nerve. But if there's anyone I can trust to open up about this with, it's Cam.

“You remember I mentioned my high school girlfriend?” I finally ask, eyes fixed on the bottle in my hands.

Cam nods slowly. “The one that got away. Sure.”

“Well, she's Colton's aunt. His guardian, actually—and the woman who's been bringing him to skating lessons. They just moved to Atlanta.”

“Wait—” Cam's eyes widen. “ She's your one that got away?”

“That's her.” I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips. “Ella Smart.”

“Smart as in smart, or—”

“It's her last name,” I clarify, rolling my eyes. “Though it fits her pretty well.”

Cam lets out a low whistle. “Dang. Talk about full circle.”

“Yeah.”

“And you're still hung up on her.” Cam states it as a fact, not a question.

I meet his gaze. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only to someone who’s paying attention.” He shrugs. “The guys are too focused on their own stuff to notice. But yeah, it’s pretty clear something’s up with you. ”

I sigh, leaning back in my seat. Outside the window, stars pepper the endless black canvas. It’s beautiful in a lonely sort of way.

“I thought I was over her,” I admit quietly. “I mean, it’s been almost ten years. I’ve dated other people. I’ve built this whole life. But seeing her again...” I trail off, struggling to find the words.

“Brought it all back?” Cam offers.

“Yeah. But it’s more than that.” I turn the water bottle in my hands, watching the liquid swirl inside. “It’s like ... all these years, I’ve been measuring everyone against her without even realizing it. And now that she’s back, I’m remembering why.”

“But?” Cam prompts, clearly sensing there’s more.

“But she’s different now. We both are.” I run a hand over my face, feeling the stubble rasp against my palm.

“She’s been through so much—losing her sister and brother-in-law, her mom’s declining health, raising Colton on her own, a divorce.

She’s built these walls around herself, and I get it. I understand why.”

“And you’re afraid to push,” Cam says, nodding slowly.

“I don’t want to be that guy,” I explain, frustration bleeding into my voice.

“The one who doesn’t respect her boundaries.

The one who tries to force his way through walls that are there for a reason.

” I twist the cap off my water bottle again, more forceful this time.

“I still have feelings for her, but now’s not the time to tell her.

She’s made it pretty clear she’s not looking for anything. ”

I go on to tell him about the circus, followed by the night at Ella’s house—building the bookshelf, looking through old photos, the moment we shared when she finally let her guard down, and then how quickly she shut down when we stumbled across that graduation picture.

How she practically pushed me out the door afterward.

“It’s like one minute we were connecting, and the next...” I sigh. “I reminded her of the guy who broke her heart.”

“Well, you did,” Cam points out.

“Yeah, thanks for the reminder,” I mutter with sarcasm.

“Just stating facts.” He shrugs unapologetically. “You broke up with her, right? Before college?”

I nod, shame washing over me. “Biggest mistake of my life. I thought I was doing the right thing—putting hockey first, not holding her back with a long-distance relationship. Everyone told me it was the right decision.”

“Everyone except Ella, I’m guessing.”

“She never even got a say.” The admission hurts, even after all these years. “I just made the decision for both of us.”

Cam is quiet for a moment. “So now you’re afraid of making the same mistake again. Pushing what you want onto her without considering what she needs.”

“Exactly.” I’m surprised by how accurately he’s read the situation. “I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“Hmm.” Cam leans back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “You know what I think?”

“I have a feeling you’re gonna tell me regardless.”

He grins, unfazed by my sarcasm. “I think you’re overthinking this. It’s not about pushing through her walls or staying on your side of them. It’s about proving they’re not necessary with you.”

I tilt my head. “What do you mean?”

“Actions over words, man.” Cam taps his temple. “Don’t tell her you’re trustworthy—show her. Don’t promise you won’t bail—prove it. Be consistent. Be there. Not just for the kid’s skating lessons, but for the small stuff. The everyday things that actually matter.”

“That’s...” I pause, considering his words. “Pretty good advice.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he scoffs.

I laugh, feeling some of the tension drain from my shoulders. “Marriage has made you wise.”

“Be sure to tell Nila that.” Cam chuckles. “Anyway, if you really care about her—and it’s obvious you do—then patience is your best play here. Let her set the pace. Let her see that you’re not going anywhere this time.”

“And if she decides she doesn’t want me in her life that way?”

Cam shrugs. “Then at least you’ll know you did right by her. Which, from what you’ve told me, is what you’re actually worried about.”

He’s right, and we both know it. I nod slowly, letting his words sink in.

“But seriously, Kade, just give it time. She’s got a lot on her plate—new city, new job, raising a kid on her own. Maybe what she needs right now isn’t a boyfriend. Maybe she just needs a friend she can count on.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Maybe that’s enough.”

“For now,” Cam adds with a knowing look. “I’m not saying you should give up completely on something that matters to you. Just ... don’t try to rush it either. I mean, when I met Nila, I fell hard and fast, but she wasn’t ready to commit.”

“But can we blame her? She was the social media specialist hired to do damage control after you punched a fan in the face,” I joke.

“Okay, yeah,” he grunts. “But she’d also been through some things and put up some walls.”

“Okay, okay.” I hold up my hands in mock surrender. “I’ll give you that.”

“My point is, patience paid off.”

“I can be patient,” I promise, both to Cam and to myself.

Cam reaches over and claps my shoulder. “Good. Now can you please get your head back in the game? Because that last goal was embarrassing.”

I groan, but there’s a smile tugging at my lips. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“She better be worth it.” He smirks, settling back in his seat.

I think of Ella—her strength, her kindness, the way she’s built her entire life around giving Colton stability and love. The way she still laughs with her whole body when something truly amuses her, just like she did in high school.

“She is,” I say simply. “She definitely is.”

Chapter Twelve

Ella

“Come on!” Colton urges as he bounces just outside of the driver’s side door. “Let’s go! We’re gonna be late.”

“We’re not late,” I mutter, shaking my head. However, I can’t help but smile at his urgency. Skating lessons with Kade have become such a staple in his life, and I love seeing the light back in his eyes.

Inside, the familiar chill of the rink greets us, and Colton immediately spots Kade standing by the boards in his Glaciers warm-up jacket. Colton speeds off toward him, and a sense of warmth settles in my chest at the sight.

Maybe it’s not so bad having Kade around after all. Maybe we can be ... friends. For Colton’s sake. It’s okay to let Kade back into my life as a friend, right ?

The only thing that matters is that I don’t fall for him again.

“Kade!” Colton calls out, his voice echoing in the cavernous space.

Kade turns, and the smile that spreads across his face at the sight of Colton makes something in my chest flutter traitorously. He high-fives Colton with enthusiasm, then glances up, his eyes finding mine across the distance. His smile softens as he waves hello.

I wave back, trying to ignore the way my heart picks up speed.

By the time I reach the two of them, Colton is mid-story about how Aaron is going to be trying out for the travel hockey team this spring. His words are tumbling out in an excited rush. I catch the tail end as I approach.

“—and they get these super cool jerseys with their names on the back and everything!” Colton says, dropping his bag to gesture with both hands.

“That does sound pretty awesome,” Kade agrees, his eyes briefly meeting mine over Colton’s head.

“Kade, do you think—” Colton’s voice suddenly drops. “Do you think I’d be ready to maybe try out, too? I mean, I know I’m not as good as Aaron yet, but maybe if we practice extra hard?”

The hope in his voice is so raw that it makes my throat tight.

Kade crouches down to Colton’s eye level. “You’ve got natural talent, buddy. I’ve seen it from day one. You’ve got good instincts, and you work hard. I can definitely get you ready for hockey tryouts, assuming Ella’s okay with it. ”

Colton’s entire face lights up, as if someone just flipped on a switch inside him. He looks back at me, seeking confirmation, approval, permission—all of it wrapped up in one hopeful glance.

“Can I?” he asks.

And that’s when I realize—this isn’t just about hockey for him. It’s about belonging and connection . It’s about finding his place.

“I think we can give it a shot,” I say, swallowing the internal panic so as not to dim the light in his eyes.

“But it’ll take some serious work,” Kade adds, standing up. “Tryouts are what, six weeks away?”

Colton nods.

“Then we better get to work.” Kade ruffles Colton’s hair. “Put your skates on. We’ll start with some new drills today.”

As Colton darts off to the bench to lace up, Kade turns to me, his expression shifting to something more serious.

“I hope that was okay,” he says quietly.

I nod, appreciating his consideration. “He really wants this.”

But I honestly have no idea what I just agreed to, and that causes a wave of dread to wash over me.

Kade studies my face, and I have the distinct feeling he’s reading between the lines.

But before he can say anything else, Colton calls out, “I’m ready, let’s go! ”

With a nod, Kade heads toward the ice, where Colton is waiting by the gate, already laced up and bouncing on the rubber mats. I make my way to the bleachers, settling into what’s become my usual spot, close enough to watch but far enough to give them space.

Kade leads Colton through a series of warm-up drills, his voice carrying across the

rink.

There's something mesmerizing about watching him teach—the way he demonstrates each move, the patience with which he corrects Colton's form, the genuine enthusiasm he shows for every improvement, no matter how small.

“That's it!” he calls out as Colton successfully navigates around a series of cones. “Now try it again, but keep your head up this time. You want to be able to see the play developing around you.”

Colton responds in earnest, doing exactly as instructed.

“Nice job!” Kade gives him a thumbs-up. “You're getting it. Now let's work on those crossovers. They're crucial for tryouts.”

For the next twenty minutes, I watch as Kade breaks down the complex footwork of a hockey crossover, showing Colton how to push with one foot while crossing the other over, generating power while turning.

It's clear from Kade's patient repetition and Colton's determined attempts that this is challenging, but neither of them shows any sign of giving up .

When Colton finally executes a clean crossover, Kade's face lights up with genuine pride. He gives Colton an encouraging pat on the shoulder, and my nephew beams as if he's just won Olympic gold.

“Did you see that, Ella?” he calls out to me, executing another wobbly but successful crossover.

“I did!” I call back, giving him a thumbs-up. “Looking good out there!”

His smile grows even wider, and he turns back to Kade for his next instruction, eager to soak up every bit of knowledge.

As they continue with the lesson, I shift to a quieter corner of the bleachers and pull out my phone. I need to know exactly what we're looking at financially if Colton makes this team. I open my browser and search for information about the spring travel team.

The web page showcases smiling kids in matching jerseys lifting trophies and celebrating goals. But as I click through to the registration and fee pages, my stomach sinks lower and lower.

League fees: \$1,200 per season.

Tournament fees: \$300-\$500 per tournament, 4-6 tournaments per season.

Travel expenses: Varies, but plan for hotel stays, meals, gas for away games.

Equipment requirements: Full gear in good condition, often including team-specific items .

The numbers blur together as I scroll, each one feeling like another door closing. The total cost would be well over \$5,000 for the season. My fingers tremble slightly as I open my banking app, though I already know what I'll find.

After rent, utilities, groceries, basic living expenses, and the small amount I try to put away each month for emergencies, there's hardly anything left.

A notification pops up on my screen, reminding me that my car insurance payment is due next week. Another \$175 that I'll have to carefully budget around.

I quickly close my banking app with a heavy sigh, the harsh truth of our situation settling over me like a dark cloud.

Katie and Brett's passing not only left an emotional void in our lives, but also a significant financial burden.

With his parents having more debt than assets and no life insurance, Colton didn't receive much inheritance.

I've been meticulously budgeting my meager teacher salary with what little Social Security survivor benefits we receive to cover our basic needs. And while my new teaching job came with a raise, it's certainly not enough to cover an immediate \$5,000 expense.

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath to steady myself.

When I open them again, I look up to see Colton attempting a spin on the ice, laughing as he wobbles and nearly falls. Kade catches him by the arm, steadying him, and they're both grinning like it's the most fun they've had all day .

The joy on Colton's face is so pure, so unrestrained. He doesn't know much about rent payments or insurance premiums or the cost of travel teams. He just knows that he loves hockey, that he's good at it, and that he wants to be out there on the ice with a team around him.

I take another deep breath and tuck my phone away.

Maybe I can pick up some tutoring gigs or some side hustle.

Because one thing's for certain—I'm not going to be the one to dim that light in Colton's eyes. Not if there's anything I can do to keep it shining.

As the lesson wraps up, Colton skates over to the boards where I'm now standing, his cheeks flushed with exertion and excitement.

"Did you see me?" he asks, breathless. "Did you see how I did those crossovers at the end? Kade says they were really good!"

I smile, reaching out to brush a sweaty strand of hair from his forehead. "You were amazing out there. I'm so proud of how hard you're working."

"Thanks. Kade says if I keep practicing like this, I'll definitely be ready for tryouts," he says, his eyes shining.

"Then that's what we'll do," I assure him, admiring his hope and determination. "We'll make sure you're ready."

And I'll try to figure out a way to pay for it...

Chapter Thirteen

Kade

“And any time you guys want to come to a Glaciers game, just let me know. I can get you great seats, free of charge.” I grin as Colton tears into a slice of cheese pizza, his appetite reminding me of my own as a kid—and now as well.

I could eat a whole pizza and never think twice about it.

That’s just one of the pros of burning so many calories every day.

However, as my eyes cast to Ella, who’s staring down at her one slice of pepperoni pizza, something feels off.

“Are you not hungry?” I try to play it cool as I ask. This was supposed to be a celebration—Colton nailed some complex footwork today, and I suggested pizza as a reward. I expected Ella to be excited, but instead, she’s been oddly quiet since we left the rink .

She shakes her head. “I had a big lunch at school today.”

I purse my lips, not buying one word of what she’s saying. I know Ella. Well, I used to know her. And back then, it was easy to tell when something was off, because she’d do that exact same zoning-out spell.

“I can’t wait to tell Aaron I’m trying out for spring hockey with him,” Colton says

around a mouthful of pizza. “I know that I might not make it since this is my first year, but—”

“You’re good enough to make it,” I say with confidence. I don’t say it just to hype him up, either. I mean it. Colton has natural talent, and has surpassed most kids who have been doing the sport for years.

“Really?” Colton sets the remnants of his pizza down, which is just a thin piece of crust. “You think I can make it?”

“I do.” I glance at Ella as she shrinks into herself even more so. This surprises me. I thought she’d be excited.

“Yes!” Colton grabs his napkin and wipes off his greasy hands. “I’m gonna be one of the cool hockey kids at school!”

“Yeah, for sure,” I say, reaching into my pocket and grabbing a couple of twenties. “And why don’t you go take this, get some change, and hit the arcade? That way, Ella and I can talk about it all for a few minutes.”

Colton’s eyes grow wide, but he eagerly accepts the bills. “Thank you so much! You’re the best!”

Ella winces.

What’s wrong with you, El ?

I wait for a few moments, letting Colton get well out of earshot, all the while watching Ella pick at the meat on her pizza. She just peels a pepperoni off and then places it right back where it was. Over and over again.

“So...” I begin as soon as we’re in the clear.

“So...” she echoes, never looking up from her plate.

“Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you, or should I just pretend I don’t notice that you’re upset?”

She exhales slowly, her fingers now fiddling with the paper napkin in her lap. “I’m not upset.”

I raise a brow. “Ella, I’ve known you since we were fourteen. I can tell when something’s wrong.”

“It’s nothing,” she insists, but the way she avoids my eyes tells me it’s definitely something. “Just ... do you really think it’s possible Colton will make the travel team?”

“I do,” I say without hesitation. “Why?”

She bites her lower lip, a battle clearly raging behind her eyes.

And that’s when it clicks.

The travel team. The costs. Money.

I’m not oblivious to the reality of Ella’s situation. Single guardian, teacher’s salary, raising a child who isn’t biologically hers. I know she must be stretched thin, and youth hockey isn’t exactly budget-friendly. Between equipment, league fees, travel expenses ... it adds up fast.

“It’s ... expensive,” she admits before I can say anything, her voice barely audible

over the restaurant noise.

“Really expensive. I looked it up after practice today,” she goes on, her eyes darting to the arcade to make sure Colton is still occupied.

“The fees alone are over a thousand dollars, and that’s before equipment, travel costs, tournament fees...

” She trails off, shaking her head. “It’s just not in our budget right now. ”

The defeated slump of her shoulders causes a protective surge to shoot through my chest.

“I can help,” I offer immediately, keeping my voice casual even as my heart races. “It would be no problem for me to cover—”

“No.” The word is firm, definitive. Ella sits up taller, pride straightening her spine. “Absolutely not.”

“Ella—”

“You’re already giving him free skating lessons, Kade. That’s more than enough.” Her voice softens slightly. “I appreciate the offer, I really do. But I can’t accept that kind of charity.”

I wince at the word. “It’s not charity.”

She shakes her head again, more firmly this time. “I’m his guardian. It’s my responsibility to figure this out, not yours.”

“I just want to help,” I say, unable to let this go.

“I know.” Her expression softens as she looks at me. “And you are helping—more than you know. The skating lessons are huge for him. Not just the skills, but having you in his life. As a role model.” She swallows hard. “That’s worth more than any team membership.”

Her words warm something deep inside me, but they don’t erase my concern. How can I make her understand that I want to pay for it? I would’ve paid for it regardless of her financial situation.

“I’ll figure something out,” she continues, determination replacing the defeat in her voice. “Maybe I can pick up some tutoring gigs.”

I nod, admiring her resilience even as I wish she’d let me make this one thing easier for her. “You’re one of the strongest people I know, Ella Smart.”

She gives me a small, genuine smile. “I don’t know about all that. I’m just doing what needs to be done.”

“That’s exactly what makes you strong.”

A comfortable silence falls between us, filled with the clinking of glasses and the distant sounds of arcade games. I watch as she finally takes a real bite of her pizza, some of the tension leaving her shoulders.

“By the way,” I say, trying to lighten the mood, “Colton’s crossovers today were seriously impressive. He’s got this natural edge control that you can’t teach. He gets that from his dad.”

Ella’s expression warms at the mention of her brother-in-law. “Brett would be so proud of him.”

“He would,” I agree. “But he’d be even prouder of you.”

Her eyes meet mine, something vulnerable flickering in their hazel depths. For a moment, I think she might say more, might let me in just a little more. But then Colton comes bounding back to the table, cheeks flushed with excitement.

“I got the high score in the racing game!” he announces, sliding back into the booth next to Ella. “But I need more quarters to beat the bonus level.”

Ella laughs, the sound lighter than anything I’ve heard from her tonight. “Finish your pizza first, champion.”

I watch as she smooths Colton’s hair back from his forehead, the gesture so naturally maternal it makes my chest ache. The worry hasn’t left her eyes completely, but she’s pushed it aside for now, focused entirely on her nephew’s joy.

And every moment I’m around her, I’m reminded of just how much I miss her being mine.

“Oh no!” Colton’s exclamation cuts through the momentary calm at our table.

His eyes go wide with sudden panic, pizza forgotten as he claps a hand to his forehead.

“I totally forgot! I have science homework due tomorrow. We have to label all the phases of the moon and explain why they look different and ... it’s worth, like, a ton of points!

” The urgency in his voice reminds me of Ella when she was younger, always stressing over what assignment was due.

There's something about it that hits me right in the chest.

Or maybe it's just the motherly look that fills Ella's eyes.

"You didn't tell me you had homework." Ella's voice is soft, understanding, and not remotely upset at his admission. "Did you bring it with you, or did you leave it behind?"

"I brought it. It's in my backpack," Colton says with certainty, relief flooding his face. "Can we just do it here?" He then turns to me. "Can you help me with my homework?"

"Uh..." My voice trails off as I glance at Ella, who suddenly has a smirk on her face. "I can ... I can try . Homework isn't really my thing."

Ella giggles. "I always had to help Kade with his homework."

"It's true." I nod. "Ella single-handedly helped me graduate high school. And I barely got through college without my tutor's help. It was rough. I'm more of a hockey player than a bookworm."

Colton's brow furrows. "I like doing both. I like school."

"You get that from her." I shoot Ella a wink, and I swear, I actually see a blush creep up her pretty neck. "But yeah, you want me to run out and grab your backpack from the car?"

"Um, that's okay," Ella says, pushing back from the table. "I'll get it if you'll just stay here with Colton."

"Yeah, of course." I barely get the words out before she's out the front door.

Colton looks up at me with big, earnest eyes, a wide smile brightening his face. “Ella’s the best,” he says, his voice filled with such admiration and love that I can’t help but feel a pang in my chest, because it’s true. “I don’t know what I’d do without her...”

“She really is the best,” I agree, and I mean it.

I can’t shake the mix of admiration and regret that hits me when I think about how much she’s had to take on alone.

How much I wish things could be different for her, for us.

It only deepens my resolve to be here, to be part of their lives, for as long as she’ll let me.

“I want to be like her when I grow up,” he says. “And like you, too. I can be both, right? A hockey player and really good at school?”

“You can be anything you want to be, Colton.”

As Ella returns with the backpack, she gives me a grateful smile before settling back into the booth.

Colton scoots around the bench until he’s between Ella and me, his homework spread out in front of him.

It strikes me how naturally we’ve positioned ourselves—Ella on one side, me on the other, both of us angled toward Colton in the middle.

Like two pillars supporting the same structure.

Like ... a family.

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The thought hits me with unexpected force, and I have to take a sip of water to cover the sudden tightness in my throat.

“Okay, so we need to label these diagrams.” Ella points to the blank circles on the page. “Let’s start with the ones you know for sure.”

Colton chews his lower lip, a habit I’ve noticed he shares with Ella. “Well, that one’s a full moon,” he says, pointing confidently to one of the circles. “And that’s a new moon because you can’t see it at all. ”

“Great start,” I encourage, watching as he carefully writes the labels. His handwriting is better than mine was at his age—neater, more controlled. “Now what about these others?”

“Um...” He hesitates, pencil hovering over the page.

“Think about what they look like in the sky,” I suggest. “You know how sometimes the moon looks like a half circle? Or just a sliver?”

His face scrunches in concentration. “Yeah, like when it looks like a banana?”

“Exactly.” Ella nods. “That’s called a crescent moon.”

I reach across to point at another diagram, my arm brushing against Ella’s in the process. A jolt of awareness runs through me at the contact, and from the way she quickly shifts, she felt it too.

“Sorry,” I murmur, though I’m not sorry at all.

“It’s fine,” she says quietly, not quite meeting my eyes.

Colton, oblivious to the tension suddenly crackling between us, is busy writing “crescent” beside another diagram. “So what’s this one called?”

“That’s the first quarter or third quarter, depending on which half is lit up,” I explain, recovering my focus.

“Wow, look at you go, Kade.” Ella smirks. “I’m impressed.”

“Believe it or not, I took astronomy as part of my general education in college. It’s one of the few classes I actually looked forward to.” I laugh and then continue my explanation to Colton. “See, the moon orbits around the earth, and as it moves, different portions get illuminated by the sun.”

“Think of it like this,” Ella jumps in, grabbing a clean napkin and drawing a circle.

“If this is the earth, and the sun’s light is coming from this direction...

” She adds another circle and some arrows.

“The moon travels around the earth, and depending on its orbit, we see different amounts of the sunlit side.”

I watch her hands as she sketches, elegant fingers moving confidently across the napkin, creating a surprisingly accurate diagram with just a few strokes. Her nails are short and practical—no polish, a small paper cut on her index finger. Teacher’s hands. Mother’s hands.

Beautiful hands.

“I think I get it,” Colton says, studying her drawing. “So these ones where it’s more than half full but not completely full are ... gibbous moons?”

“Right!” Ella and I say in unison, then exchange surprised smiles.

“Waxing gibbous is when it’s getting fuller, and waning gibbous is when it’s starting to shrink again after being full,” she explains.

“Like wax on, wax off,” I say, making a circular motion with my hand.

Colton looks at me blankly.

“It’s from a movie,” I explain. “Before your time. ”

“Way before,” Ella mutters in a way that makes me feel ancient at twenty-seven before giving me a smirk.

Colton shrugs and returns to his worksheet, carefully labeling each phase.

As he works, I find myself studying the curve of Ella’s neck as she leans over to guide him, the way her hair falls forward when she tilts her head.

She tucks it behind her ear absentmindedly, a gesture I’ve always found endearing.

As Colton works on the final parts of his assignment, Ella reaches across him to point out a minor correction.

Her hand brushes against mine where it rests on the table, and this time, neither of us pulls away immediately.

For one breathless moment, her pinky finger rests against my knuckles, a touch so light it could be accidental but feels too deliberate, too charged to be anything but intentional.

When she finally withdraws her hand, I have to resist the urge to reach for it again.

“Almost done,” Colton announces, still oblivious to the silent current running between the adults flanking him. “Just need to label these last two phases.”

“You’re doing great,” Ella encourages, her voice slightly deeper than before. She clears her throat, tucking that persistent strand of hair behind her ear again.

I wonder if she knows how much that simple gesture affects me, how it takes me straight back to high school—to study sessions in her mom’s kitchen, to bleacher seats at hockey games, to the back of my beat-up old truck under star-filled skies .

“Finished!” Colton declares triumphantly, setting his pencil down. “Can you check it, Ella?”

She scans the completed worksheet, nodding with approval. “Perfect. Your teacher will be impressed.”

“We make a pretty good team,” I say, the words slipping out before I can censor them.

Ella’s eyes meet mine, a flash of something vulnerable crossing her face before she masks it with a smile. “We do,” she admits softly.

Colton beams up at both of us. “That was way easier with both of you helping. Usually, it’s just me and Ella at the kitchen table, and sometimes she has to look stuff up on her phone.”

“Well, even teachers don’t know everything,” Ella says, ruffling his hair affectionately.

As the academic crisis subsides, the world around us seems to filter back in—the restaurant noise, the late hour indicated on the wall clock, the reality of our complicated situation.

But for those twenty minutes, it felt like we were so much more than a professional hockey player, a struggling single guardian, and a kid who’s lost too much.

We were three people who fit together in a way that feels as natural as breathing.

Chapter Fourteen

Ella

“Hey, happy Friday!” Valerie pokes her head into my classroom as the students flood out into the hallway. “You wanna grab lunch today? Since we both have the next period off, I was thinking we could discuss the robotics team applications...”

“Oh, sure, yeah,” I reply, struggling to hide my hesitancy about spending the extra money right now.

“Lunch is totally on me,” she adds with a warm smile. “And I can drive!”

“Oh, you don’t have to—

“Don’t be silly.” She waves me off. “You’re always so good about bringing your lunches from home.

But as you know, I’m not nearly as disciplined.

And since I’m dragging you out with me, the least I can do is pay.

” She giggles as her red curls bounce against her shoulders, which are covered in an olive-green, floral-patterned maxi dress.

The woman has some way of pulling off the most eccentric of clothing, and she’s absolutely adorable.

I grab my purse and follow Valerie out of the room, relieved by the now-empty hallways.

I love my students, but I also love the silence that comes with lunch break.

My heels click on the linoleum as we make our way to the parking lot.

Valerie presses the key fob for her white Ford Explorer, and I climb into the passenger seat.

“So...” Valerie eyes me as she starts the car. “You’re kind of quiet today. Is everything okay?”

I force a smile. “Yeah, it’s just one of those days.”

“It’s Friday.” She narrows her eyes at me. “But okay. I can take that if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s...” I start, then stop, uncertain how much I want to share. Valerie and I have become genuine friends over the past month, the kind where she notices when something’s off. But financial worries feel so personal, so ... embarrassing, somehow. Like I should have this figured out by now.

“It’s...?” Valerie prompts. “Not trying to pry or anything, but, scientifically speaking, talking about your problems actually reduces cortisol levels in the brain. So if you want to vent to me, it’s basically free therapy, just saying.”

I can’t help but laugh at the random scientific fact.

“It’s Colton,” I finally admit, grateful for her persistence. “He wants to try out for the spring travel team. ”

“Wait, really?! That’s great! He and Aaron can do it together!” Valerie exclaims, then catches my expression. “Or ... not great?”

“The hockey part is great. He’s talented—Kade thinks he can make the team. It’s just...” I hesitate, feeling my chest tighten. “I finally looked up the costs and between the league fees, tournaments, travel, equipment—it’s a lot. I feel like I’m in way over my head.”

Valerie’s lips turn downward. “Oh, girl, I feel you. It’s so expensive.

It’s just insane how much it costs for kids to be involved in things these days.

It’s like we have to gouge ourselves to even give our children a chance.

” She shakes her head, frustration written across her face.

“If it weren’t for my ex-husband chipping in, I don’t think I could afford it. ” She sighs.

“Yeah, it honestly feels impossible. I mean, I’m stretched thin as it is. Between rent, utilities, insurance, saving for emergencies, there’s nothing left. And I can’t just...” I trail off, blinking rapidly as unwanted tears emerge.

“Hey,” Valerie says softly. “It’s okay to be overwhelmed by this.”

I swallow hard and stare down at my hands. “It’s my job to give Colton opportunities, to help him find joy after everything he’s lost. The last thing I want to do is tell him he can’t pursue something he loves because I can’t afford it.”

The words hang heavy in the car, the full weight of my inadequacy pressing down on my chest. I’ve spent years telling myself I’m enough for Colton, that I can give him

the life he deserves. But moments like this expose the lie.

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” Valerie says, her voice gentle but firm. “Kids don’t need every opportunity—they need love, stability, and someone who believes in them. Which, by the way, you provide in abundance.”

I shake my head, not quite ready to accept her comfort.

“You should see him on the ice. He lights up in a way I haven’t seen since ...

since before.” Before the accident. Before his entire world shattered.

“His dad was a hockey player in college. He used to talk about teaching Colton to skate, about coaching his team someday. And now Colton has this natural talent, this love for the game, and it’s like a piece of Brett living on through him. ” My voice cracks on the last words.

Valerie reaches over and squeezes my hand, her usual energetic demeanor softened by empathy. “That’s beautiful. And important.”

I nod, wiping at a stray tear that’s escaped despite my best efforts. “So, how do I tell him no? How do I explain that the one thing connecting him to his dad, the thing he’s genuinely good at and passionate about, is out of reach because I can’t figure out how to afford it?”

“Maybe you don’t have to tell him no,” Valerie says, a familiar spark of excitement returning to her eyes.

I shoot her a skeptical look. “I’ve gone through my budget a dozen different ways. Unless I start selling organs on the black market—which, tempting as it might be, I hear is frowned upon—I don’t see how—”

“The robotics team,” Valerie interrupts, straightening in her seat. “Coach it.”

I blink. “What?”

“The robotics team,” she repeats, her words picking up speed as her enthusiasm grows. “We still need a coach for this year. It comes with a stipend—three percent of your base salary.”

My mind is already calculating. It’s not enough to cover everything—maybe about half the cost, but it’s a significant start. And it’s not like I have many other options. I could try picking up private tutoring, but that’s inconsistent income at best. The robotics stipend would be guaranteed.

“The practices would be after school twice a week,” Valerie continues. “Plus, maybe some weekend competitions later in the spring.”

“Oh, I don’t know. That would mean even less time at home with Colton. More responsibilities on top of everything else.”

“You could bring Colton with you to practices when he doesn’t have hockey.

Set him up with homework in the corner. And,” she continues, not letting me get a word in, “I have no problem taking Colton and Aaron to hockey practice, assuming they both make the team, of course. I could also take Colton to his lessons. The rink is on my way home.”

Her enthusiasm is infectious, but I still hesitate.

More work. Less free time. A steeper learning curve than I’d planned for this year.

But also, the joy of watching Colton pursue something that connects him to his father.

The relief of not having to crush his dreams before they've even had a chance to take flight.

"Okay," I say, the word coming out more decisively than I expected. "I'll do it."

Valerie lets out a whoop so loud that I jump in surprise. "Yes! Operation Hockey Funding is a go!" She claps her hands together. "This is going to be great, Ella. You'll see. The kids will love you. And we'll have Colton suited up and ready to go before you know it."

I shake my head, but I'm smiling. "Your confidence is either delusional or inspiring. I haven't decided which."

"The line between delusion and inspiration is remarkably thin," she says with a wink. "Aaron's gonna be so excited. Those boys are attached at the hip."

I grin. "They've pretty much become best friends."

"It's a good thing," Valerie says as she pulls into the parking lot of a small diner. "Aaron hasn't had many close friends. I think Colton is a great influence. And honestly, I'm happy to have you in my life, too."

"Aww. Thanks. We're happy to have you both in ours," I tell her as she puts the car in park. I unbuckle my seatbelt and climb out, following her into the diner.

I slide into the booth across from Valerie and pick up a menu. This diner is a quaint little place that feels like stepping back in time—maybe the 1940s? Before the internet existed .

"The burger is the best one in the city," Valerie comments as she clasps her hands together on the table. "I know that sounds so cliché, but I mean it. It really is the best

in town. You have to try it ... if burgers are your thing.”

“Well, they’re definitely not not my thing.” I giggle and set the menu down.

As soon as the waitress appears, we both order a burger with fries. I add cheese to mine. Valerie leaves her plain.

“You know, I was thinking...” Valerie begins, after the waitress leaves. “We should get together with the boys outside of school sometime. It would be good for all of us.”

I nod eagerly, feeling a pang of desperation for socialization. “I think that would be amazing. Let’s do that! Actually—” I pause, thinking of the home game coming up for the Glaciers. “Maybe we could all go to a hockey game? Both our boys would enjoy it, and Kade can get us tickets.”

Valerie lights up. “Oh, Aaron would love that. He’s been dying to go to a game this year.”

“Okay, perfect,” I say, fishing my phone out of my pocket. “Let me text Kade and see if he can get us tickets for Friday.”

Valerie nods, and I can see the curiosity written all over her face. I don’t blame her for having it when it comes to Kade. I would, too, if I were in her shoes. But she has no idea of the warning label I’ve placed on him. Still, I pull up our boring text message thread and type out a message.

Me: Do you think you could get four tickets to Friday’s game? It would be for Colton, me, and then his friend and mom.

I chew on my lower lip as the read receipt pops up on the screen and three dots

quickly follow.

Kade: I think I can handle that. Kids want jerseys, too? Do you want a jersey?

My heart flutters at the mention of me wearing his jersey.

I haven't worn it since I was in high school, and the thought of slipping one on again feels ...

intimate . However, I quickly shake it off.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of women now wear his jersey.

It can be purchased from their merch store. It's not the same. It's not special...

And there's no reason for me to make it into something more.

Me: I'm sure the kids would love jerseys, but they don't have to.

I look up at Valerie, who's intently focused on me now with a cocked brow. "What?"
I feel my cheeks heating up.

"So ... You and Kade...?"

I let out a sigh. "It's not what it seems. We're ... friends at best. Or maybe more like exes who still get along. "

She nods, running her finger against the grain of the table. "Well, that sounds like a very loaded statement—and relationship. When did you two date?"

"Most of high school," I admit, trying to shrug it off.

“Aww. Was he your first love?”

I nod, ignoring the pit in my stomach at the mention.

“There’s something really special about that first love. I’ve always heard that they’re irreplaceable in some ways. I wouldn’t know, because I didn’t really have one. I just got kind of tossed around by boyfriends until I landed my husband—well, ex-husband.”

“I suppose so.” As much as I want to pretend like there’s nothing special about a first love, everything is special about them. Well, about Kade. He was my first everything , and for some reason, it feels monumental.

“It’s cool that the two of you get along, though. It’s not that often exes can be amicable in a way that benefits both of them.”

“I don’t think he’s benefitting from anything,” I snort. “He insisted on giving Colton lessons for free. So, it’s not like he’s getting anything out of it...”

Valerie’s smile fades. “Of course, he’s getting something out of it.”

“And what’s that?”

“You, Ella. He’s getting you.”

Chapter Fifteen

Kade

I skate out onto the ice, my eyes searching for the two people that I care about the most at the game tonight.

“Let’s focus, boys,” Coach Wilson calls out. “This is a big one.”

I join the whooping and hollering, but my eyes divert to the stands once more.

Finally, I see Colton and a redheaded kid, along with Ella and a redheaded woman who seems to match the other kid.

Both of the boys are wearing my jersey. I can’t hold back my smile or wave, and Colton jumps to his feet, waving both arms dramatically.

I chuckle beneath my helmet, shaking my head as Ella gives me one of her infamous little waves.

She has no idea how spectacular she looks—even if it’s not in my jersey .

My stomach knots up at that thought, my mind diving into the depths of the past. She wore my name well before I was ever anything worth writing home about. She supported me before I made money or achieved the status of one of the best goalies in the country.

She was there before I mattered.

And I left her cold.

Now, I have fame and fortune ... but nobody to even share it with.

I never should've let her go.

I clear my throat and do my best to focus on the game. If I let my mind wander, I'll end up in a mess—and then I won't play well. The last thing I want is a bad game for Colton in front of his friend. So, I put my physical and mental blinders on and play the absolute best I can.

"Congrats on the win," Ella says as I step out of the locker room, happy to see that she accepted my offer to meet Colton's friend.

"You were so sick out there!" Colton declares, giving me a fist bump and then gesturing toward his friend. "This is my best friend, Aaron. He's super big into hockey like me, but his favorite player is Cameron Hastens because he's super-fast."

"Yeah, but you're cool, too," Aaron says, his face turning red.

I give him a fist bump. "Hey man, I'll take what I can get. Is this your mom?" I point to the redheaded lady standing with Ella.

"Yep."

"This is Valerie," Ella chimes. "I'm so sorry. I should've introduced her. That's on me." She gives me a bashful smile and gestures to Valerie, who sticks out an eager hand.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Kade.” The woman beams. She’s eccentric and a little nerdy, and I can tell right away that she’s probably one of Ella’s teacher friends.

It’s fitting. Ella has always had loud friends.

It’s the opposite of what she is, and I have to admit, I’m a little jealous of anyone who gets to be this close to her.

I mentally shake myself. That’s not healthy. I’m better than that.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I say, shaking her hand. “Do you guys wanna meet the rest of the team?” I gesture to the rest of the guys, now slowly filing out of the locker room.

Colton and Aaron both nod, and I give a slight wave to Cam, who immediately knows what’s going on. He calls out for Colton, and the two boys rush over to the rest of my teammates, shaking hands and eagerly asking questions. It gives me a chance to talk with Ella and her friend.

“So, what did they think of the game?” I ask, trying not to be boastful .

“It was great,” Valerie answers, her eyes diverting to the group of men behind me. “You all played so well...”

I chuckle and then gesture to the team. “You can go meet the rest of the players if you’d like.”

“Okay,” she squeaks and slips past me, clearly having her eye on one of them.

“I think she has a crush on one of the rookies,” Ella says with a sigh. “There’s just something about you hockey players that gets to women like us, I guess.”

“Like you ?” I can’t help but play into it. I have to take the bait.

“I mean...” She immediately slows down, shaking her head. “I just mean that we’re a little nerdy and, you know, jocks always seem out of our league. I don’t know, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Right,” I say, letting my chuckle die.

“Can we get pizza?” Colton interrupts suddenly, his eyes bright with excitement. “I told Aaron that we get pizza all the time after skate lessons, and it would be so cool if we could get pizza together!”

I grin. “I’m in.”

“Will you come and play the racing game with me, Kade?” Colton asks, while Aaron shoves pizza into his mouth. “I bet I can beat you!”

“Sure.” I chuckle, pushing back from the table where Ella and Valerie are conversing about the robotics team. I give them both a smile that I’m pretty sure neither of them see and then follow Colton over to the car racing game.

I slide into one of the seats while Colton climbs into the other.

I wait for him to adjust his chair, and I navigate through the menu and choose my car and avatar.

Colton navigates his as well, and I note that he’s very particular about what he’s racing with.

I find that quality endearing about him.

Everything Colton does is intentional. “Okay, are you ready?” Colton wiggles his eyebrows at me, flashing me a wicked grin.

“I’m ready to whoop you,” I shoot back, keeping my competitive tone playful.

Colton smashes the go button, and the countdown begins.

As soon as the light turns green, I slam the gas pedal and shift, since I chose the manual mode.

I quickly realize that Colton has done the same—and he’s way better than I expected him to be.

Without even burning out, his car flies off down the course through some fake city.

My jaw drops. He’s actually going to be a challenge to beat.

And here I was, thinking that I’d have to let him win .

His giggles erupt as he gains multiple car lengths on me, and I’m left groaning and gasping as I race to catch up to him. “I’m gonna beat you!”

“No kidding,” I mutter, my brows now furrowed in determination. “I had no idea what I was getting into, obviously.” I laugh as I ram into the sidewall, slowing my pace and dropping back a few places in the ranks.

Colton bursts into laughter, and I can’t help but join him. It doesn’t matter that I’m terrible at video games. It doesn’t matter that Aaron, Valerie, and now Ella are watching us as we race down the straightaway.

“Go, Colton!” Aaron exclaims, practically bouncing beside him. “It’s gonna be so

cool to say you beat an NHL player!”

“Hey now,” I say playfully, shooting him a funny look.

Aaron bursts into a cackle. “You gotta quit smashing the gas. You’ll just keep running into things.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’d choose to ride with you,” Valerie quips. “I think I’d rather ride with Colton.”

“Same,” Ella agrees, resting her hand on the back of my seat.

There’s something about her being so close that causes my heart to jump in my chest. In fact, I become completely distracted once I catch a whiff of her perfume.

It hits my nostrils in a way that takes me all the way back to the past—back to when she and I used to do everything together.

I need to tell her that it hasn’t changed for me .

The thought bothers me. It truly does. I don’t know if it would ruin everything that I have going with her and Colton now. I don’t want to lose my relationship with either of them. But...

But especially Colton.

I know he needs me. I know that I needed my dad more than ever when I was Colton’s age. That need only grows as a boy gets older. He doesn’t really have anyone to be there in his life like that—and maybe that’s me overstepping, but I can’t help it. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve wanted to be a dad.

“Go, go, go!” Ella’s voice erupts from behind me, and I glance over at Colton’s screen long enough to see him flying across the finish line and taking first place. I’m still five places back, and I forget about my own loss as pride swells in my chest for his win.

“Nice job!” I call out, letting my car wreck...

And burst into flames.

Colton’s eyes grow wide as he points to my screen. “Dude, you’re wrecked.”

I shrug. “I was never good at video games. Besides, I was totally going easy on you.” I say it in a teasing tone, and Colton’s face flickers with competitive determination.

“Then let’s go again!”

I shake my head as I slide out of the booth. “No, I think you should play Ella. She was always so good at video games. I bet she could beat you.”

Colton makes a funny face. “No way. She never even plays video games.”

“That’s because she’s busy being a parent and teacher now,” I say, noting the blush creeping across her cheeks. “You gotta play her. I bet she’ll win.”

“I will not,” Ella gasps, looking mortified as everyone stares at her in curiosity.

“Come on,” I urge, gently grabbing her shoulders and guiding her to the seat. “You gotta show Colton where he gets his skills from.”

“No,” she protests, leaning into my hands. I feel the warmth under her thin sweater, and my mouth grows dry at the simple touch. There’s something about it that makes

me feel so many things.

I clear my throat. “Nope, you’re going to play.”

She lets out a cute little groan in frustration and then huffs as she plops down in the seat. She adjusts her seat before eyeing Colton.

“I’m not going easy on you,” she says, her voice gentle yet stern. “So, you can’t get upset when you lose.”

Colton grins. “Bring it on.”

She sighs, clicking through the menu with the same intention that Colton had before her. “Okay... Well, here we go...”

Nerves bubble up in my chest as I watch the countdown flash across the screen. I have no idea why I’m so hung up on this race—like it’s going to matter at all. It doesn’t matter if Ella beats Colton. Honestly, I’m cheering for them both.

But ... I just want to see Ella win in one way or another. She deserves it more than anyone else I’ve ever met. I want Ella to win in every single way possible.

They take off down the track, and Ella shifts like she’s been racing cars in real life.

Aaron gasps. “Holy moly! She’s really good!”

Valerie bursts into a giggle as Ella’s purple car soars to the front, flying right past Colton’s black-and-gold race car. Everyone is left in awe, except for me. I knew she had it in her.

And I just smile right along with Ella, who is grinning ear to ear with a determined

look in her pretty hazel eyes.

“Ella, you’re too fast!” Colton cries out as Ella just keeps shifting gears and braking through the curves like a pro. “I don’t think anyone can beat you!”

“No one ever has,” Ella says, her voice flat with concentration. “It’s all about strategy.”

“And being able to drive like a pro,” I point out, shooting her a wink as she takes a moment to glance up at me. Her cheeks blush again, and I wonder if I have any kind of effect on her the way I used to. Honestly, it’s all I want now.

I want to be the reason Ella Smart smiles.

There’s nothing more I want in the entire world, and as she crosses the finish line before anyone else, I cheer louder than I should. Plenty of people shoot me an annoyed look, but I don’t even care.

“Way to go, Ella!” Colton throws his hands up in surprise. “I can’t believe you’re so good at this! Will you play with me more?”

Ella beams, and for a moment, I see the old Ella—the one I fell head over heels for all those years ago. I don’t even know how to react to it, but I have a sudden, overwhelming feeling to grab her face and kiss her.

To somehow make her mine ... again.

Chapter Sixteen

Ella

I wake up before my alarm, a habit I've developed after years of early mornings. The only sound is the gentle hum of the heater kicking on against the February chill. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and rub my sleep-crusted eyes.

Another day, another dollar.

I stretch my arms above my head, pushing away the lingering exhaustion that seems to have taken permanent residence in my bones these days.

In the kitchen, I move on autopilot. I spread peanut butter over a slice of wheat bread, careful to keep it away from the crust—just how Colton likes it—and add a thin layer of strawberry jam to another slice.

The little note I write on his napkin has become our tradition: “You’ve got this! Love you tons. -E.”

I fold it carefully, tucking it beside the sandwich in his lunchbox.

I’m slicing the apple into perfect wedges when I hear the telltale creaking of Colton’s bedroom door. His footsteps shuffle down the hallway.

“Morning, bud,” I say as he appears in the doorway, rubbing his eyes with the sleeve of his pajamas. “Sleep okay?”

He nods, stifling a yawn. “I had a dream that I scored the winning goal at a hockey tournament.”

“That sounds like a pretty amazing dream.” I place the apple slices in a small container, adding a dollop of peanut butter in the center. “Maybe it’s a sign of things to come.”

His face brightens at that, and he slides onto one of the kitchen stools, watching as I finish packing his lunch. “I’ve been practicing my crossovers every day, just like Kade showed me.”

My heart gives a little stutter at the mention of Kade. Lately, things between us have been ... different . Not a bad different, just complicated.

Like we’re both tiptoeing around something neither of us is ready to name.

“I do them in my socks on the kitchen floor when you’re not looking,” Colton adds, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I laugh, picturing him sliding around in his socks. “So is that why the floors have looked so shiny lately?” I wink.

“My socks are a dust magnet.” He laughs.

“I might have to start using them on the blinds.” I ruffle his already messy hair. “Now go get ready while I finish up here.”

By the time Colton returns, dressed in jeans and his favorite hockey-themed t-shirt, I’ve managed to transform from zombie to functional human being. I’ve even thrown on a decent outfit—dark jeans and a burgundy sweater.

He crunches through his cereal while I double-check his backpack, making sure he has everything for the day—completed homework, his signed permission slip for the upcoming field trip, his notebook and pencils.

“Don’t forget I’m teaching robotics class after school today,” I remind him as we head out to the car, the morning air sharp with cold. “Valerie’s going to take you to your skating lessons with Kade, and I’ll be there to pick you up afterward.”

“I know, I know,” he says, sliding into the back seat. “You told me three times last night.”

“Just making sure.” I start the car, letting it warm up for a moment before backing out of the driveway. “I’ll pick you up from the rink at six.”

“Can we get pizza again?” he asks hopefully.

I bite my lip, mentally calculating what’s left in the food budget for the week. “Not tonight, bud. I’ve got chicken thawing for dinner.”

He nods, accepting this without complaint, which only makes me feel worse.

What kind of parent denies their kid pizza?

The kind who’s stretching every dollar to make sure he can play the sport he loves, I remind myself.

Thirty minutes after the final bell rings, the science lab is alive with the energy of middle schoolers, their voices bouncing off the linoleum floors and cinder block walls.

The fluorescent lights buzz overhead, casting a sterile glow over the chaos of

circuitry, wires, and robot parts spread across the tables.

I put on my best teacher smile, despite the headache pulsing at my temples.

This extra stipend for coaching robotics will be worth every migraine if it means Colton can play hockey.

That thought alone keeps me going as I clap my hands for attention.

“Alright, Math Mechanics!” I call out, using the team name they voted on last week. “Let’s get focused. Regional competition is only eight weeks away, and we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

The students break into their assigned groups, voices overlapping as they debate technical specifications and design modifications. I move from table to table, offering guidance, asking questions to spark critical thinking, and occasionally jumping in to demonstrate a technique .

I glance at my watch—it’s 4:15. Colton should be at his skating lessons by now. I need to leave to pick him up from the rink in about an hour and a half. My neck tightens at the thought of all the logistics I’ve still got to manage today.

A crash from the table draws my attention, and I hurry over to find a disheartened eighth grader staring at robot parts scattered across the floor.

“The arm just fell off,” he explains, looking close to tears. “I don’t know what happened. I was adjusting the gears, and then...”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I say, crouching down to help gather the pieces. “This is exactly why we test and refine. Every failure is just data for our next attempt.”

I pick up the main component of the arm mechanism, examining the connection point. “Look here—see how the mounting bracket is slightly warped? That’s probably why it couldn’t support the weight when you adjusted the gear tension.”

His expression shifts from despair to curiosity. “I think I have an idea for how to fix it!”

“Awesome! You’ve got this.” I smile encouragingly.

I took on this coaching position for the stipend, but watching these kids light up when they solve a problem reminds me why I became a teacher in the first place. There’s something magical about witnessing that moment when confusion transforms into understanding.

An hour and fifteen minutes comes and goes in a blink .

“Okay, everyone,” I call out, clapping my hands to get their attention. “Let’s start cleaning up. I want each team to document today’s progress and challenges in your journals. This will help us pick up right where we left off next practice.”

The students begin organizing their materials, some more efficiently than others. I move around the room, helping to sort parts into the correct bins, making sure nothing important gets misplaced or accidentally thrown away.

“Miss Smart?” A small voice draws my attention to a girl clutching her journal tightly to her chest. “I don’t think I’m doing a good job on this team. Everyone else knows so much more about robotics than me.”

I recognize the look in her eyes—self-doubt, the fear of not being good enough. It’s a feeling I know all too well.

“Lindsay,” I say, guiding her to a quieter corner of the room, “do you know what the most important quality in a scientist or engineer is?”

She shakes her head, eyes wide behind her glasses.

“It’s not knowing everything already,” I tell her, smiling gently. “It’s being curious enough to figure things out. I’ve watched you these past few practices. You ask great questions. You notice details others miss. Those skills are incredibly valuable.”

She nods, a small smile forming. “Thanks, Miss Smart.”

I check my watch again—5:40. Time to go. I quickly address the whole group. “Great work today, everyone! You’re dismissed. See you next week.”

I pack up my things and make the short drive to the rink, arriving with two minutes to spare.

I lean against the railing, content to observe without announcing my presence just yet.

Kade hasn’t noticed me, his focus entirely on Colton as he demonstrates a hockey stop, spraying ice as he cuts his blades sideways.

His posture speaks of years of muscle memory—effortless grace that makes even the simplest movements look like art.

“Now you try,” I hear him instruct, his voice carrying across the ice. “Don’t be afraid to dig in. The ice can take it.”

After a few rocky attempts, Colton successfully cuts his skates sideways, actually managing to spray a small shower of ice, and comes to a much more definitive stop. His face breaks into a wide grin.

“That was awesome!” Kade exclaims, giving him a high-five. “See what happens when you trust your edges?”

Pride blooms in my chest as I watch. I can’t help but think of Brett and Katie—how proud they would be to see their son taking to the ice with such natural ability.

Brett would’ve loved teaching Colton these skills himself.

The thought arouses a familiar ache, but it’s tempered by gratitude that Colton has found his way to this sport anyway, that he’s found Kade to guide him.

Kade glances at his watch, then scans the rink.

His eyes land on me, and his serious coaching expression melts into a warm smile that shouldn’t affect me as much as it does.

He says something to Colton, who turns to look my way and waves enthusiastically.

I wave back, moving closer to the exit gate.

“Let’s cool down with one last lap,” Kade tells Colton, “and then we’ll call it a day.”

They circle the rink side by side. Kade is so naturally good with him, instinctively knowing when to push and when to encourage.

When they reach the gate, Colton’s face is flushed with equal parts exertion and joy. “Did you see me stop?” he asks breathlessly. “I did it just like Kade showed me!”

“I saw.” I smile and reach out to tousle his sweaty hair as he removes his helmet. “You looked like a real hockey player out there.”

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“That’s because he is a real hockey player,” Kade says, stepping off the ice behind him.

“And a darn good one at that.” He turns to Colton.

“You’ve got natural talent, and more importantly, you work hard.

That’s a winning combination.” Kade beams as he helps Colton to the bench, carrying his helmet and gloves.

He kneels to help unlace the skates, talking quietly with Colton about what they’ll work on next time.

There’s an ease to their interaction that simultaneously warms my heart and terrifies me.

Colton is getting attached—maybe too attached.

And if I’m being honest, so am I.

Kade approaches with Colton’s equipment bag slung over his shoulder. “He did great today,” he says, his voice low enough that Colton can’t overhear as he grabs a drink from the water fountain.

“That’s great! I wish I could’ve been here to see it, but duty calls.”

“Listen, I know you’ve got a lot on your plate with work and the robotics team,” he

says, his amber eyes earnest. “I’d be happy to pick Colton up for lessons whenever needed. It’s no trouble at all. My schedule’s flexible on practice days.”

The offer is kind, practical, and would genuinely make my life easier. So why does accepting his help feel like crossing some invisible line I’ve drawn in my head?

“That’s really generous,” I say, choosing my words carefully, “but we’re managing okay with Valerie’s help.”

“Okay. Well, the offer stands,” Kade says simply, no pressure in his tone. “Just know it’s there if you need it.”

I nod, genuinely appreciative despite my hesitation. “Thank you, Kade.”

We say our goodbyes, and I manage to herd Colton toward the exit. Outside, the last light of day is fading from the sky as we make our way to the car. Colton climbs into the back seat, immediately buckling his seatbelt without being reminded—a small victory in the daily parenting battle.

I stow his equipment in the trunk, wincing slightly at the damp smell that’s already developing despite my best efforts to air everything out between practices. Another item for the weekend to-do list: figure out how to de-stink hockey gear .

We pull out of the parking lot, a comfortable silence settling over us as we both decompress from the day. Through the rearview mirror, I watch the lights of the ice rink recede, a strange melancholy washing over me as I think about Kade still in there.

“Hey, Ella?” Colton’s voice breaks the silence.

“Hmm?” I respond, eyes on the road as I navigate through early evening traffic.

“I just wanted to say thank you.”

I glance back at him, surprised by the sudden expression of gratitude. “For what, bud?”

He fidgets with the zipper of his jacket, suddenly looking uncertain. “For everything, I guess. For letting me learn hockey. For working extra so I can maybe join the travel team.”

My heart pinches. How does he know about that? I’ve been careful not to mention the financial strain, not wanting him to worry.

“Valerie mentioned it,” he adds, as if reading my thoughts. “She said you’re coaching robotics to help pay for hockey stuff.”

I’m going to have a serious talk with Valerie about this later. But the damage is done.

“It’s not a big deal,” I say lightly, trying to downplay it. “I like robotics. It’s interesting.”

“But you’re always so tired,” he persists, his voice small. “I see you falling asleep on the couch with your laptop. And you get up super early to make my lunch even though I could just buy lunch at school like some of the other kids.”

I swallow past the sudden tightness in my throat. “Colton, that’s my job. To take care of you. To make sure you have what you need.”

“I know, but...” He looks out the window for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “You do so much more than you have to. Like writing me notes in my lunchbox every day. And coming to all my school stuff even when you’re really busy. And now you’re doing extra work just so I can play hockey.”

The earnest gratitude in his voice makes my eyes sting with unexpected tears. “You’re worth every bit of effort, Colton. Never doubt that.”

“I just want you to know that I see how hard you work, and I really appreciate everything you do for me.”

I have to blink rapidly to clear my vision, my heart’s so full it feels like it might burst. This sweet, observant boy notices far more than I give him credit for.

“And I know it’s not the same without my mom and dad,” he continues, his voice wavering slightly. “I miss them a lot. But...” He trails off, and I hold my breath, waiting. “But you’re the best mom ever,” he finishes. “And I’m really lucky that you’re my mom now. ”

Mom.

He called me mom.

In five years of caring for him, of loving him as my own, he’s always called me Ella. I’ve never pushed for anything else, understanding that “mom” belonged to Katie in his heart. And that was okay. I was his Ella, and that was enough.

Until now.

Tears spill onto my cheeks before I can stop them. I smile at him in the rearview mirror, unable to form words past the emotion clogging my throat.

“Is it okay that I called you that?” he asks hesitantly.

I manage to shake my head, then nod, then shake it again, realizing I’m sending mixed signals. “It’s more than okay,” I finally whisper, my voice breaking. “It’s ...

it's perfect. If that's what you want to call me, I would be honored."

"I've been thinking about it for a while," he admits. "But I wasn't sure if it would make you sad or make me forget my first mom."

I pull into our driveway and put the car in park, turning to face him fully. "Colton, you will never forget your mom. Katie will always be your mom. Having me doesn't change that at all."

He nods solemnly. "I know. But I can have two moms, right? One in heaven and one here with me?"

The simple wisdom in his words undoes me completely. I immediately hop out of the car and make my way to his side, opening his door as he unbuckles his seatbelt.

"Yes," I manage, my voice thick with tears as I pull him into a hug. "You absolutely can have two moms. "

He hugs me back fiercely, his face pressed into my shoulder. For a moment, we just hold each other, this new understanding—this new bond—settling around us like a warm blanket.

When we finally pull apart, he grins at me, that bright, beautiful smile that has gotten me through the hardest days. "So, does this mean I can have ice cream for dinner, Mom?"

I laugh through my tears, the new title sending a fresh wave of emotion through me. "Nice try, kiddo. But no, we're still having chicken tonight."

He sighs dramatically, but there's no real disappointment in it. "Worth a shot."

As we gather our things and head inside, I realize that for all the financial stress, all the exhaustion, all the moments of feeling completely overwhelmed—this makes it all worthwhile.

Nothing compares to the simple, profound joy of being called “Mom” by the boy who holds my heart.

Chapter Seventeen

Kade

Cam's phone rings as he plops down in a seat across the aisle, breaking through the post-game chatter. His expression immediately softens as he answers. "Hey, babe." His voice drops to that tone he reserves for Nila alone. "Yeah, we just boarded. Should be home in about an hour."

I spot Blaze pulling out his phone as well, his face lighting up as Addy presumably answers.

Something twists in my chest as I watch him laugh at whatever she's saying, his whole demeanor changing from exhausted athlete to besotted husband.

He and Addy have been inseparable for as long as I've known them, but it took them ten years—and apparently being forced to share a room at her little sister's wedding in Hawaii—to realize they had feelings for each other.

The guys and I knew it long before that, though.

I'm just glad they finally got their happily ever after.

Now if only I could get mine...

I fish my phone from my pocket and stare at the lock screen. It's nearly eleven at night. Ella's most likely in bed by now, making sure she gets enough sleep before

waking up to pack Colton's lunch and start another day of teaching math to hormonal middle schoolers.

I scroll to her contact, my thumb hovering over the call button.

But what would I even say?

"Hey, sorry to wake you, I just wanted to hear your voice"?

Yeah, that wouldn't be weird at all.

I put my phone away just as Dylan slides into the empty seat beside me. He shoots me a lopsided grin, the kind that's pure trouble, and elbows me in the ribs. "Wanna hit the town with me tonight, Kade? Celebrate our big win?"

"Nah. Think I'll pass. I just want to get home."

"To what? Your empty house?" Dylan scoffs. "Come on. Live a little. I'll even let you pick the music in the Uber. "

I roll my eyes, but there's no real irritation behind it. Dylan's just being ... Dylan.

"I'm good, man."

"Dang it, Kade," he huffs. "When did you become so boring?"

"Maybe he's just not into having a different girl in every city," Cam pipes up from across the aisle, having finished his call. "Some of us actually grow up."

"Speak for yourself, old man. Variety is the spice of life," Dylan shoots back with a wink.

Cam shakes his head. “You’ll never change, will you?”

“Why mess with perfection?” Dylan smirks.

I lean back in my seat as the charter plane lifts off into the night, the Nashville skyline fading into the distance.

I eventually notice Dylan studying me in my peripheral. “Wait ... this is about Ella , isn’t it?” he says. “You don’t want to go out with me because you’re hung up on her, huh?”

I snap my head up in surprise.

“What? I pay attention sometimes.” Dylan shrugs.

“That’s surprising, considering you’re obsessed with yourself,” I joke.

He chuckles. “Regardless, I know I’m right.”

“Yeah...” I relent.

“You know, I met her son at the meet-and-greet after the Philly game.” Dylan nods.

“Cute kid. Good manners.”

“He’s great,” I agree .

“So, what’s the problem? You like the woman, you like her kid. I mean, I get she’s your ex or whatever, but that was like ten years ago, right? It’s gotta be water under the bridge by now. And it seems like you’re spending a lot of time together lately. So why not make it official?”

“It’s not that simple.” I shake my head. “We’ve been spending time together because of Colton’s lessons. There’s definitely still something there between us—at least on my end. But she’s cautious. She went through a tough divorce a few years back. And she’s got Colton to think about.”

“Ahh. You’re in the friend zone.”

I cringe at the term. “I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“But am I wrong?” he challenges, eyebrow raised.

“I’m not trying to push things,” I explain, ignoring his question. “She’s got a lot on her plate. New city, new job, raising Colton on her own. The last thing she needs is me complicating things.”

“But you want more,” Dylan presses.

“I want to be there for both of them, however she’ll let me. If that means just being Colton’s skating coach and Ella’s friend, then so be it.”

“Wow,” Dylan says, leaning back in his seat. “You’ve got it bad.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I mutter.

“So, how are the lessons going? Colton any good? ”

The question brings an immediate smile to my face. “He’s incredible. Natural talent, great instincts. He picks things up so fast it’s almost scary. He’s trying out for the spring travel team.”

“No kidding? Those teams are competitive.”

“I know. But he’s got a real shot at making it,” I say, unable to keep the excitement from my voice. “We’ve been working on his edge control, his stops, his crossovers. He’s gonna nail the tryouts.”

Dylan studies me for a moment, a knowing look in his eyes. “You really care about him, don’t you?”

“I do,” I admit, my voice softening. “He’s had it rough, losing his parents so young. But he’s resilient, you know? And watching him on the ice...” I trail off, struggling to put it into words. “It’s like he comes alive out there. Like he’s found a piece of himself.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Dylan remarks with a smirk.

I chuckle. “Yeah, I guess so.”

We sit silently for a moment, the hum of the engines filling the space between us. When I speak again, my voice is quieter, more serious. “I’m worried about Ella, though. She’s working herself to the bone trying to afford all this.”

“Youth hockey isn’t cheap,” Dylan adds.

“It’s not. And she’s already stretched thin. She picked up coaching the school robotics team just to help pay for Colton’s hockey.”

“That’s dedication,” Dylan says, genuine respect in his voice.

“That’s Ella,” I reply simply. “She’d do anything for the people she loves.”

But she’s exhausted. I can see it every time I look at her.

Dark circles under her eyes, always checking her phone to make sure she's not late for something, constantly juggling schedules.

And that's before adding travel team commitments. ”

“Can't you help?” Dylan asks. “I mean, you're not exactly hurting for cash.”

I rub my jaw, feeling the stubble rasp against my palm. “I've offered. She won't take it. Says she's not looking for charity.”

“It's not charity if it's coming from someone who cares about you,” Dylan argues.

“Try telling her that.” I sigh. “She's fiercely independent. Always has been. It was one of the things I loved about her in high school, but now...”

“Now it's frustrating as heck,” Dylan finishes for me.

“Exactly. I have the means to make this easier for her—for both of them. But I also have to respect her boundaries.” I shake my head. “I don't want to be another guy who lets her down or makes her feel like she can't handle things on her own.”

“So how much money are we talking about here?” Dylan asks, leaning forward with undivided interest. “I mean, I know youth hockey was expensive when I was a kid, but how much is it running these days?”

I go on to explain the tournament and equipment fees. “And that's before you factor in travel expenses,” I continue. “Hotels, gas, meals on the road. Figure another two to three hundred per tournament weekend, minimum.”

“Dang,” Dylan mutters, shaking his head. “No wonder she's stressed.”

Cam leans across the aisle. “The cost of youth hockey has gotten out of hand.”

I nod, unsurprised that Cam’s been eavesdropping. The team plane doesn’t exactly offer much privacy, and Cam’s always had a sixth sense for important conversations.

Blaze appears, dropping into the seat next to Cam. “What are we talking about?” he asks, stifling a yawn.

“Youth hockey costs,” Dylan clarifies. “Kade’s giving us the breakdown for his girlfriend’s kid.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I correct, though the words sting a little.

“Right, right.” Dylan waves dismissively. “The woman he’s desperately in love with but is too noble to make a move on. Better?”

I roll my eyes. “Anyway, we’re talking serious money here. Five to six grand for a season of youth travel hockey.”

Blaze lets out a low whistle. “That’s rough. Especially for a teacher, right? What does she teach again?”

“Middle school math,” I reply.

“Man, those teachers are saints. They make next to nothing considering what they put up with.”

A brief silence falls over our group, each of us lost in thought .

“You know,” Dylan says slowly, breaking the silence, “the team could sponsor him.”

I blink. “What?”

“The Glaciers could sponsor Colton.” Dylan shrugs. “Cover his fees, equipment, travel expenses—the whole package. We do individual sponsorships all the time for underprivileged kids. Why not him?”

I’m already shaking my head before he finishes. “No. That won’t work.”

Dylan looks genuinely perplexed. “Why not? It’s perfect.”

“Because Ella would see right through it,” I explain, trying not to sound as frustrated as I feel. “She already turned down my offer to help her with the costs. If the team suddenly decides to sponsor Colton, she’ll know it was my doing.”

“So?” Dylan challenges. “The kid gets to play hockey, she doesn’t have to work herself to death—it’s a win-win. Do you really think she’d see our help as a bad thing?”

“I think she’d see it as me going behind her back,” I correct him. “As me thinking she can’t handle it on her own. As me not respecting her enough to accept her decision when she said no.”

The explanation hangs in the air for a moment as the other guys absorb it. I can see them processing, trying to understand the delicate balance I’m struggling to maintain with Ella.

“What if...” Blaze begins, then pauses, choosing his words carefully. “What if it wasn’t about Colton specifically?”

All three of us turn to look at him .

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“What if the Glaciers sponsored the entire team?” Blaze suggests, leaning forward in his seat. “Not just Colton—all the kids. Reduced fees across the board, equipment assistance, travel subsidies, the works.”

I blink, considering the idea. “A team sponsorship?”

“Exactly.” Blaze nods. “The PR department’s been looking for more community outreach opportunities anyway. This could be perfect—investing in the next generation of players, making the sport more accessible to families of all income levels.”

“That ... could actually work,” Cam says. “Ella wouldn’t be singled out for special treatment. Colton would benefit, but so would every other kid on the team, including his friend. The one who came to the game with them, right? Aaron? His mom would get the same deal.”

I turn the idea over in my mind, searching for flaws. “It would have to be genuine, though. Not just a PR stunt. A real investment in the program, a long-term commitment.”

“Of course,” Cam agrees. “Nila’s always saying that the key to good PR is doing something you actually believe in. This definitely qualifies.”

“The kid’s got real talent, right?” Blaze asks. “You weren’t just saying that?”

I nod firmly. “Colton’s the real deal. Natural instincts, great work ethic. With proper coaching and development, he could go far.”

“Then it’s even more worthwhile,” Cam points out. “We could be helping launch the

career of a future NHLer.”

“But even if he wasn’t,” I add quickly, “even if he was just average, he deserves the chance to play. All kids do.”

Dylan claps his hands together decisively. “It’s settled, then. We’ll propose a team sponsorship to management ASAP. With all of us behind it, they’re bound to go for it.”

As they continue discussing logistics, I find myself staring out the window, conflicting emotions swirling in my chest. I’m grateful for my teammates’ willingness to help. But also...

Will Ella still see this as overstepping? I rub my jaw thoughtfully, feeling the stubble rasp against my palm. Maybe the key is transparency—not springing it on her as a done deal, but involving her in the process somehow. Acknowledging her expertise as a parent and educator, valuing her input.

But also ... this is just an idea . What if management says no? I don’t want to bring it up to her—potentially getting her hopes up—and then have it not happen...

My thoughts are interrupted as the captain’s voice comes over the intercom, announcing our final descent. The plane begins to tilt downward, the city lights growing larger beneath us as the familiar skyline of Atlanta welcomes us home .

I peer out the window, knowing somewhere out there, in a modest house that she’s made a home, Ella and Colton are fast asleep, blissfully unaware of the conversation that’s just taken place in the sky above them.

Regardless of what happens, one thing’s for certain—having those two in my life feels like a victory more important than anything we could achieve on the ice.

Chapter Eighteen

Ella

“Are you ready for this?” I ask Colton as I pull into a parking spot at the rink.

“I think so...” he says as he unbuckles his seatbelt and grabs his bag. “But Aaron told me today there’s a bunch of guys trying out who’ve been playing for years.”

I turn around in my seat, which stops Colton mid-reaching for the door.

“It doesn’t matter how long those other kids have been playing or skating.

What matters is all the work you’ve put into this.

You can’t compare yourself to them.” I give him a warm smile, even though, on the inside, I’m torn.

I want Colton to make the team more than anything, but...

I still haven’t come up with five thousand dollars.

“Thanks, Mom. You’re the best,” Colton says, breaking my thoughts as he finally pushes the door open and hops out.

I’ll figure it out. Just like always.

I climb out of the car and follow Colton across the parking lot. Valerie and Aaron are already waiting for us inside, and I'm grateful to have someone to sit with.

"Do you think Kade will be here?" Colton asks as I grab the door and open it for him. "I told him about it at practice."

I sigh, giving him a sympathetic look. "I don't know. He had an away game this week. I'm not sure when they will get back."

He responds with a half-hearted nod, and I can see the disappointment on his face as we head inside the skating rink.

We make our way to the herd of kids, all preparing for tryouts.

I spot Valerie and Aaron almost immediately, thanks to their bright red hair.

Colton jogs off to get ready with Aaron, and I take my place beside Valerie and all the other parents.

"I'm nervous for him." Valerie laughs, eyeing me. "It's amazing how I'm not even the one out on the ice, and I think I'm more nervous than he is."

"I get it," I tell her, folding my arms across my chest. My sweater feels scratchy, and the jeans I wore seem too tight around the waist. "I'm nervous, too. I feel like I'm about to go on stage for a debate or something."

She giggles. "Neither one of us was much when it comes to sports, I see. "

"No way." I let out a sigh and then glance up to the bleachers. "Maybe we should go take a seat now?"

She nods and then gestures for me to lead the way.

I do exactly that and find a good spot at the very front.

We have a great view of the rink, and Valerie plops down beside me.

We watch as the boys—and a whole bunch of other kids—skate out onto the ice.

I notice immediately that Colton's skill on the ice stands out.

He's ... good .

And it makes sense, considering he's been coached by Kade. Of course, he's going to stand out, even if he's not been doing this as long as some of the other kids.

"I'm surprised Kade isn't here," Valerie comments, sipping on an iced coffee I didn't even realize she had. "I figured he'd show up to support Colton."

"He had an away game," I say, keeping my eyes on Colton. I smile as he scans the crowd, his eyes searching through the shield. His gaze finally lands on mine, and I give him a big, gaudy wave. He grins and then goes back to talking with Aaron.

Valerie and I watch as the tryouts begin.

"They're doing really well, I think," Valerie remarks. "I think they have a good shot at making it."

I nod, but before I can say anything at all, someone shouts and hollers from behind the stands, and the crowd of parents begins to cheer.

"Go, Colton!" a deep voice booms across the skating rink.

I whip my head around, though I already know who it is.

My eyes land on Kade, holding up a poster board that says, ‘ Kill ’em, Colton!

’ It’s decorated up like all the signs at his games—well, and any other game, really.

I’m not sure the quality of the sign changes much between high school and professional sporting events.

Regardless, Colton gives Kade the biggest smile I think I’ve ever seen...

And I know this moment means more to him than even making the team.

Kade cheers for him once more, and then his eyes shift to the stands. My cheeks heat up as I watch his dark eyes search for me. At least, I assume he’s searching for me, and that’s confirmed when his gaze locks on mine—and then he flashes me that painfully sweet smile.

Ugh. Why does he have to be so handsome?

Kade holds up the sign, still facing the rink, as the kids get directed into groups. Then he makes his way to me, his gaze never leaving my face. My heart thrums nervously in my chest, and I try to focus my attention on the rink.

“He’s doing really well,” Kade comments, and I just nod, refusing to look over at him. “I had to drive like a NASCAR driver to get here in time. I didn’t want to miss it.” His sweet words hit me like a knife to the chest, and I can’t help it anymore—I finally look over at him.

“It means a lot to him that you’re here.” My voice isn’t nearly as strong as I want it to be, and I know it’s because of the way Kade genuinely cares for my boy. It’s rare for

someone to choose to be in another person's life the way Kade has chosen Colton.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," Kade says, his voice confident as he rests the sign in his lap. "He's definitely gonna make the team."

Valerie leans over with a grin. "Is that because you're pulling strings?"

"Ha ha." Kade smirks. "I suppose that maybe I could, but that wouldn't benefit the team or the boys. They need to earn their place. Though, I think they're both going to make it on their own accord. Aaron is good."

Valerie beams with pride. "Thank you. I'll have to tell him you said that. I know it will mean so much to him coming from you. If I said such a thing, he'd just roll his eyes." She lets out one of her eccentric laughs, and Kade chuckles along.

As he does, the director of the youth program clears his throat over the microphone. We both turn our heads to the middle-aged man standing in the center of the rink, a bright smile on his face.

"We're going to wrap up tryouts for the evening.

We just wanted to thank everyone for coming, and the way you all support the league in the city.

We'll have the results posted tomorrow evening.

If you don't make it," he addresses the herd of kids on the sidelines, watching him, "don't give up.

A 'no' this year doesn't mean a 'no' next year.

We have limited spots, and unfortunately, there's just not enough room for everyone.

With that being said..." His voice trails off, as a song starts to play over the PA system. "Have a good night!"

The kids skate off toward the exit, and we stand to our feet, along with all the other parents.

It's super crowded, and based on where we're at, it's going to be a while before we reach the boys.

I cling to my purse, all the while Kade holds his sign and Valerie leads the way.

Something about the moment feels natural.

It's as if we've done this a million times.

It takes us about ten minutes to make it to Colton and Aaron, who, by the time we show up, have already changed into their street shoes. Colton has his bag slung over his shoulder, and the grin on his face makes my chest swell.

"Kade!" Colton explodes with sentiment as soon as we're in earshot. He then rushes to Kade, wrapping his arms around his waist. "You made it! Ella said you might not make it, but you did! I knew you would!"

Kade gives him a tight squeeze, and the moment sends a rush of longing through my body.

Seeing the two of them interact in this way makes me wonder what it would be like if we didn't have to go home to separate houses.

What it would be like if we got to spend every day together.

What it would be like if we were a ... family .

That's a dangerous thought, Ella.

Yet my mind keeps pulling me toward it.

“Have they announced it yet?” Colton asks for the hundredth time.

I open up the youth hockey webpage for the umpteenth time and check, which only leads to me shaking my head at an empty list. “Not yet. They said they would post the roster this evening. But they didn't give a specific time...

” I give him the best smile I can manage, but honestly, I'm feeling his nerves, too.

“I'm sure it'll pop up soon,” Kade says as he lands beside Colton and then pats his shoulder. “You can't let it distract you too much.”

Colton gazes up at him, but even Kade can't seem to quell the frustration. “My lessons will all be for nothing if I don't make the team.”

Kade's dark brows furrow, and he leans against the railing. “If you don't make the team, then the lessons are even more important. I can talk to the director, figure out why you didn't make the cut, and then we can work harder on developing your skills.”

Colton nods, but I can see how much this is weighing on him .

“You're going to be okay, regardless of the outcome.” I repeat, telling him the same words I've been telling myself all evening.

“I guess I’ll just keep skating for a little while longer,” Colton huffs, pushing off the rail and heading back in the direction of the cones that Kade has set up.

Kade holds my gaze a little longer, just enough to cause me to squirm from the heat in his eyes. Then, Colton calls for him, and he pushes off the railing in the same fashion my son did a minute ago. I try to shake it off, but my heart beats unevenly.

I lean back against the bleacher behind me, the metal digging into my upper back.

It’s uncomfortable, but the support allows me to close my eyes for a moment and relax with a couple of deep breaths, doing my best to swallow the nerves about everything.

I want this for Colton so badly ... but why does it have to be so dang expensive ?

Just take it one step at a time.

My eyes flutter open, and I reach down, once again refreshing the website. This time, the team roster pops up, and the columns are full of names. My heart jumps to my throat, and I brace as I zoom in and start working my way through the list.

I spot Aaron’s name first and smile, knowing that he’s probably elated—and so is Valerie. I continue down that list until I make it to the very last name.

“Colton Whimsy,” I read aloud, a mixture of emotions once again bubbling to the surface.

Just celebrate with him. Worry about the rest later.

Keeping my phone clutched in one hand, I stand to my feet and then make my way to the railing. Kade and Colton don’t notice my movement, as they’re working the puck

through the maze of cones.

My eyes drop down to Kade's biceps, curled and taut as he demonstrates to Colton what he wants him to do.

My mind flashes back to the parts of high school that only he knows, and it involved those arms being wrapped around me.

Goosebumps pop up on my skin, and my stomach shifts from knotted to fluttering.

Longing erupts in my chest, and I find the ache that I worked so hard to overcome a decade ago returning like it never left.

Ugh. I clear my throat, hoping to cut through my feelings while also getting Kade and Colton's attention. They both stop and look at me. Kade instantly reads whatever is on my face and turns to Colton.

"I think Ella has some answers for us." He keeps his tone even, calm, and basically all the things I'm not feeling right now.

"Is it posted?" Colton's voice takes a shrill edge as he comes speed skating over, his hockey stick still in hand. "Mom, did I make it? Did I?"

"Do you want me to tell you? Or do you want to look for yourself?" I ask, keeping a blank look on my face, just for the sole purpose of not ruining the moment for him.

"Let me look," Colton breathes out, his voice shaking. He extends his hand, and I hand him my phone. He opens the page, his face shifting to pure concentration as he reads. Finally, his body grows rigid, and a grin sweeps across his face. He turns to Kade. "I made it!"

Kade explodes with excitement, and together we all celebrate the moment, though I spend most of mine internally feeling smaller than ever. I have enough savings to cover the initial payment due at the end of the first practice...

But that's where my finances end.

I might have to ask for help.

My eyes flicker to Kade, who's already put his offer to pay on the table. As if he feels my eyes lingering on me, he whips his head around.

He gives me a concerned expression. "Everything okay?"

I nod. "Totally. Everything's fine."

It's all fine...

Chapter Nineteen

Ella

“His first practice.” Kade beams as he holds up his phone and takes a video beside me. “I can’t believe it happened so fast.”

I look up and cock a brow at him, feeling tiny beside his big frame. “You sound like one of those dads behind every home video.” I make the joke light, shaking my head as I catch sight of Colton playing a mock scrimmage.

“He’s doing so well,” Kade continues as he films the entire thing—which as funny as I think it is, it’s also incredibly endearing.

But I try not to focus on that.

“So where’s Valerie tonight?” Kade asks.

“Oh, she got caught up at a parent-teacher conference. Aaron’s dad brought him to practice tonight.

” I glance over to Valerie’s ex-husband who’s sitting a few rows away.

I haven’t formally met him yet, but I saw him walk in with Aaron.

And right now, he looks about as enthusiastic as a man attending jury duty.

Kade nods before becoming engrossed in filming the hockey scrimmage once more. Colton blends in effortlessly with his new teammates—as if he’s been playing hockey for much longer than two months.

“So, what should we do about skating lessons?” I ask, folding my arms across my chest. My thin sweater is no match for the air conditioner blasting in the rink, and I’m suddenly wishing I would’ve brought a parka.

“Now that he’ll have practice two times a week, I don’t want him to get too overloaded. ”

“Well, I was thinking I could probably make most of his practices. I mean, they do fall on skate lesson days, so there’s no reason why I can’t still be here.”

“I see...” I purse my lips together, realizing that he misinterpreted my question.

He thinks I was asking when we’d see him rather than when Colton would have his skate lessons.

I take it that means that Colton doesn’t need to take any more lessons, but I don’t ask the question.

I let Kade think that it was just about Colton seeing him.

After all, it is a relationship that I want to continue to foster. Colton could really use a positive male influence in his life...

However, all my thoughts come to a sudden, startling halt at the sound of a collision between two players.

My eyes widen as I watch Colton tumble violently onto the ice.

His stick launches out of his hand, flying in the opposite direction, and the crash leaves him lying there, motionless.

Panic seizes me as the coach blows his whistle and shouts at the kids to back up, clearing the scene around him.

“Colton!” I call out his name in horror, but Kade is much faster to jump into action than I am. My hands shoot up to cover my mouth as the NHL player is already leaping over the railing and racing across the rink.

My heart constricts as Kade drops to the ground beside Colton, helping him remove his helmet. I gasp when I see the beginnings of a black eye forming, the bluish hue creeping across his skin. My mouth grows dry with worry, and I feel helpless as my pulse echoes in my ears.

Kade helps him up, looking him over with cautious determination alongside the coach, who pulls out an instant ice pack from the first aid kit and hands it to him. Colton squints in my direction as Kade directs him toward me, both of them slowly making their way to the edge of the rink.

“Are you okay?” I ask, the words spilling out in a rush as soon as they’re close. “Do we need to take him to the doctor? Maybe this whole hockey thing was a bad idea. I know that—”

“Easy, Ella,” Kade gently interrupts, his voice low and soft.

His steady calm cuts through the worry raging inside of me.

“It’s just the beginning of a black eye.

Otherwise, he’s fine. It’s just part of hockey.

” He reaches out and squeezes my hand, instantly leaving my skin tingling with warmth. “It’s okay.”

I blink back tears as I look at Colton’s face. “That’s going to be so gnarly...” I lean over to get a better look, my hand still in Kade’s. “But it will heal.” I say the words more for myself than anyone else. Colton and Kade don’t look all that concerned about it.

“Yeah, and it doesn’t hurt that bad,” Colton reassures me, and I breathe a sigh of relief. If he can handle the injury with such nonchalance, then I can deal with being a hockey mom.

“You took the hit like a champ,” Kade declares, his voice full of pride as he pats his shoulder. “Now you can really say that you’re a hockey player. If you haven’t had a black eye, then you can’t be a part of the club.”

“What club?” Colton looks confused.

“The real hockey player club.” Kade winks at him before hopping over the railing.

His hand drops from mine, and I suddenly feel the absence more than ever.

Or maybe it’s the protective way that he ran out to Colton, never thinking once about anything other than his safety, that has me feeling ... different.

Ten minutes later, Colton’s feeling ready to get back on the ice. “Go get ’em, kid.” Kade pats him on the back.

“Got it.” Colton gives Kade a wicked grin and then nods to me. “I’ll be okay, Mom. I’m a real hockey player now.”

I blow out a sigh. “Good to know...”

I watch Colton skate back out to play, joining the kids who are now laughing and shouting on the ice. I can hardly believe that he bounced back so quickly from the injury.

Kade hops up from his seat beside me.

“Where are you going?” I ask, my heart hitting my ribcage with an uneven beat.

“Practice is almost over.” Kade looks back at me. “I’m gonna grab a couple instant ice packs from the locker room so Colton can ice his eye on the ride home.”

“Oh...” I stand up and follow along mindlessly, still reeling from the adrenaline. I follow Kade through the double doors leading to the locker room area. The rink is quiet back here, the sounds of skates and whistles muffled behind us.

“They’re in the trainer’s room,” Kade explains, leading me down a short hallway, now completely out of sight of the rink. “The team keeps a supply for situations just like this.”

The trainer’s room is small and utilitarian—a padded table in the center, medical supplies organized neatly on shelves. Kade goes straight to a cabinet, retrieving a handful of ice packs.

“Here,” he says, handing them to me. “You’ll want to ice his eye twenty minutes on, twenty off, for the rest of the evening.”

I take the ice packs, suddenly overwhelmed by his competence, his calm in the face of my panic, his instinctive protection of Colton.

Sensing my emotion, Kade reaches for my hand again, giving it that familiar squeeze. “He’s okay, El. He’s a tough kid.”

I nod, gazing up at him, meeting those warm brown eyes. “I appreciate you jumping out there to go check on him... I never would’ve known what to do...” I swallow the lump in my throat at my admission. “I don’t know enough about sports to do this well.”

Kade’s expression softens. “Ella, you don’t have to do anything.” His body is suddenly closer, his cologne filling my lungs, wrapping me up in memories. “Just be there for him. He’s a good hockey player. He’s going to get hurt because he’s ambitious.”

“You’re right.” I offer a small nod, feeling the gaping pit of worry slowly close itself up. “I guess it’s just something I’ll have to get used to...”

“Yes, but you don’t have to do this alone. I’ll be here for him, too. And for you.”

I catch my breath at his last two words.

“Ella...” His voice trails off, the sultry tone rattling my insides and freezing me in place. The panic gives way to something else, something I can’t hide from. “I want to be here for you.” His words are deep and sincere, reaching into all the places I’ve locked away. “For the both of you.”

Kade’s gaze drifts to my lips, and I find myself parting them instinctively as he takes a step closer, sweeping his free hand across my cheek, a gesture so tender it makes my heart ache.

Our eyes lock, and something electric passes between us—an acknowledgment of all the unspoken feelings that have been building since he came back into my life.

In an impulsive surge of emotion, I close the distance between us.

At the first brush of his lips against mine, I'm struck by the familiarity in the movement—something that I thought would be foreign by now. But it's not...

It's Kade .

And he's kissing me.

His arms wrap around me, strong and sure, sending a jolt of electricity down my spine. I lean into him, the ice packs forgotten as they tumble to the floor.

As Kade deepens the kiss, I find myself melting into him, my mouth meshing perfectly with his.

He lets out a light groan, just loud enough for me to hear, as his tongue traces the curve of my bottom lip with a tantalizing slowness.

It's something he always used to do, but now he's doing it with intention and need.

I grab for those biceps, curling my fingers around them like an anchor as he comes for me, invading my mouth and sending a thrill of excitement through my body. Years of history and weeks of tension crystallize into this perfect moment.

I feel like I'm eighteen again, before life got complicated, before heartbreak and loss carved their permanent marks on my soul. For this suspended moment in time, there's only Kade, me, and the rightness of us together.

His heart thunders against my palm, where it now rests on his chest, matching the rapid cadence of my own. The scent of him surrounds me—that cologne mixing with something uniquely Kade, a smell that I've never been able to forget no matter how

many years passed.

We break apart for air, his forehead resting against mine, our breathing ragged. His amber eyes are dark with desire, and I know mine must mirror the same intensity.

“Ella,” he whispers, my name like a prayer on his lips.

Before he can say more, the crackle of the PA system breaks the spell. “Attention all players and parents,” the coach’s voice echoes through the building. “Please gather around for a special announcement.”

We step apart, breathless and disoriented by the sudden intrusion of reality.

“We should...” I gesture vaguely toward the door, my voice unsteady.

“Yeah,” Kade agrees, though the look in his eyes suggests he’d rather stay right here, in this room, reliving what just happened between us. “You go, I’ll be right behind you.” He bends down to retrieve the scattered ice packs.

I step into the hallway and hurry back out to the rink, leaving Kade behind as I try to compose myself. My lips tingle, my cheeks burn, and my mind spins with what I just did.

I spot Colton standing with the rest of the team, looking completely unbothered by the fact his eye is now sporting an impressive purple bruise. The director is standing in the center of the ice, wearing a Glaciers jersey .

“As you all know, we’ve been running this youth hockey team for over a decade.

” The director pauses as the gathered people clap in support.

I join in, but mostly in a robotic, unthinking motion, because I still can't get over the way my lips are tingling.

"This year," he continues once the applause dies down, "is a little different. For the first time, we're able to operate without any fees to the players.

Even the equipment costs have been covered in full. "

Everyone around starts muttering, and I'm left in the same confusing state. Who in the world would pay for the entire team's fees?

Oh no.

No, he wouldn't have...

"The Glaciers have sponsored the team, covering all costs."

And suddenly, all I feel is anger.

Chapter Twenty

Kade

She's angry. I can tell by the way she's been quiet since the announcement. I can tell by the way that she's got that terse smile on her face. Just as I feared, the Glaciers paying for the travel team has upset her.

I have to make this right.

"Can we all go get pizza?" Colton's voice cuts through the tension as we head out into the parking lot.

"We—"

"Not tonight," Ella cuts me off, not even giving me a chance to answer. "We need to get home so you can rest."

"But I'm hungry..." Colton whines, and I wince at the way Ella's jaw tenses .

"Not tonight. There's food at home. I don't want to be out late. And you need to ice your eye."

I cock a brow at her, but I don't argue. It's clear she doesn't want to be around me right now, and I know that—but she needs to understand that paying for hockey is one of the few things that I can do when it comes to the two of them.

Well, unless she lets me kiss her again...

Then I could do a lot of things for her.

My heart jumps to my throat at the thought of a second chance with her. I know it's a long shot, but maybe it's not impossible. She did return my kiss, and she made it the kind that you never forget.

"Come on," Ella urges Colton as we make it to their SUV. She opens the back hatch for him to toss his bag in, and then she closes it, leaving me to follow behind like a scorned puppy.

"Maybe we should talk," I say in a hushed voice as Colton climbs into the car. "I know you're frustrated, and I don't want to leave it like this."

"Nothing to be frustrated about," Ella chimes, her voice overly sweet and nice. It makes me wince. She only talks like this when she's mad—really mad.

"A lot happened tonight," I press, refusing to let her leave things the way they are. "We need to talk about it."

She opens the driver's side door and glances back to Colton, who's now busy icing his eye with one hand and scrolling his tablet with the other. She turns back to me, slamming the driver's side door closed again. "Okay. You want to talk? Let's talk."

Uh oh...

"For starters, I told you I didn't want your charity. We talked about it. I don't know why you had to go find some sort of loophole to do exactly what I asked you not to do. Colton already sees you as a hero, Kade. You don't have to keep driving the point home over and over."

My mouth drops, and I feel the heat of my irritation creeping up my neck. “It’s not like that, Ella. I’m not trying to be a hero.”

She places her hand on her hip, completely unamused by me. “Right, so then, what is it about? Hmm? How did this even happen ?”

“Look. I promise I had no intention of crossing your boundaries.” I sigh, raking my fingers through my hair.

“I was just talking to my teammates the other night about how expensive youth hockey is, how I wished I could help somehow—and they came up with the sponsorship idea. They thought it’d be a good idea to help the entire team.

I had planned to talk to you about it, to get your input, but ... ”

“But you didn’t ,” she huffs.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry. It all just happened so fast, I didn’t get the chance. I knew it was a risk, but I went along with it because I wanted to help you. I wanted to help Colton. I want to be there for him, and make sure that he gets everything that he—”

“I can handle making sure he gets what he needs!” Her voice strains, and I see the hurt written all over her face.

“I’m doing the very best I can, and I’ve done a good job the last five years.

I can’t help it that I don’t have the same kind of financial resources that you do, but I was willing to do whatever it took to keep his place on the team.

” The exasperation in her voice sends a shockwave of hurt through my chest, but not

for myself...

For her .

“Ella, I know how much you do,” I say, keeping my voice soft. “I see it every time we’re all together. You’re an amazing mother, and you work so hard to ensure that Colton has everything he needs—I was just trying to help because you deserve it. You shouldn’t have to do this all alone.”

“I’m not alone.”

“You’re right, you’re not alone, but I can see—”

“You’re making so many assumptions right now.” She holds up a hand to stop me from saying anything more. “I just hope the rest of your team was actually on board with this, and you weren’t out there forcing them to pay for everyone’s fees just because you wanted to impress Colton.”

“They wanted this. We all saw it as an opportunity to help the community, and yeah, it helped you and Colton out, but is that really such a bad thing? I mean, you guys have become my best friends. I literally want to spend all my time with the two of you. ”

“That’s only because you like skating and hockey. That’s all this is.” She backs up, bumping her back into the side of her car door. “You would’ve never taken an interest in us had we not been at that hockey game where Colton mentioned wanting to learn to play.”

“That’s not fair to say,” I exasperate, feeling the need to pull her into me and console her.

“I hadn’t seen you in so long... I didn’t know what you were up to, or how you were.

I didn’t even know you had Colton! But when I saw you at that game , it was like seeing you for the first time all over again, Ella.

You’ve always been the kind of woman that leaves an impact. ”

She scoffs. “That’s rich coming from the man who chose hockey over me.”

“That was—”

“Please don’t. Even if you call our breakup a mistake, it doesn’t change the fact that it happened. You made your choice. And whatever brought on that kiss from you tonight ... I don’t think that should happen again.”

It feels like my heart is freaking shattering into a million pieces. She’s quiet, her eyes brimming with moisture that I wish wasn’t there.

I wish I hadn’t caused it.

I wish I could take back the stupid mistake I made of letting her go.

I can see it in her eyes that she’s not over me. And I’m definitely not over her .

“I still have feelings for you, El ... is it really too late for us?” I plead.

Ella turns away from me, and I feel something in my chest break. “I—I can’t do this right now.” She bats her tears away.

I swallow hard, trying to come up with some way to convince her that I won’t hurt her again. That I can be trusted with her heart. But honestly, I don’t know how I

could possibly convince her.

“I’ve got to get out of here.” She meets my gaze, breathing out a sigh. “Goodnight, Kade.”

And with that, she climbs into her car and shuts the door.

Right in my face.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ella

I shouldn't have left like that.

I shouldn't have been so cold.

"But he went behind my back," I reason to myself, shaking my head as I stare at my computer screen. It's been a couple days since our confrontation in the parking lot, but I'm still reeling from it all, replaying everything that happened over and over.

I just hate the fact that only minutes after choosing to let my guard down with him—minutes after being wrapped up in his arms and feeling his lips on mine—Kade gave me yet another reason to put it back up.

And then he has the audacity to admit he still has feelings for me.

How dare he? How dare he go behind my back to pay for Colton's hockey and then declare his feelings for me? As if I'm supposed to just swoon into his arms in gratitude?

I push my chair back, standing up to pace the small space between my desk and the whiteboard.

The Glaciers' sponsorship is exactly why I can't let myself fall for him again.

He thinks he can just sweep in and fix everything with his NHL connections and bank account.

He doesn't understand what it's been like for me—scraping by, making tough choices, building a life for Colton and myself brick by painful brick.

And now he wants to waltz in and take credit for making everything better?

I stop in front of the wall where I've hung the best student work from the semester.

Colorful graphs and neatly solved equations stare back at me.

I've worked so hard to be self-sufficient, to prove to myself and everyone else that I can handle anything life throws at me.

After losing Katie and Brett, after Landon left us, after moving to a new city and starting over, I've survived it all on my own terms.

And yet...

The memory of Kade's lips on mine sends an electric current through my body. Where, during those few stolen moments in the trainer's room, everything felt right. Like the universe had finally clicked back into place after years of being slightly off-kilter.

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the traitorous thought.

One good kiss doesn't erase the past or solve the problems of the present.

He hurt me once before, choosing his hockey career over our relationship.

What happens now, when the novelty of coaching Colton wears off?

Or when he decides that dating a single mom with financial struggles and trust issues is too much work?

I'd be left picking up the pieces. Again. But this time, it wouldn't just be my heart on the line—it would be Colton's too. He's already getting attached to Kade, looking up to him with stars in his eyes.

The thought of Colton getting hurt makes my stomach twist into knots.

"It's exactly why I don't date," I mutter.

"Ah, are you having a nice conversation with yourself?" Valerie's voice startles me from my spiral. She's standing in the doorway of my classroom, her copper curls haloed by the hallway light. "You look ... miserable."

I sigh, feeling like I've been caught red-handed. "There's just a lot going on."

Valerie steps into the room, dropping her oversized tote bag onto one of the student desks. "And what's going on, exactly?" She tilts her head, studying me. "Because I assumed you'd be on cloud nine after that surprise announcement about the Glaciers covering our hockey fees."

I sigh, collapsing back into my chair. "That's actually why I'm upset."

"Huh?" Valerie looks genuinely confused.

"Kade went behind my back, Val. He knew I didn't want his help, but he arranged for the Glaciers to sponsor the whole team anyway." I groan, dropping my head into my hands. "He should've talked to me first. Instead, he just fixed it. Like I couldn't

handle it myself.”

Valerie is quiet for a moment, letting my words hang in the air. “Okay, I hear you. But can I offer a different perspective?”

I wave a hand, giving her permission she doesn’t need to ask for.

“The sponsorship isn’t just helping you and Colton.

It’s helping dozens of families, including mine.

” She leans forward, her expression earnest. “Aaron’s dad has been complaining about the travel team fees for weeks, using it as another excuse to be late with child support.

This sponsorship means I don’t have to fight that battle anymore. ”

I feel a flush of shame creep up my neck. I’ve been so focused on how this affects me that I hadn’t even considered the bigger picture.

“I mean, it was such a nice surprise,” she adds. “I know there are many other parents that live on a tight budget to afford for their kids to play hockey. It gave everyone some breathing room.”

I let out a sigh. She’s right. Kade and his teammates just helped a lot of people in the community.

And maybe I wasn’t fair to him when he tried to explain that...

“You know what,” I say, giving her a look. “You’re right. I haven’t been very clear-headed with this whole thing.”

“It happens to the best of us.” She flashes a knowing smile.

“But in my defense, I was already emotionally compromised,” I mutter.

Valerie’s eyebrows shoot up. “Emotionally compromised? What does that mean? What happened before the sponsorship announcement?”

The heat in my cheeks intensifies. “We ... kind of ... kissed.”

“YOU WHAT?” Valerie’s shriek could probably be heard three classrooms away. “And you’re just now telling me this? Start from the beginning. I want details!”

Despite my turmoil, I can’t help but laugh at her reaction. “It was after Colton got hurt. We went to get ice packs from the trainer’s room, and it just ... happened.” I press my palms against my hot cheeks. “Gosh, Val, it was incredible . Like no time had passed at all.”

“I knew it!” Valerie practically bounces in her chair. “The tension between you two could power the entire city of Atlanta during a blackout.”

My eyes widen. “Wait, what ? ”

“I said what I said.” She smirks. “So what are you going to do now?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. All I know is, I can’t let myself get swept up in another romance again. I have to stay strong for Colton.”

“You’re a good mom, Ella. Always putting Colton first.” She pauses, as if choosing her words carefully before continuing. “But don’t forget about yourself in all of this. You deserve to be happy, too. And it’s pretty clear you still have feelings for Kade...”

I roll my lips against each other, mulling it over.

I know deep down, there's real feelings there.

I wouldn't have kissed Kade if there wasn't.

But given everything that transpired afterward, I'm not really sure how to move forward.

And as a mother, it's not just my feelings I need to think about anymore.

Ugh.

"I think you should talk to Kade—without Colton there." Valerie gives me this painfully sympathetic look. "Why don't you call him and figure out a time to meet up, and then I can watch Colton while the two of you talk this out like adults?"

I swallow hard, my eyes flickering to my cell phone, resting on the corner of my desk. In all this time, I haven't done much reaching out to Kade. And considering how I acted the last time we spoke, he's probably hurt.

At the very least, I could apologize for overreacting.

"Yeah, I'll call him and set something up."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kade

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel as I sit in Ella's driveway, waiting for her to come out of the house. There's a big part of me that wants to run to her door and play the role of the perfect gentleman, but I already know in my gut that this is not a date.

In fact, this whole thing feels like the dreaded we need to talk spiel—and that's almost always loaded with nothing but heartbreak.

The radio plays softly in the background, and I take a deep breath, hating the choice of song.

“When We Were Young” fills the cab, and I sometimes wonder if the man upstairs gets a laugh out of torturing me with irony.

Regardless, I can't bring myself to actually turn it down or off.

No, I listen to every lyric, all the while wondering if Ella Smart is going to ghost me. Again .

But then—Ella steps out of her front door, looking lethal in a pair of dark wash jeans and a cream-colored sweater. I can't stop staring at her.

And every second just makes the ache in my chest hurt a little more.

I hop out of the truck and jog around to the passenger side, beating Ella to the door.

“Hey,” I breathe out, sounding like I just ran a half-marathon. “I was starting to think you weren’t gonna come out.”

She doesn’t meet my gaze. “Sorry. I was just trying to find the right shoes.”

I glance down at her Converse. She can wear whatever she wants, and it still looks good. “You look great, El.” My voice comes out way softer than I intend, and she peers up at me.

“Thanks,” she says before looking away and hopping into the car.

I shut the door and then rub my forehead as I make my way back around to my side. My heart flutters in my chest, and I have those unwanted first-date vibes flowing through my body. And the irony of it all is...

Ella was my first date .

“Where do you want to go?” I ask as I situate myself in my seat. “Have you eaten?”

“Yeah,” she answers weakly. “I don’t think I want to have this conversation over food.”

So that means it really is a bad one.

Great.

“Well, we could go sit by the river. It’s not that far from here. There’s a couple of good lookout points. We don’t have to get out of the truck either, if you’re worried about safety.”

She makes a face. “I think you’re probably one of the biggest men in the city. I don’t think I’ve ever felt unsafe with you.” She pauses, a bittersweet smile stretching across her face. “I’ve never felt like I even have to pay attention to my surroundings when we’re together.”

The admission makes my chest soar with pride. “I’m glad I make you feel secure. I hope that never changes.”

Her eyes dart away at that, and she tugs on her seatbelt. “Yeah, we can just go sit at the river.”

I put my truck in reverse and back out, heading out of her neighborhood.

I steal glances over at Ella as we make it to the stop sign, and once I realize she’s not going to talk about anything else, I reach for the radio, turning up the music.

Some other song plays, and thankfully, it’s not remotely as triggering as the one before it.

Some other woman sings about falling in love, and I tune out, focusing on getting us to the river safely .

And Ella? Well, she just stares out the passenger window like I’m taking her away to prison or something.

I want to ask her how her day was and how Colton’s day was. I want to know every thought that crossed her mind today, but I know better than to ask. I feel the weight of the conversation that’s to come.

“This is really pretty,” Ella’s voice breaks my thoughts as I pull into a spot that faces the glory of the water. The sunset casts a warm glimmer across it.

She's right. It is pretty.

But probably not pretty enough to convince her to love me again.

"So... You wanted to talk..."

She unfastens her seatbelt, and for a moment, I think she might get out of the truck, but she doesn't. Instead, she just nods, angling her knees slightly in my direction. "I won't take much of your time, Kade. I know you probably have a lot more important things to do."

"Uh, no," I respond, furrowing my brow and running my hand over the leather steering wheel. "I never have a problem making time for you or Colton."

"Um, okay. Well, I just wanted to start by saying I'm sorry for getting so offended over you and your teammates paying for the travel team. You were just trying to help out, and it was a really nice gesture. Not just for me, but for all the families involved. So ... thank you. "

"You're welcome," I reply, a wave of relief washing over me. "And I'm sorry for pushing your boundaries. The guys and I truly just wanted to help out Colton and all the other kids who made the team."

She nods slowly, her gaze drifting out toward the lake once more. "I know. And I know you have a big heart when it comes to helping others."

"I really would do anything for you and Colton. Just say the word."

Her eyes close, and she leaves them like that for longer than I'm comfortable with. "You know, my ex-husband started out being really, really loving. There was nothing that he didn't say to me."

Well, this is a strange direction of conversation...

“In fact,” she goes on, “when we first got custody of Colton, Landon acted like it was one of the biggest blessings in his life. He loved the idea of being a dad. But that was just it... He loved the idea of being a dad. He didn’t actually want to do it.”

“I see.” I bite my tongue, wanting to inform her that I’m not her ex-husband, and I don’t intend to ever fall in love with the “idea” of being a parent to Colton. If I ever had the chance to step into that role, I’d love it for the good days and the hard ones.

“I know I briefly mentioned this to you before, but things started getting really rocky between us at the one-year mark of having Colton. It was hard for Landon to see past the therapy appointments and the transition pains of taking in a little boy who had just lost his whole world.”

My heart squeezes in my chest, trying to imagine what little Colton must’ve gone through. “I’m so sorry...” The words slip out with sympathy as I find my fingers covering Ella’s.

She sucks in a sharp breath but doesn’t retreat. She lets me linger. “I so badly wanted Colton to have some semblance of family. Some stability. But Landon didn’t care. And, well, you can’t make someone stay who doesn’t want to be there.”

But I want to be here, Ella.

“The divorce hurt,” she continues, “but it was nowhere near as painful as watching a little boy try to make sense of losing another father figure less than two years after his parents died. One that was alive and willingly choosing to forgo a relationship with him. Landon walking out on us made getting over him easy. I’ve never looked back. But Colton didn’t deserve any of it.”

“I understand what you’re saying, and I’m sorry that you and Colton went through what you did.

Neither of you deserved it. But you need to understand something from me,” I pause, waiting for her reaction.

She seems to sort of nod, and I squeeze her hand.

“I want to be in Colton’s life. Me helping him with hockey and cheering him on isn’t about you .

It’s about him . The bond we’ve created is special, and I don’ t want to lose that. ”

Her eyes glimmer with moisture, and I momentarily wonder if I’ve messed up by being so direct with how I feel. She pulls her hand from mine, shaking her head, and my heart sinks.

“I don’t understand why you always say all the right things,” she mutters, looking toward the window instead of me. “You’ve been that way since the moment I met you. You ride in like a knight in shining armor and sweep me off my feet.”

“You’re making it sound like that’s a bad thing.” I lean back against the seat. “I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“You broke my heart, Kade,” Ella snaps, whipping her head around to look at me again. This time, there are stray tears sliding down her cheeks, and the way they rip into my chest isn’t fair. What’s even more unfair is the fact that I know I’ve caused a lot more of them in the past.

I try to choose my words carefully. “I never should’ve walked away from you, El. But that was a decade ago. I was just a kid. I was under a lot of pressure, and I

thought I was doing the right thing.”

“But that’s just it, Kade. You always think you know what’s best. Back then, it was letting your parents talk you out of us. Now, it’s paying for things I said I didn’t want help with.”

“You’re right. I didn’t stand up for you. I didn’t even stand up for us. I was so scared of messing up my shot at the NHL that I let my parents convince me I couldn’t have both. And you know better than anyone that I was never good at school. Hockey was my entire life plan—”

“Well, you were mine...” Her voice comes out so small, and the way her eyes lose their vibrance at the admission has my heart sinking. “But life doesn’t always go according to plan.”

“I’m so sorry, El,” I breathe out, raking my fingers through my hair. “I let you down, and I really wish I could go back and do it all over again and make the right choice. Because the truth is—I lost more than I gained when I let you go. And all I can do is promise to be better moving forward.”

“Well, it’s not just about me anymore. And Colton’s heart matters a whole lot more than mine. I don’t want to subject him to any more heartbreak.”

“I understand,” I say softly, feeling the weight of my past mistakes pressing down on me. “Colton is the priority, always. And I will do whatever it takes to ensure he doesn’t have to go through any more pain or heartbreak.”

Ella’s eyes search mine, sadness flickering in their depths. “I appreciate that, Kade. I truly do. And I want to believe you. I want to trust you. I’m just not sure I’m ready to completely let my guard down.”

I swallow hard. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that this feels like a lot right now. And I think I need some time to process everything. Some space to breathe. To think. To make sure that we’re not just falling into old patterns because it feels familiar.”

“Okay.” I nod, understanding the gravity of her words. “Take all the time you need. ”

“But I won’t stop you from coming to Colton’s games or practices,” she says quietly.

“I’ll be there.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ella

“Are you having first-game jitters?” Valerie nudges me as the first whistle blows and the skaters line up in their starting positions.

I take a deep breath and nod, my heart pounding with anxiety as I pick out Colton standing front and center.

“I’m just worried he’s going to get hurt...

” I hate that I sound like a wimp, but after years of watching Kade play hockey through high school, I know good and well how common it is to take a blow—and that’s already happened to Colton once.

“It’ll be fine,” Valerie reassures me. “And besides, kids bounce back fast at this age. It’s not like it’d be if one of us were out there trying to play. I mean, my goodness, if I fell out on the ice, I might not be able to get up for a whole week.”

I can’t help but giggle, even though I feel uneasy. “I don’t think I’d make it more than five feet of skating before I fell. I didn’t get any of the athleticism my sister got. I only got the brains.”

“And the looks.” She shoots me a playful wink.

A few moments later, Valerie nudges me with her elbow. But my eyes are glued on

Colton's every move. I wince as another kid brushes against his shoulder as he skates by.

Ugh, please leave my baby alone!

"Ella," Valerie urges, elbowing me again. "Look!"

Annoyance grows in the pit of my chest, but I swallow it, forcing my protective eyes from Colton to Valerie. "What is it?"

She points over to the entrance of the rink, and that's when I see it. Kade and his teammate, who I recognize to be Dylan Williamston, carrying signs with Colton's number and team colors. And to make it even worse...

Kade is wearing a mock jersey.

It's so freaking endearing that it makes my stomach swirl.

My mind races as I stare at Kade, a bright smile on his face, fist pumping and waving at Colton. My gaze jumps to the rink where I see Colton suddenly skating with a renewed sense of energy.

"You okay?" Valerie whispers. "You look like you're about to be sick."

I shake it off, clearing my throat and tossing my hair over my shoulder. "No, I'm totally fine. I just had a moment where I was starting to worry about Colton getting hurt. You know, he got that black eye at practice. It seems like it just cleared up. I don't want him to get another one."

"He's not going to get another black eye, silly. Well, at least not today." She laughs, tipping her head of red hair back.

“You’re not making me feel better,” I sulk, shaking my head.

“Oh c’mon, Ella. You’ve gotta have some faith. That was a freak accident anyway. He’s got this—look at him go!” Valerie bounces beside me, cheering on Colton as Aaron guards him and he skates across the rink with precision, headed right for the goal.

And he makes it.

“Way to go, Colton!” I find myself shouting and clapping as the rest of the crowd erupts in wild cheers. However, no one is as loud and proud as Kade, who gives a freaking caveman celebratory yell.

Colton lifts his head in Kade’s direction, and I can see his grin beneath the face guard.

He’s proud of himself, and I’m pretty sure Kade’s support means everything to him—even more so than my own.

It makes sense, though, because everything he’s learned about the game at this point has come from Kade, not me .

And for that reason, I hope Kade continues to be involved and doesn’t phase out just because I told him I needed some space.

“They’re going to win the game,” Valerie says. “I just know it. They’re really good. I think they put all the best players on our team.”

“I hope so,” I say, trying to gather my thoughts as the players huddle for a timeout. “I think I’m gonna go grab something from the concession stand. Do you want anything?”

She nods. “If you don’t mind, could you grab me a coke? I haven’t had one of those in a while, and it sounds pretty good right now.”

I give her a lame thumbs-up and make my way toward the concession stand at the back of the rink.

My eyes flicker toward Colton, who’s caught up in the game and not remotely in what I’m up to.

I smile at his focus. Hockey is a good avenue for him to build his self-confidence, and based on the way he’s playing, I have a feeling he might turn into the star of the team.

And that would make his parents so proud.

Honestly, just him playing hockey at all would do that. The bittersweet feeling takes over my chest as I find my place in the line with a sigh. There’s a solid seven to ten people in front of me, and I hope I don’t miss too much of the game.

I rock back onto my heels, my mind swirling from everything from the robotics team, to my mom’s health, to Colton, and to Kade.

I know better than to dwell on things too much.

I just need to take life one day at a time.

If I focus too much on everything, it’ll just reiterate the fact that maybe I’m ... secretly drowning.

I’m snapped out of my thoughts by the voices coming from a few people behind me in line.

“He’s playing really well,” Kade’s deep voice booms. “I’m so proud of him.”

“You were the one giving him lessons,” a voice that I assume to be Dylan’s replies, letting out a chuckle. “Most kids only dream of getting lessons from someone like you.”

“Yeah, but I’m the goalie, and the fact that he’s killing it at center really says a lot about his athletic capabilities.

I think that’s something that can’t be taught.

He’s just really talented.” Kade’s tone is oozing with a pride that reaches into my chest and squeezes my heart.

It’s so endearing, and I’m not even sure he knows that I’m standing just a few feet in front of him.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if the whole team came out to support Colton? Then we could all have signs and stuff.”

“Yeah. But maybe since we’re supporting the entire team, we shouldn’t just show support for Colton.”

“That’s true,” Dylan agrees. “I guess we could split up our support and make signs for the other kids, too, to make it more fair, but still ... I want to hold Colton’s sign!”

I smile to myself at the enthusiasm even Dylan has when it comes to Colton. If Colton knew what was being said about him, he’d be on cloud nine. I’ll have to tell him about this after the game.

“What can I get for you?” The teenager at the counter brings me back to reality, and I

flash her a smile.

“Can I get two cokes?” I ask, trying to ignore the heated gaze I suddenly feel boring into my skull. If Kade didn’t know I was in front of him, I’m certain that he knows now.

“Of course,” the girl says. “That’ll be five dollars.”

I nod, pull out a five-dollar bill and lay it on the counter, as she returns with the drinks. “Thank you,” I say, taking one in each hand. I spin around and head back for the stands, unable to avoid walking past Kade and Dylan.

Kade is staring at me, his gaze holding mine. All the while, Dylan appears to be looking at anything but me. It makes me wonder if they’ve talked about me since I asked for space...

“I just had to grab a couple of drinks,” I say stupidly as I approach them, swallowing the nerves that are now pumping against my ribcage.

“Yeah, I see that.” Kade chuckles, eyeing the two cokes in my hands. “Colton is playing really well tonight for his first game. If he’s nervous, you can’t even tell. It’s awesome.”

“Yeah,” I choke out, keeping a smile on my face. “I agree. Brett and Katie would be so proud of him. I know it.”

He nods. “Yeah, absolutely.”

With that, he gives me another nod and ushers Dylan forward, leaving me standing there facing no one. A pang of rejection hits my chest, but I have to remind myself that I’m the one who asked for space, and Kade is simply respecting me by putting

the distance there.

I asked him to do it.

No, I told him that's what I needed.

But this is for the best.

Right?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kade

“He scored the winning goal in his last game, I wonder what he’ll do tonight,” I muse aloud. We’re currently driving to the airport for an away game, which means I’m missing Colton’s second game—something that I’m not happy about.

“I’m sure he’ll play really well,” Cam assures.

I sigh. “I just wish there was a way to watch it. It’s not like I’ll have anything better to do on this six-hour charter flight. Might as well be able to watch the game.”

“Yeah, I don’t think they stream ten-year-olds playing hockey, bro.” Dylan snorts from in front of me. “You’ll be better off just trying to imagine it in your head.”

“Man, what’s wrong with you tonight?” Cam shoots at Dylan.

“Sorry,” he replies, leaning his head back and shutting his eyes. “Just dealing with annoying family stuff. My sister’s best friend is coming over for dinner this weekend, but she’s planning on bringing her boyfriend this time, and he’s literally the most annoying person I’ve ever met.”

“Wow, must be bad if you’re saying that.”

I check the time on my watch, pinpointing that Colton’s game will start about twenty minutes after take-off.

“You have no idea,” Dylan groans, but then doesn’t offer up any other amount of information. I don’t bother to ask any more questions.

“You could see if someone is streaming the game on Facebook or something,” Blaze speaks up, bringing my thoughts back to Colton. “Some parents are into that.”

“Maybe...” My voice trails off as the SUV pulls into the airport. I rub my forehead, knowing I should be thinking more about my own game than trying to catch Colton’s. But for whatever reason, his game seems equally as important.

And I can’t help that he means a lot to me.

The team filters out of the SUVs to make our way to the charter plane.

My bag bounces against my shoulders as I walk across the pavement, the whir of the jet engines already purring.

I glance down at my Nikes, which are beat up and old from years of running on them.

But they’re still my favorites, so I travel in them.

I make my way onto the charter plane and find a chair, plopping my bag down at my feet.

I pull my phone out, put it in airplane mode, and then connect to the Wi-Fi.

I scroll to social media and start scouring for any footage of Colton’s game.

I find a couple of posts, but none of them are talking about actually streaming the game.

With a defeated sigh, I drop my phone in my lap and rub my temples. I suppose I could ask Ella to record it. But would that be crossing a line? I swallow hard at the thought. Would that break her rule of putting distance between us?

Probably.

“Ugh,” I grumble under my breath, knowing that the time is ticking away. I don’t want to miss seeing his second game—not after he finished his first one on such a high.

I pick the phone back up and scroll for a few more minutes, double-checking the league website and anything else that might lead me to a streaming video.

But my efforts are fruitless. If I want to see any part of Colton’s game, I’ll have to ask Ella to do something for me.

I turn to Cam, who’s sitting directly across from me. “Hey,” I call out to him. “You think it’d be okay to ask Ella if she could record the game? Or do you think that breaks the whole distance thing?”

Cam makes a face. “You’re really that determined to see it, huh?”

“Yeah,” I don’t even hesitate. I don’t care. “I need to see his game. Otherwise, I won’t know what we need to go over the next time I have a chance to give him a lesson.”

Cam studies me for a few moments. “Well ... if you can’t find some other way to watch it, maybe just send Ella a quick text and ask her.

Just don’t get upset if she says no or something.

She doesn't have to do that for you—and don't double-text her, either.

Say everything you need to say in one message. ”

“I second that,” Blaze calls from beside him. “Don't ever double-text someone who's asking for space. That's pushing it too far. Addy would totally tell you that.”

“But didn't you double-text Addy at one point?”

“We don't talk about that.” He shrugs.

“Uh-huh. And what do you think, Dylan?” He doesn't look up, currently engrossed in his phone.

“Do whatever,” he mutters, his eyes still glued to his screen.

“I guess it's settled, then.” I swallow my nerves and navigate to the text message thread with Ella. I carefully type out a message, stopping once or twice to ensure that it sounds not pushy, extra-distant, and strictly about the game.

Me: Hey, I'm missing Colton's game tonight. I'm pretty bummed about it. I looked online to see if it was streaming anywhere, but I guess it's not. Would you mind recording it so I can watch it? If not, that's totally cool! Thanks.

I hit the send button, second-guessing myself as the bubble turns blue and then immediately shows that it's been read. Anxiety pumps through my veins as I stare at the screen.

Come on, Ella. I just want to see the game.

My mouth grows dry as the three dots pop up on the screen, and I wait for her to type

something out...

Part of me is preparing for a long text, lecturing me about bothering her.

But nothing comes.

In fact, ten minutes pass, the plane takes off into the evening, and I'm still staring at a completely blank screen.

I suppose no answer is an answer. Trying to push away the disappointment, I set my phone down in my lap and shut my eyes, attempting to will myself into a nap of sorts.

However, as soon as I start to drift off, my phone begins to vibrate in my lap, and I'm startled awake.

I almost silence it, but then choose to pick it up to see who's calling me.

But it's not just a phone call.

It's a FaceTime call. From Ella.

My heart pounds as I slide to answer it, unsure if it's a buttdial or on purpose. It takes a second to connect, and I adjust my earbud right as the noise of the crowd nearly explodes my eardrum .

I quickly turn down the volume as Ella's face goes from pixelated to clear. "Hey," I say, the word coming out as more of a question than a greeting. "What's up?"

"Hey," she replies slowly, her cheeks slightly blushed.

I try not to think about how gorgeous she looks with her hair half-up and her natural

makeup done.

“I was thinking maybe you’d like to watch the game live.

It might be easier than me recording the whole thing and then figuring out how to get it to you.

Is now a good time?” She seems a little shy as her eyes bounce away from the screen and back to it.

“Uh yeah, this is totally cool,” I tell her, trying not to show too much of my excitement—about the fact that Ella is FaceTiming me. “We can make this work, but you definitely don’t have to,” I add quickly.

“No, no,” Ella mumbles, fumbling with the phone. “I don’t mind at all. I just need to get this camera switched around so that you can actually see the game... They’re about to start right now...” The phone screen switches from showing Ella’s face to the rink, and I brush away the moment of longing.

I swear, I could stare at Ella all day long.

However, as soon as the whistle blows and the game starts, I get lost in the moment, watching Colton skate like a pro. He works his position perfectly, and I cheer him on as quietly as possible, trying not to disturb my teammates on the plane.

“Go, Colton, go!” Ella’s voice fills my ears, and I smile as the camera shakes in her hand. She’s caught up in the moment, and I lose the view of Colton scoring a goal. It’s fine, though. Hearing Ella cheer him on is just as good. “He’s so talented,” she says from behind the camera.

“He is,” I agree. “He’s very talented. I’m really impressed with how well he’s

playing. You'd never know this is his first year, El."

"I know." She beams and then sighs. "Well, actually, I guess I don't know, but it's clear that you taught him really well. It's showing on the ice. I'm proud of him."

"Me, too," I say, my voice thickening. I stop myself from saying anything more than that, turning my attention back to the game.

For the next hour, I watch it play out, with Colton scoring three more goals.

We cheer for him every time, and about halfway through, Cam and Blaze join me, all three of us lost in little league hockey.

"I never knew this could be so entertaining." Blaze chuckles, leaning over as a kid wipes out on the ice.

Ella gasps in my ear, but the rest of the guys can't hear her reaction. It warms my heart that she's so concerned for the kid's wellbeing. That's the way a mom should be, and I've always known that Ella would make the best mom. She's just got that sense about her.

"Dude, they're unstoppable," Cam breathes. "And I hate to say this, but Colton is totally carrying the weight of the team. He's got major talent. I bet he'll be an all-star if he keeps after it. "

"Do you really think so?" Ella's voice chimes in my ear. "Do you think that he can be that good? I don't want to get his hopes up..."

"If he keeps working hard, then yes," I answer her, taking a deep breath.

I don't know why the topic of the future suddenly feels like a weight on my chest, but

the realization that I might not be a part of Colton's future hits me like a freight train.

It's a heartbreak in and of itself, but I don't let it on.

"I'm really excited to see where hockey takes him, Ella. "

"Me, too," she replies, and while I can't see her face, I can hear the smile in her voice.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ella

The last thing I expected was to be FaceTiming Kade during Colton's game—not after I told him I needed space. But there was something so earnest in his text message that made me reach out despite my better judgment.

Seeing his reaction to Colton's playing, how nothing mattered more to him than watching a ten-year-old's hockey game—a ten-year-old who isn't even his—did something to me.

It did something to my heart.

“Dude, I can't believe we won again!” Aaron gives Colton a high five as the two emerge from the locker room.

“I know!” Colton beams with pride as he meets my gaze .

“You played great today, kiddo.” I bring him in for a hug, giving him a tight squeeze before releasing him. Valerie does the same for Aaron, and we drift away from the crowd of parents and onlookers, heading toward the exit.

“Everyone thinks that Colton's dad is a professional hockey player,” Aaron blurts out as soon as we step out into the evening air. “And he didn't tell them no!”

I whip my head around to Colton, my eyes widening. “Why do they think that?”

“Um...” Colton’s voice trails off, and his cheeks redden. “I don’t know...”

“It’s ’cause they saw Kade at our first game and he had that sign and stuff!” Aaron continues to rattle off, telling all about what’s been happening on the team. “Colton didn’t say anything, so they all think that Kade is his dad!”

Valerie and I exchange a look, and she guides Aaron’s shoulders away from us. “We really need to get going ... we’ll talk tomorrow?” Valerie smiles at the two of us, and then we split, them heading toward their van and us toward the Tahoe.

I sigh and run my fingers through my hair, knowing that I’m going to have to address this before it gets out of hand. “Come on,” I say, placing a hand on his back. “We need to talk.”

He’s quiet, throwing his bag into the backseat and then climbing in. His total silence has me feeling a little guilty—but also irritated. Why wouldn’t he tell the kids the truth? Kade isn’t his dad ...

I climb into the driver’s seat and start the car, letting the engine warm up as we sit and idle in the parking lot. “Did you tell your teammates that Kade is your dad?” I let the question hang in the silence as I adjust the rearview to meet his gaze in the mirror.

Colton’s eyes immediately drop to his lap. “I ... I didn’t tell them he was my dad ... I just didn’t tell them he’s not my dad.”

“Did you want them to think that Kade is your dad?” I ask the question softly, trying to make sure I don’t come across as accusatory—or make him feel like he’s in trouble.

That’s the last thing I want to do right now.

I just want Colton to feel safe enough to share his feelings and not bottle them up.

“I just...” His voice trails off as he glances up, meeting my eyes in the mirror. They’re rimmed with moisture, and as much as I want to be mad at him, I can’t bring myself to feel anything other than pure sympathy. His lower lip quivers, and his voice breaks. “I just wanna have a dad, too.”

My heart explodes in my chest as he begins to cry, and I quickly unbuckle and spin around in my seat to reach out to him and grab his hand. I give it a squeeze. “Colton, I’m so sorry. I really am. There are so many things that I wish I could change.”

“Why can’t you just be with Kade?” His voice strains through his distress, and I feel the weight of his words on my shoulders. “He’s super nice, and Aaron says that he likes you!”

“It’s not that simple,” I say quietly but firmly. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, it should .” Colton shuts down then, folding his arms across his chest after wiping his tears away.

“You can’t lie about who your dad is,” I say softly. “Your dad was really good at hockey. He could’ve been a pro had that been something that he wanted to do, but instead, he just wanted to be your dad.”

“Do you think he’d be proud of me?” Colton’s voice comes out so small, reminding me of the sad five-year-old that sat in the back of my car and cried for his parents for hours after the accident.

“I think they’d both be so proud of you, Colton.

They’d cheer for you louder than anyone else in the entire world.

” I fight to hold back the tears as Colton nods, fresh ones spilling from his eyes and down his cheeks.

His nod tells me he needs space, and I turn back around in my seat, buckle up, and pull out of the parking spot.

I readjust the mirror, preventing Colton from seeing me as the tears begin to fall from my own eyes. I’d never wish this kind of pain on anyone, especially not a child. I know that Colton wants to be able to point out his dad like a lot of the other kids on the team.

I breathe in and out, trying to keep myself from breaking down as I make the fifteen-minute drive home. As soon as I pull into the driveway and park in the garage, Colton hops out, leaving his hockey bag in the backseat.

I let him go, slowly gathering all my things from the day and grabbing his bag on the way inside. I set it all down in the mudroom and then kick off my shoes. I walk slowly across the tile floors, hearing the shower running in the bathroom. I let out a sigh and keep going to my room.

Instead of immediately hopping into my own shower, I plop down on the edge of the bed and fish my phone out of my pocket. I scroll to my mother’s phone number and hit the call button, trying to keep it together.

“Hello?” Her warm tone fills my body with some relief.

“Hey, Mom,” I breathe out. “I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“Oh, of course not, Ella.” I can hear the smile in her voice. “How are you? You sound awfully tired. Late night at practice?”

“No, Colton had his second game tonight, and apparently—”

“Oh, was Katie there?” Mom cuts me off, confusion filling her voice. “And what kind of game? Why was I not invited?”

My heart plummets. “What’s the date today?”

“Oh, I’m not sure...” Mom’s voice trails off. “I think it’s about time for your semester to end, right? It’s getting close to finals.”

“I see...” I swallow the hurt. She has no idea of the present.

She must be having a bad day. “Is Chandra there? I thought she was coming to clean today.” It’s the verbiage I use when Mom is having a bad day, and she believes Chandra is the cleaner I hired to help her out.

I don’t how Chandra manages to do what she does—but I couldn’t do this without her.

“I don’t know why you think I need help cleaning. I’m not decrepit. I’m only fifty-one.”

No, you’re not, Mom.

“I know, but I just thought the help would be nice,” I say carefully, just as I hear the other line pick up. Chandra must’ve figured out that Mom was on the phone. “Oh, is that Chandra on the other line?”

“Yes,” Chandra comes on, her voice warm and sweet. “I just so happened to hear your mom on the line and thought I’d see if I could check in on you, Ella. You know how nosy I can be.”

I hold back the tears, already knowing that Chandra is saying what she's saying because Mom isn't all the way there right now.

"Oh, it's always nice to catch up with you.

I don't get to do that very often." We both have figured out that if we try to correct Mom on what time her mind is in, she gets combative—and that never ends well for anyone.

"Why don't you let us catch up for a little bit?" Chandra's voice has that consistently motherly, gentle tone, and I breathe out a sigh of relief as Mom agrees.

"Oh, I bet the two of you would enjoy that since Ella has been away for college. It's so hard having you gone, Ella. I miss you."

"I miss you, too, Mom," I say, just as I hear the line click .

"She's not having a good day," Chandra then says, her voice losing its brightness. "In fact, it's been one of her worst days yet." I can suddenly hear the exhaustion in her voice, and I feel a pang of guilt.

"I'm sorry for not being there." I sniffle, my emotions overwhelming me all over again. "I feel like I should be there more often. It's just with hockey and robotics and—"

"You're doing plenty enough already," Chandra says, her voice firm. "Please don't beat yourself up. Your mom usually has more good days than bad. She's had a great week other than just today. I'm sure she'll be better tomorrow. You just have to give her time."

"I know," I choke out, running a hand over my face. I feel selfish, but for once, I

really need my mom to be in the right mind. She's the only person I have that understands my situation and what I'm going through with Colton. Not to mention, she knows Kade better than anyone else I know.

"Are you okay?" Chandra's tone comes out concerned. "You don't sound great, Ella. Do you need to talk about something?"

"No," I say quietly. "I'm just tired. I'll let you go, though. I need to get Colton in bed soon." I hang up with her after we say our goodbyes, and then I toss my phone to my bed, burying my head in my hands. I've never needed to talk to someone so badly, to unload everything I'm going through.

But who would possibly listen to me?

I swallow hard, my eyes drifting back to my phone.

There is one person who would listen to me...

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kade

The hotel room door clicks shut behind me, and I drop my bag in front of the king-sized bed with a heavy thud. Tomorrow's away game against Boston looms over me, but right now, all I can think about is a hot shower and at least seven hours of uninterrupted sleep.

I roll my shoulders, trying to work out the kinks that come from being nearly six-foot-four and crammed into an airplane seat, even if it is a charter.

"I'm getting old," I mutter as I unzip my team jacket.

I'm digging through my suitcase for a clean pair of sweats when my phone starts buzzing in my back pocket. Probably Cam asking if I want to grab food with the guys. My stomach growls, but exhaustion wins. I'll just order room service and crash.

When I pull out my phone, Ella's name and picture flashes across the screen, and my heart jumps in my chest at the sight. I stare at it for a moment, almost afraid to answer.

But I do before I can overthink it.

"Ella?"

"Kade." There's a pause, and I can envision her biting her lip the way she does when

she's nervous. "I'm sorry to call so late. You're probably busy—"

"No, I'm not busy," I cut in, maybe too quickly. I sit on the edge of the bed, suddenly less tired. "Just got to the hotel. What's up?"

"I..." Her voice wavers slightly. "Something happened with Colton after the game, and I needed someone to talk to. Someone who would understand."

"Is he okay?" Concern floods through me.

"He's fine. Physically, at least." She sighs.

I wait, giving her the space to continue at her own pace, as the silence stretches between us for a few seconds.

"Aaron let out that the other kids on the team think you're Colton's dad." The words tumble out in a rush. "Apparently, after you came to his first game with the signs and everything, they just assumed, and Colton didn't correct them."

I grip the phone tighter, unsure how to respond. "Oh."

"When I asked him about it, he broke down crying. He said—" Her voice catches, and I hear her gulp. "He said he just wants to have a dad, too."

My chest tightens. "El, I'm so sorry."

"No, don't apologize. It's not your fault." She lets out a shaky breath. "It just ... it broke my heart, you know? He doesn't deserve this. And I really wish I could help, but I—I can't bring Brett and Katie back. And I just feel so inadequate right now."

"It doesn't mean you're not enough," I say gently. "It's natural for kids to want what

other kids have.”

“I know. Logically, I know that.” There’s a rustling sound, like she’s running her hand through her hair or shifting positions. “But it hit me hard. And then I called my mom afterward, hoping to talk it through with her, but she’s having a bad day. She thought I was still in college.”

I close my eyes, hating that she has to deal with so much grief. “That’s rough. I’m really sorry.”

“Chandra was there—that’s her caregiver—but still.

It was just one more thing, you know? I feel like I’m barely keeping my head above water most days between teaching, coaching robotics, hockey, my mom, trying to be both parents to Colton...

” She lets out a shuddering breath. “I didn’t know who else to call. ”

The confession tugs at something deep inside me. Despite everything that’s happened between us, she still turned to me when she needed someone.

I clear my throat, trying to push past the emotion building there.

“I’m glad you called me.” I mean it more than she could possibly know.

“I don’t want to burden you with this,” she whispers. “I know you’ve got your own stuff going on, especially with the game tomorrow—”

“It’s not a burden. Not at all.”

“Colton really looks up to you, and I thought maybe you’d have some insight on how

to handle this.”

“Well, I understand why Colton may have done it. Hockey is his new world, and he wants to fit in. Plus, it’s probably easier to go along with their assumption than try to explain the whole situation to kids he barely knows.”

“That’s what I thought as well,” she admits.

“What did you tell him when he said he wanted a dad?”

She’s quiet for a moment. “I told him that Brett would be proud of him. That both his parents would cheer for him louder than anyone else in the world if they were here.”

Something warm spreads through my chest at her words. Even in her emotional turmoil, she made sure to honor his parents’ memory.

“That was perfect,” I say softly. “You’re doing a great job with Colton. You know that, right?”

She makes a sound that’s halfway between a laugh and a sob. “Am I? Because some days I really don’t feel like it.”

“Yes, you are,” I insist. “Colton is kind, resilient, determined. And he’s respectful to others. Those aren’t qualities that just happen by accident. They come from having someone like you to guide him.”

I hear her take a deep breath. “Thank you for saying that,” she says. “I needed to hear it.”

“Anytime.” I pause, then add, “Do you think it would help if I talked to him? Not to contradict anything you’ve said, but just to—I don’t know—clarify things? Let him

know it's okay to be honest with his teammates about who I am?"

"You'd do that?" The surprise in her voice stings a little.

"Of course I would. I care about Colton." I swallow hard before adding, "And I care about you, too. That hasn't changed."

The line goes quiet, and for a second, I worry I've said too much, pushed too far.

"I know," she says finally. "I know you do."

We both let that hang between us for a moment, neither willing to unpack what it really means.

"If you think it would help for me to talk to him, I'll do it," I continue. "Also, I've been meaning to tell you that I have some extra tickets to next week's game. No pressure, but I wanted to put it out there in case you and Valerie want to bring the boys."

"That would be so great," she breathes. "The boys will love that."

"Awesome, I'll send them your way."

Another silence falls, but it's less tense than before. I hear her yawn.

"You should get some sleep," I tell her. "It's been a long day."

"Yeah," she agrees. "You too. Thanks again for listening."

"I meant what I said before. I'm always here for both of you."

Her “thank you” is soft, carrying a warmth that spreads through my chest like honey.

“Good night, Kade.”

“Good night, El.”

The call ends, and I stare at my phone for a long moment before setting it on the nightstand.

She called me.

When she needed someone, she chose me .

I grab my toiletry bag and head for the shower, replaying our conversation in my mind.

There’s still so much unresolved between us—her request for space, that kiss at the rink, years of history and hurt.

But tonight feels like a small step forward, like a crack in the wall she’s built around herself.

Under the hot spray of the shower, I let myself imagine a future where calls like this aren’t rare exceptions but part of our daily routine.

Where Colton doesn’t have to pretend that I’m his dad because I’m actually there, not as a replacement for his father, but as someone who loves him in my own right.

Where Ella doesn’t have to shoulder everything alone.

It’s a dangerous path to let my mind wander down. I know better than to get my

hopes up. But as I step out of the shower and wrap a towel around my waist, I can't help but smile at the thought.

I just wish I could go back in time and never let her go...

When I finally lay down on the crisp hotel bed sheets, I close my eyes as soon as my head hits the pillow. And suddenly, I'm pulled back into the depths of my mind—back to a whole decade ago, when Ella was begging me not to let her go ... and all the things that led up to it.

9 Years Ago

My heart thuds in my chest, the box in my pocket burning a hole. "I need to talk to you for a second," I say to my parents, both of whom are leaning against the kitchen counter, talking quietly to each other.

My dad, whose hair is graying faster than ever now, sets his cup of coffee down. "What is it, Kade? You look nervous." His thick brow furrows, and I start to sweat under his gaze .

At my father's words, my mother also turns around, though she seems less concerned. "What's up, honey?" She continues to sip her coffee as I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

"I bought something yesterday..." My voice doesn't come out confident. In fact, I sound like a weak little puppy, terrified of his new owners. Well, except my parents don't own me. No one owns me.

I'm an adult now.

"Okay..." My dad watches as my hand slides to my pocket, just as Nate walks into

the kitchen, eating an apple while humming a tune. The song abruptly stops as Nate sees what's going down between my parents and me.

“What is this?” Nate chuckles, his eyes bouncing until they meet mine. His gaze locks on my hand in my pocket, and the apple he was crunching on drops to his side. “You did it? You actually bought the ring, didn't you?”

“The ring ?” Mom is now fully invested. “What are you talking about?”

My face grows hot as I feel outed by my brother, and instead of trying to explain, I pull the ring out of my pocket. My mother makes an audible gasp at the sight of it, and my father grunts something incoherent.

“He's going to ask Ella to marry him,” Nate snorts in the most obnoxious way.

“Are you serious?” Mom turns to me, her voice now sharpening. “You're going to ask Ella to marry you? But you're only eighteen! You just got a scholarship for hockey! And the two are about to go off to two different schools...”

“I'm not proposing,” I clarify in a stern voice, shaking my head. “It's a promise ring. I've been wanting to get her one, and now seems like the right time with her moving away and everything...” My voice trails off as everyone stares at me, their skepticism written all over their face.

“Look.” Dad sighs, running a hand over his face. “I get that you and Ella have been together for years now—and we love her, we do—but you're about to live eight hours apart from each other. It seems a little much to be promising anything right now.”

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“And everyone knows promise rings are bad omens,” Nate adds, biting into his apple again.

“Well, I love her,” I say as I stand there, surrounded by the family I thought would be excited for me.

“I know I’m going to be really busy playing college hockey at LSU, but I don’t want El to think I’ve forgotten about her.

I want her to know, whenever she sees it, that I wish we could be right there, together... ”

“Then you two should’ve gone to the same school,” Mom cuts in, her voice plain and sharp. “She could’ve gone to LSU with you, but she chose not to.”

“She has her own scholarship,” I reason, shaking my head. “It’s not that simple.”

“I understand.” Mom nods, her features softening.

“But that’s why you shouldn’t be making big promises at this age.

In fact, I’m starting to worry that a long-distance relationship will become a distraction for you.

You need to be focused on hockey. You’ve worked too hard for this.

And you have a real shot at going pro. I don’t want you to miss out on the

opportunity to join the NHL. ”

“Your mom is right,” Dad chimes. “A long-distance relationship can detract from your ability to focus on the ice, and the last thing you need is to lose out on a spot on a professional team just because you’re too busy burning up the miles between you and Ella.

She’s got her own life to live. And you have a real chance to change the trajectory of yours. ”

“But she’s my person,” I argue.

“And if it’s meant to be, it’ll be, honey,” my mom gently reasons.

“If anything, you need to consider backing off and let nature run its course,” Dad adds.

I glance down at the ring in the box, my stomach churning. “I don’t want to give her up.”

“Bro, I get that you love her. But high school relationships rarely work out in the long run.” Nate tosses his apple core into the open trash bin of our small family kitchen.

“I mean, think about it. You’re about to live eight hours apart.

You’re gonna be practicing and playing hockey, and when you’re not, you’ll be doing schoolwork.

There’s no way you’re gonna have time for Ella.

It’s not like you two will be able to sit down and study together, or go grab a quick

dinner. ”

“We can call each other,” I argue, dread settling into my chest. I glance down at my watch, seeing that it’s already time to meet up with her. She’s going to be waiting for me at our spot, and the last thing I want is to be late. She leaves tomorrow for school.

“Phone calls aren’t enough to maintain a solid relationship,” Dad cuts in, continuing to hound me.

“And honestly, throwing a ring on her finger as a promise when you’re not even going to be around seems like a way to control her.

She needs to be able to live her life without worrying about what you’re doing. ”

“But I’m not like that,” I grit out. “I don’t hold her back.”

“No, but you haven’t been long distance, either. That changes things,” Mom says, folding her arms across her chest. “You need to think about what’s best for Ella. Not just yourself.”

“And you need to think about your hockey career,” Dad calls to me as I spin on my heels and head for the door.

“Your mom and I have worked hard to ensure your future turns out better than ours. If you throw hockey away, it would all be for nothing. And then you’ll be stuck trying to provide for Ella on a grocery boy’s salary.

Don’t you think she deserves better than that?

” His words hit my heart as I step out the front door, fear shattering all the confidence I had only a half hour ago.

Maybe I do need to focus on hockey before I promise anything.

What if I can't give her what she wants ?

What if I don't make hockey a career? And I end up poor, like my parents?

The thoughts spin around in my head as I drive to our spot by the lake.

When I make it, Ella is already there, sitting on the bench. I hurry out of my car and rush toward her, sitting down beside her, our shoulders brushing. I wrap my arm around her as she peers up at me, tears in her eyes.

"I can't believe I have to leave tomorrow," she murmurs, her voice shaky. "I thought this summer would last so much longer."

I nod, a lump growing in my throat as I think about our imminent goodbye. "It went by really fast..."

Ella furrows her brow, her golden eyes focused on me. "Are you okay?"

I can't figure out how to tell her all the things I have on my mind—and it tumbles out in the worst way. "I think I need to focus on hockey."

She jerks backward, confusion etched in her expression.

"Um ... I don't understand what you're saying.

Of course you have to focus on hockey, but you also need to focus on school, too.

Are you trying to..." Her voice trails off, and she connects dots that I don't even know I'm creating.

“Oh my gosh, you’re breaking up with me. You’re breaking up with me.”

“No... Well... I... You’re going to be a long way away, and I just don’t want to be a grocery boy—”

“What?” Ella cuts me off, standing to her feet in a hurry.

“A grocery boy? Are you serious? I knew something was off with you... You’ve been acting funny since yesterday, and I bet you were listening to your dad again, weren’t you?”

I don’t know why you think if you don’t go pro, you’re going to end up stuck bagging groceries!

You’ll still have a college degree, you know!

” She throws her arms out in the most dramatic way possible, and I’m just as shocked as she is.

“I just want to be able to give you the world, and I don’t know... Maybe long distance isn’t going to be the way that works.” My words are tumbling out of my mouth, and I know I’m not making any sense. What am I doing? What am I even saying?

“Okay, I get it.” Ella blows out a sigh. “I knew there was a chance this would happen. I knew it. You’ve always loved hockey more than you ever loved me.”

“No...” My voice trails off. “But I have to put my everything into hockey. That’s the only way that I can be who I want to be for you.”

“This is so twisted.” Her face contorts with hurt. “You’re breaking up with me so you

can be who you need to be for me?" She shakes her head, tears streaming down her face. "I can't believe you, Kade. I really can't believe you."

Ella spins on her heels and storms away, leaving me there in a puddle of shock .

I can't even find the words until her car is peeling out of the parking lot. With blurry vision, I gaze after her. I just broke up with the woman who, hours ago, I was going to promise to be with forever...

And now, I might have to live forever without her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ella

The classroom feels too quiet after the last student leaves, the silence punctuated by the ticking of the clock and my pen tapping against the stack of ungraded papers on my desk.

I have thirty-two math quizzes to grade, each one needing my full attention—attention I can't seem to muster because my thoughts keep drifting to Kade.

I set down my pen and rub my temples, my eyes going to my phone sitting face-up on my desk. No new notifications. No texts from Kade. Which is exactly what I asked for, isn't it? Space. Distance. Time to think.

So why does it feel so hollow?

I manage to grade two papers before my thoughts stray again. It's not that the work isn't important. These kids deserve my full attention. But Kade's words keep echoing in my head.

"I'm always here for both of you."

I shake my head, trying to dislodge his voice from my memory.

I called him in a moment of weakness, when Colton's tears about wanting a dad

broke my heart, and when my own mother couldn't even remember what decade we were in.

I just needed someone who would understand, someone who knows Colton well enough to offer genuine insight.

I didn't expect Kade to answer immediately. I didn't expect the gentle patience in his voice as I stumbled through an explanation. I definitely didn't expect his words to make me feel so ... seen.

And so ... safe .

I stare at Lucy Smith's quiz. She's made the exact same error as three other students.

I should make a note to review that concept tomorrow.

But instead, I find myself thinking about how Kade's never missed a single opportunity to be there for Colton, even when I pushed him away.

How much that consistency must mean to a boy who's lost so much.

It's becoming increasingly difficult to keep him at arm's length when he's so thoroughly woven himself into the fabric of our lives. When Colton talks about him constantly. When I find myself looking for him in the stands before I even realize what I'm doing .

"You're not actually grading that test, are you?"

I startle, nearly dropping my pen as I look up to find Valerie perched on the edge of a student's desk.

“How long have you been standing there?” I ask, setting my pen down.

“Long enough to watch you stare at the same question for five minutes.” She hands me one of the two coffee cups she’s carrying. “You need this more than I do. You’re a million miles away.”

I accept the cup gratefully. “Just tired.”

“Mm-hmm,” Valerie hums, clearly unconvinced. She settles more comfortably on the desk, crossing her legs beneath her flowy emerald dress. “And this zombie stare has nothing to do with a certain NHL player?”

Heat crawls up my neck. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Spill it,” she demands, using that same penetrating stare she gives students who are trying to hide contraband. “Something’s going on. You’ve had that distracted look on your face all week.”

I take a sip of coffee, buying myself some time. Valerie waits patiently, one eyebrow raised. She’s never been one to back down easily.

“I guess I’m just ... confused. I told Kade I needed space, and he’s respected that. He hasn’t pushed or tried to change my mind. He just ... shows up for Colton. Every time. Without fail. ”

“And that surprises you?”

I fiddle with the coffee cup lid. “Maybe? I don’t know. After Landon left, I guess I just expected—I don’t know what I expected.”

“You expected Kade to leave, too,” Valerie says softly. “But he hasn’t. Not even

when you gave him every reason to.”

The truth of her words hits me like a physical blow. “He genuinely cares about Colton,” I whisper. “He hasn’t missed a single game. He just keeps showing up for him. He even invited us all to the upcoming Glaciers game.”

“Us all?”

“You, me, Aaron, and Colton. He has tickets.”

Valerie studies me for a moment, her head tilted. “You know, for someone who’s supposed to be keeping her distance, you seem to be letting him awfully close.”

“It’s for Colton,” I say automatically.

“Is it?” she challenges. “Or are you possibly developing feelings for him again?”

I stare down at the stack of tests. “It’s complicated.”

“Love usually is,” she says with a small smile.

“I didn’t say anything about love,” I counter.

“You didn’t have to.” Valerie takes a sip of her coffee, watching me over the rim. “Your face does this thing when you talk about him. It’s like you’re trying so hard to keep your walls up, but they keep crumbling anyway. ”

I run my hands through my hair, loosening more strands from the clip I secured it with this morning. “He’s already broken my heart once before, Val.”

“I get that. But people change. You’re not the same person you were at eighteen,

right?”

“No,” I admit.

“And Kade doesn’t seem like the same person either,” she points out. “From everything you’ve told me, he’s been nothing but supportive and respectful of your need for space, even when it’s clearly killing him—and you.”

“Sure, but Kade and I have history. Complicated history.” I sigh. “And I’ve spent so long being angry at him for choosing hockey over me that I don’t know how to let that go.”

“But he’s not choosing hockey over you now, is he?” Valerie counters. “He’s doing everything he can to be present for both you and Colton, despite his career.”

I blink. I hadn’t thought about it that way. “I suppose not.”

“From my perspective, Kade seems like a man who made a mistake when he was young and is doing everything in his power to make up for it now.”

“I ... I just don’t want Colton to get hurt.”

“And you think keeping Kade at arm’s length is protecting Colton?” Valerie questions. “From what I’ve seen, that boy adores Kade. And Kade adores him right back. ”

“For now,” I counter. “But what happens when Kade decides hockey is more important again? Or when he just gets tired of playing dad to someone else’s kid?”

Valerie studies me for a long moment. “You know, fear is a funny thing. It can keep us safe, but it can also keep us stuck.” She reaches out to cover my hand with hers. “I

think your fear is holding both you and Colton back from the family you could have.”

“Family?” I echo, the word catching in my throat.

“Yes, family.” Valerie leans forward, her eyes earnest. “Those boys are so much happier together. And if I’m not mistaken, you’re happier, too.”

I can’t deny it. The moments when the three of us are together—at the rink, getting pizza after practice, even just sitting in the car—those are the moments when everything feels right.

I stare down at my coffee cup, watching the steam curl into the air.

“I don’t know how to let him in without risking everything.”

“Oh, Ella.” Valerie sighs. “That’s the thing about love. It always involves risk. There are no guarantees. But from what I’ve seen, Kade Santos is a pretty sure bet. I mean, he’s been showing you and Colton exactly who he is through his actions. The question is, are you paying attention?”

I think about the last couple weeks—how Kade has kept his distance from me while still being there for Colton, how his face lights up whenever Colton succeeds on the ice. How the man has spent countless hours teaching my boy how to skate, to play, to believe in himself.

“But what if it doesn’t work out?” I whisper, voicing my deepest fear. “What if he leaves again?”

“What if he doesn’t?” Valerie counters, squeezing my arm. “What if this is your second chance at happiness? Are you really willing to let fear rob you of that?”

I don't have an answer. Valerie doesn't push for one. She just sits with me, her presence comforting as I mull over her words.

The bell rings, startling us both. In less than a minute, my classroom will be filled with thirty energetic twelve-year-olds.

"Think about it," she says, standing up and smoothing her dress. "That's all I'm asking. Just think about what you really want, not what you're afraid of. And know that it's okay to change your mind. Just don't wait too long, or you might lose him altogether."

Her words hit something deep inside me. The thought of losing Kade again, this time because of my own fear rather than his choices, makes my chest ache in a way I can't ignore.

She gives me one last meaningful look before heading to the door. "And for what it's worth," she adds, pausing in the doorway, "I've seen the way he looks at you when you're not watching. That man is still very much in love with you, Ella."

The house is quiet except for the soft hum of the dishwasher.

I curl up in the corner of the living room couch, wrapping myself in the throw blanket Colton and I picked out together last winter.

He's been asleep for over an hour now. I should be grading more papers and prepping for tomorrow's lessons, but Valerie's words from this afternoon keep circling in my head like a song I can't shake.

"What if this is your second chance at happiness?"

The question feels both terrifying and exhilarating, like standing at the edge of a high

dive, trying to decide whether to jump.

I close my eyes, and suddenly the memory of our breakup all those years ago unfolds like a movie in my mind. The words exchanged, the hurt, the tears.

But the scene is playing differently than it has for the past decade.

I've always remembered it as a betrayal—Kade choosing hockey over me, breaking my heart because his NHL career mattered more than our relationship. But now, remembering the confusion on his face, the way his words tumbled out incoherently ... I wonder if there was more to it.

“I just want to be able to give you the world, and I don't know ... Maybe long distance isn't going to be the way that works.”

Those were his exact words. At eighteen, all I heard was rejection. But now, at twenty-seven, I hear the fear behind them. The insecurity. The pressure he must have been under.

I was so hurt, so blindsided, that I ran. I didn't stay to hear his explanation or try to understand. I cut him off completely—deleted his number, blocked him on social media, ignored his attempts to reach out. It was easier to hate him than to face the pain of losing him.

But we were just kids. Kids with big dreams and no real understanding of what it meant to navigate adult relationships through major life transitions. Kids who made mistakes.

I open my eyes with a newfound understanding. A newfound hope.

And that's when Kade's question—the night after our kiss—echoes in my mind:

“I still have feelings for you, El ... is it really too late for us?”

At the time, I was too angry, too defensive to hear it. But now, alone in the quiet of my living room, I let myself truly consider it.

Is it too late?

But my heart already knows the answer. It's been there all along, buried beneath layers of protection I built up over the years.

I've been so focused on avoiding pain that I've been blind to the possibility of joy. So determined not to repeat past mistakes that I've been making a new one—pushing away someone who genuinely cares for both me and Colton.

I stand up, stretching my arms overhead, before making my way to my bedroom.

I peek into Colton's room. He's sprawled across his bed, one arm flung over his head, hockey posters watching over him from every wall.

While asleep, he looks so much like Katie that it makes my heart twist. I wonder what she would tell me if she were here.

I think she'd want me to be happy. To let Colton be happy. To stop hiding behind fear and start opening myself to possibility.

Which is why, starting now, I'm done letting fear dictate my decisions.

Tomorrow, we have tickets to Kade's game. I'll see him there, probably just briefly after the game, but it's a start. A chance to look at him with new eyes, without the walls I've been hiding behind.

Maybe our story isn't over yet.

Maybe it's just beginning.

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 3:45 am

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ella

“Dude, I’m so excited for the game,” Aaron says from the backseat. “I heard that the Glaciers might make it to the playoffs again this year.”

“Duh, they’re going to make it,” Colton shoots back. “Kade is, like, the best goalie ever. He was the NHL’s top pick for the position this year. He’s basically the best there ever was. I bet it’s ’cause he’s been getting extra practice with me.”

I raise my brows and eye Valerie, who’s stifling her giggle from the passenger seat. I swear, kids say the most interesting things when they’re having conversations with each other—or really anyone, for that matter.

“Mom, do you think we’ll get to see Kade after the game?” Colton leans forward, his seatbelt straining as he pokes his head between the front seats.

“Maybe for a few minutes,” I reply, keeping my eyes on the road. “He’ll probably be tired, but I’m sure he’ll want to say hello.”

What I don’t say is how much I’m counting on those few minutes—how I’ve rehearsed at least twenty different versions of what I might say to him.

The boys go back to their excited chatter, and I turn on the radio. The familiar route to the Glaciers’ arena feels different tonight—my hands aren’t gripping the steering wheel with their usual tension, and for once, the afternoon traffic isn’t sending my

blood pressure through the roof.

“You seem ... lighter,” Valerie says quietly. “Like you’ve made a decision.”

I take a deep breath. “Let’s just say, I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said. About not letting fear rob me of something potentially good.”

Her smile widens. “I’m proud of you. It takes courage to give someone a second chance.”

“Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’ve still gotta talk with him first,” I warn, though I can’t stop the small smile that tugs at my lips .

For the first time in years, I’m letting myself imagine possibilities rather than worst-case scenarios. And it’s both terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

We finally pull into the arena parking lot, the massive building looming before us. I take one last glance at myself in the mirror—smoothing my hair, checking my lipstick, then immediately feeling silly for caring so much.

“Alright, everybody out,” I announce, trying to sound casual as I gather my purse and coat. “And stay together. This place is going to be packed.”

The boys tumble out of the car, their energy infectious as they practically bounce toward the entrance. Valerie hangs back with me, linking her arm through mine.

“Whatever happens tonight,” she says softly, “I’m here for you.”

I squeeze her arm. “Thanks, Val. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Inside, the arena is electric with energy. The corridors bustle with fans decked out in

Glaciers' gear, the air thick with excitement and the smell of concession food. Colton's eyes are wide, taking it all in as we navigate through the crowd.

"Our seats are in section 101," I read aloud from the tickets Kade sent, trying to orient myself with the stadium layout. "That's ... somewhere down here."

"There!" Aaron points excitedly. "I see 101!"

We follow the signs, and as we approach our section, my heart does a little flip. Front row. Right behind the Glaciers' bench. These aren't just good seats—they're incredible seats.

"Oh my gosh," Valerie gasps. "These are, like, famous people seats."

"We're gonna be on TV!" Aaron exclaims, practically vibrating with excitement.

As we make our way down to our row, Colton suddenly freezes, causing me to bump into him.

"Colton, what's—" I start, then follow his gaze to a man already seated in our row. A man with familiar features, dark hair, and olive skin. A man who looks exactly like Kade, but isn't.

Nate.

My breath catches in my throat. I haven't seen Nate Santos since our high school graduation, and even then, it was just a glimpse across a crowded auditorium.

He was never unkind to me, but he also wasn't particularly warm either.

And after Kade and I broke up, I always wondered if Nate had played a role in his

brother's decision.

Colton looks up at me, confusion written all over his face. "Mom, that guy looks just like Kade."

"That's because he's Kade's twin brother," I explain, trying to keep my voice steady. "His name is Nate."

Colton's eyes widen even further. "Kade has a twin? That's so cool!"

Before I can stop him, he's racing down the row toward Nate. "Hi! I'm Colton! You look just like Kade!"

Nate looks up, startled, and for a moment, I see confusion flash across his face.

Then his eyes move past Colton and land on me.

Recognition flashes, followed by something I can't quite read—surprise?

His gaze lingers for what feels like an eternity, and I find myself frozen in place, unsure of what to do or say after all these years.

"Sorry," I finally manage, stepping forward to place a hand on Colton's shoulder. "He's a bit excited."

Nate stands, his height and build so similar to Kade's that it's uncanny. There's a stiffness to him that Kade doesn't have, though—a more controlled demeanor that always sets the twins apart.

"It's nice to see you, Ella," he says, his voice genuinely warm, which surprises me. He extends his hand, and I shake it, feeling oddly formal given our history.

“You, too,” I reply, not entirely sure if I mean it. “It’s been a long time.”

“Too long,” he agrees, and there’s something in his expression that seems almost apologetic. His eyes shift to Colton. “And you must be the hockey player my brother can’t stop talking about.”

Colton beams, puffing out his chest slightly. “You know about me? ”

“Are you kidding? Kade talks about you all the time.” Nate grins, then turns toward a woman beside him whom I hadn’t noticed. “This is my girlfriend, Mallory.”

The woman smiles warmly at us. “Nice to meet you all. Kade’s mentioned you so many times, I feel like I know you already.”

I feel my cheeks flush at the implication that Kade talks about us—about me—to his family. What exactly has he been saying?

“Oh!” Nate exclaims suddenly. “You must be sitting next to us. Kade mentioned he gave tickets to some friends.”

I want to correct him—to say I’m more than just a friend—but then I realize I don’t actually know what I am to Kade right now. So I just nod and introduce Valerie and Aaron, feeling oddly like I’m in a surreal dream where my past and present are colliding in unexpected ways.

I sit down next to Nate, and Colton and Aaron immediately follow suit, sitting between Valerie and me, whispering something to each other, which I assume to be about how cool it is to meet Kade’s twin.

“So,” Nate says, leaning closer to me as the arena lights begin to dim, “Kade tells me you’re a teacher now?”

“Middle school math,” I confirm, surprised that Kade has shared details of my life with his family. “And I coach a robotics team on the side. ”

“That’s impressive.” Nate nods. “And this guy”—he gestures to Colton—“he’s your nephew, right? Kade mentioned you’re raising him.”

“Yes, after my sister and brother-in-law passed away,” I say softly. “Though at this point, he feels more like my son than my nephew.”

Nate’s expression softens. “I can see that.”

Before I can respond, the arena erupts as the announcer’s voice booms over the speakers, introducing the Glaciers. The lights dim completely, replaced by swirling blue and silver spotlights as the team skates onto the ice one by one.

“And in the goal ... give it up for number one ... KAAAADE SANTOOOOOS!”

The crowd roars as Kade skates out, his movements powerful and graceful. Even with his helmet on, there’s something commanding about his presence, a confidence that radiates from him.

“GO KADE!” Colton screams, jumping up and down, his excitement contagious.

I find myself on my feet, too, clapping and cheering along with everyone else. My eyes are locked on Kade as he takes his position in goal, the breadth of his shoulders in the padded uniform, the intensity of his focus even from this distance.

“He’s having a great season,” Nate comments beside me as the national anthem begins. “One of his best. ”

“Really?” I ask, genuinely curious. I’ve been so wrapped up in our personal dynamics

that I haven't paid much attention to his professional stats.

"Yeah." Nate nods. "Coach thinks he might be looking at another All-Star selection this year."

Pride swells in my chest, unexpected but genuine. Whatever happened between us personally, I've always known how talented he is, how hard he works. Watching him now, at the peak of his career, is a reminder of why he was so determined all those years ago.

As the game begins, I find myself completely engrossed. The players move like lightning across the ice, their bodies colliding with bone-jarring force.

And Kade—Kade is mesmerizing. His reflexes are incredible, his body seeming to know where the puck is going before it even gets there. During one particularly intense sequence, he makes three consecutive saves that have the entire arena on its feet, chanting his name.

Colton is beside himself with excitement, tugging on my arm. "Did you see that, Mom? Did you see what he did?!"

"I saw." I laugh, caught up in his enthusiasm. "That was amazing."

The first period ends with the Glaciers up by one goal, thanks largely to Kade's impenetrable defense. As the teams skate off for the intermission, I catch myself staring at Kade .

Nate gives me a knowing look so similar to the one Valerie gave me in the car that I have to wonder if my feelings for Kade are completely transparent to everyone around me.

The second period starts with renewed intensity.

The opposing team, desperate to even the score, comes out aggressively.

The play is faster, harder, and the hits more punishing.

I find myself wincing at some of the collisions, even though I know these men are professionals who are used to the contact.

Kade continues to be a wall in the goal, making save after impossible save. The crowd responds to his performance with increasing fervor, the energy in the arena building with every blocked shot.

And then it happens.

Midway through the second period, an opposing player breaks free on a breakaway, charging toward the Glaciers' goal at full speed. Kade positions himself, ready for the shot. But instead of shooting, the player loses his edge and careens out of control.

The world seems to slow down as I watch the player crash into Kade at full speed, his momentum carrying them both into the goal.

The sickening sound of impact reverberates through the suddenly silent arena.

The net dislodges from its moorings and Kade's body crumples awkwardly beneath the other player.

He doesn't get up.

My body goes rigid, a cry caught in my throat as I watch the scene unfold. The referee's whistle blasts. Kade remains motionless on the ice, and it feels like the air

has been sucked from my lungs.

“Kade!” Colton’s voice breaks through my frozen panic, his small hand gripping my arm so tightly it hurts. “Mom, why isn’t he getting up?”

I can’t answer. I can’t even breathe. My entire body feels like it’s been encased in ice as I stare at Kade’s still form.

“He’s down,” Nate’s voice stresses, and his tone confirms my fears as Kade remains on the ice, unmoving.

“We need medical!” someone shouts from the circle now surrounding him.

I spot Cameron ripping his mask from his face and dropping down beside Kade.

Even from this distance, I see the concern all over his face.

And it’s enough to put me into motion, nearly tripping over my own feet as I make my way to the exit.

“Stay here,” I say to Colton, who’s losing color in his face.

Valerie nods and waves me onward. However, as I take another step, a firm grip lands on my wrist.

“You’re going to have to wait,” Nate urges, stopping me. “We can’t get on the ice. They’re not going to let us. We have to wait.” His words sound distant as the medical team surrounds Kade, removing his mask and showing his peaceful—and terrifyingly still—face.

Panic threatens my vision, blurring it with tears. I feel like I could throw up, my

hands shaking as the stretcher is brought out. “We need to get down there right now.” My voice sounds foreign to my ears, and all I can think about is Kade’s massive, limp body being loaded up.

“We’ll meet them at the team exit.” Nate grabs my arms and basically drags me, my feet feeling frozen to the floor.

He leads the way to the door blocked by security, but they let him through, obviously recognizing him as Kade’s family.

As soon as we slip through, I’m met with the sight of the medics and a stretcher.

“Kade!” I break free of Nate’s grasp, rushing to the side of it as the paramedics continue to roll him out.

My gaze floods over his features, the light bruising on his temple and his dark brows lax because of his unconsciousness.

“Kade, please wake up,” I catch myself crying as the words slip from my lips.

I can’t believe this is happening. Fear thrums through my veins as I grab his hand, squeezing it.

“Ma’am, you’re going to have to meet us there if you’re not immediate family,” one of the medics says as we reach the exit, where the ambulance waits on the other side of the glass.

I nod, but I don’t want to let go. “I love you,” I whisper, leaning over him.

“Ma’am, unless you’re family, you gotta go.” The medic’s voice grows stern.

I bat away the tears and wrap my arms around myself, forcing myself to step away. I squeeze myself tightly as I watch Nate slip into the ambulance, and I'm left alone in the dimly lit hallway.

Please be okay, Kade. Please.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kade

I love you.

All I hear is Ella's voice on repeat in my mind. My head throbs like a sledgehammer taking blows to my temple. A groan escapes my lips, and as my eyes flutter open...

Everything is too freaking bright.

"Easy." I hear Nate's voice, though I don't immediately pick him out in my spotty, strained vision. "You gotta stay still, Kade. You took a massive hit to the head."

"Am I gonna die?" I chuckle, but abruptly end it with a groan as pain sears through the side of my brain. This is not what I had planned for the game.

I love you.

I hear Ella's voice in my head again. It's jarring, knocking the breath right out of my lungs. And as my eyes finally focus, I see my brother sitting right beside the hospital bed.

I open my mouth, unable to stop thinking about her. "Was Ella here?"

"What?" Nate makes a face.

“Was Ella here?” I repeat myself, unsure of how to further clarify it through the haze in my mind. “Did she come to see me?”

Something flickers across Nate’s face. “She wanted to. She tried to go with you in the ambulance.”

“But?” I can hear the unspoken qualifier in his voice.

“Hospital policy. Family only in the trauma unit.” He sighs. “She was pretty upset when they wouldn’t let her come.”

The three words swirl around in my head for a few moments, leaving me to process just how hard I must’ve crashed. I mean, that’s what happened, right?

“You were blocking, and Lopez took you out,” Nate clarifies. My confusion must be clearly written all over my furrowed brow. “Ella was there when you were loaded onto the ambulance.”

“Oh,” I say, hearing her words once more in my head. Did she really say them? Or is it all just wishful thinking? I mean, I did take a good hit to the head .

“Mom and Dad are still trying to figure out how to get off the cruise ship. Apparently, the cruise line doesn’t consider your situation an emergency.”

“Good to know,” I mutter, trying to say it with humor, but failing. I shut my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath as the heart rate monitor beeps steadily, filling the silence that settles between my brother and me. “How long have I been out?”

“In and out for about three hours now. This is the most coherent you’ve been.” He checks his watch. “It’s just after midnight.”

Three hours. The game feels like it happened both yesterday and ten minutes ago. Time isn't making sense yet.

"The team?" I ask.

"They finished the game. Won 3-1." Nate smiles. "Cam scored two after you went down. Said they were for you."

I try to nod, but the motion sends another spike of pain through my head. Before I can ask anything else, the door opens and a doctor walks in, followed by what appears to be a resident. The doctor is older, with salt-and-pepper hair and glasses that magnify his alert eyes.

"Mr. Santos, good to see you back with us. I'm Dr. Fitzpatrick." He approaches the bed, pulling a penlight from his pocket. "I'm going to check a few things, okay? Just try to relax."

I brace myself as he shines the light directly into my eyes. The pain is immediate and intense, like someone hammering nails into my brain. I can't help but flinch away .

"Sorry about that," Dr. Fitzpatrick says, noting my reaction. "Photosensitivity is common with concussions. Can you follow my finger without moving your head?"

I try to track his finger as he moves it from side to side, up and down. My vision blurs at the edges, and nausea rises in my throat again.

"Doing good," he encourages, though I don't feel like I'm doing anything well at the moment. "Can you tell me your full name?"

"Kade Antonio Santos," I reply automatically.

“And what day is it?”

I have to think about this one. “Thursday. No—Friday now, I guess, since it’s after midnight.”

He nods approvingly. “Do you know where you are?”

“Hospital.”

“That’s right. And do you remember why you’re here?”

“Hockey game. Player collision.” The words come out clipped as I try to manage the growing discomfort.

“Good.” He makes some notes on his tablet. “You’ve sustained a moderate concussion, Mr. Santos. The CT scan didn’t show any bleeding or fractures, which is excellent news. But we’ll need to keep you for observation at least until tomorrow.”

I close my eyes, absorbing this information. A concussion. I’ve had them before, but this one feels different. More intense .

“How long until I can play again?” The question feels automatic, programmed into me after years of living and breathing hockey.

His expression turns serious. “That’s not something we can determine right now. Concussion recovery isn’t linear, and in your profession, returning too soon can be dangerous. We’re talking weeks, not days.”

Weeks. The word settles heavily in my chest. We’re heading into the most critical part of the season, and now I’ll be watching from the sidelines. A year ago, that news would’ve devastated me. Now, though, my first thought is of Colton’s games—will I

be well enough to see them?

The doctor continues his examination, checking my reflexes, asking more questions about my symptoms. I answer mechanically, but my mind keeps drifting back to Ella. To the words I think I heard her say. To the fact that she's not here now.

"The dizziness and nausea should improve over the next few days," Dr. Fitzpatrick says. "But the headaches might persist longer. You'll need to avoid screens, bright lights, and, of course, any physical activity that could risk another impact."

I nod slightly, careful not to move too quickly. "When can I have visitors? Non-family visitors?"

He glances at his watch. "Regular visiting hours start at 9 AM. Once we move you to a regular room, you can have visitors during those hours. "

Relief washes through me. Nine hours. I just need to make it nine more hours, and then maybe Ella will come. Maybe I can see for myself if what I think I heard was real.

As the doctor and resident leave, Nate settles back into the chair beside my bed.

"You really care about Ella, don't you?" he asks.

"I do."

For a minute, Nate doesn't respond—he just stares at the floor.

"Kade," he starts, then stops. "I'm sorry." He says it like an apology he's owed me for years.

I peer over at him. “For what?”

He shakes his head, mouth twisting. “For never taking you seriously about her. For treating it like some high school phase you were supposed to grow out of.” He drops his voice, “I should’ve known better. I’m sorry.”

I can see the genuine remorse in Nate’s eyes, and a weight lifts off my chest at his admission. It’s like a validation of the emotions I’ve been grappling with for a decade.

“It’s okay.” I offer a small smile as I shift on the uncomfortable hospital bed, trying to get my pounding head under control. “I forgive you.”

Nate gives a small nod, his eyes flickering with relief. “You love her, Kade. It’s written all over you.”

“I do,” I admit softly. “I’ve never stopped.”

The words hang in the air between us .

“Well I hope it all works out for you two,” Nate finally says. “You deserve it.”

“Thanks, man.” I smile at him. He looks exhausted, his usually impeccable appearance rumpled from hours of waiting.

“You should go home,” I tell him. “Get some sleep. I’ll be fine.”

He shakes his head. “Mallory is bringing me a change of clothes in the morning. I’m not leaving you alone tonight.”

The stubborn set of his jaw reminds me so much of our father that I almost laugh, but

even the thought of laughing makes my head throb harder. “Thanks,” I say instead.

“Besides,” he adds, a hint of his usual dry humor returning, “someone has to be here to make sure you don’t do anything stupid, like try to check yourself out and go to practice tomorrow.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I murmur, though the thought of leaving had crossed my mind. Not for practice, but to see Ella. To ask her if she really said those words.

I settle back against the pillows, letting my eyes close again. The pain medication they’ve given me is starting to take effect, dulling the sharp edges of the headache to a more manageable throb. I should try to sleep. To heal.

And that’s exactly what I do.

When I wake up again, hours later, the room is empty. Nate is gone, probably to get coffee or talk to the doctor. My head still hurts, but the fog has lifted somewhat. The disorientation is less intense.

That’s when my phone rings on the bedside table.

I hope it’s Ella.

I reach for it, wincing as the movement sends another jolt of pain through my skull. I can barely make out the word “Mom” on the caller ID through my blurry vision. I’m not sure I have the energy for this conversation right now.

But I know she must be worried sick. The game was televised; they would’ve seen me go down.

I answer, pressing the phone gently to my ear. “Hey.”

“Kade!” My mom’s voice comes through, high with panic. “Oh my gosh, it’s such a relief to hear your voice. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, Mom,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady despite the splitting headache. “Just a concussion. No bleeding or fractures.”

“Thank goodness,” she breathes. “Your father has been beside himself with worry. We tried to get the cruise line to let us off the ship, but—”

“There’s no need for that,” I assure her. “I’ll be fine.”

“Let me talk to him,” I hear Dad say in the background, followed by the rustle of the phone changing hands.

“Son.” His deep voice fills my ear. “What’s the prognosis? How long will you be out?”

No “how are you feeling?” or “are you in pain?” He just goes straight into how it affects hockey. Some things never change .

“The doctor says it could be weeks,” I reply, bracing myself for his reaction.

“ Weeks ?” The alarm in his voice is immediate. “But the playoffs are coming up. The team needs you.”

“I know, Dad.” I stare up at the ceiling. “But if I try to come back too soon, I could do permanent damage.”

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“Well, yes, of course, we don’t want that,” he concedes, though I can hear the disappointment. “But you’ll be pushing to return as soon as it’s safe, right? The team has a real shot at another Cup this year.”

A few months ago, I would’ve agreed without hesitation. But now...

“Would that really be such a bad thing?” I ask, surprising myself with the words. “If I didn’t make it back for the playoffs. If this was the end?”

Silence stretches across the line, so much so that I wonder if the call dropped.

“Kade,” he finally says, his voice careful, measured. “What are you saying?”

“I’m not saying I want my career to be over,” I clarify, struggling to articulate the thoughts I didn’t even realize I had until this very moment. “I’m just saying that if it was, I’ve had a good run. I’m not twenty anymore. And there are other things I want in my life.”

“What other things?” He sounds genuinely bewildered, and I almost laugh. As if a life without hockey is incomprehensible .

“A family,” I say simply. “Love. A future with someone who matters to me.”

I hear the phone being passed again, my mother’s voice returning. “Are you talking about Ella? Nate mentioned she was at the game last night.”

Of course Nate told them. No secrets in the Santos family, even after all these years.

“Yes,” I confirm, my voice growing stronger.

“So now that Ella’s back in your life, you’re thinking about ... what, exactly? Retiring? Throwing away everything you’ve worked for?”

“I’m not throwing anything away,” I reply, frustration edging into my voice. “I’m just finally acknowledging that there’s more to life than hockey. That I want more. And yes, that includes Ella.”

“But your career—” Dad starts.

“My career is fine,” I cut him off, wincing as the increased volume makes my head pound. “I’ve played six seasons. I’ve been an All-Star. I’ve won a Cup. I’ve done everything I set out to do.”

“But you’re still in your prime,” he argues. “You could play for another several years.”

“Maybe I will,” I say. “Or maybe I won’t. The point is, it’s my decision to make. And I’m not gonna let hockey be the only thing in my life anymore. And I’m definitely not gonna let you guys try to convince me again that I have to choose between Ella or hockey. That I couldn’t have both.”

More silence, heavy with unspoken history.

“You’re saying she’s worth risking your career over?” Mom asks, her voice hesitant.

“Yes, she is. She always was. I just didn’t have the courage to admit it ten years ago.”

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. The monitors beside my bed beep a little faster as my heart rate increases with my heightened emotions.

“Look, I’m a grown man who’s capable of making my own decisions.

And I’ve decided there’s more to life than hockey.

I’m not throwing my career away, but I am choosing Ella, whether you like it or not,”
I say with conviction.

“And honestly, if you two can’t support that, then maybe we need to reconsider what our relationship looks like going forward. ”

I’ve never spoken to my parents like this before. Never drawn a line in the sand. Their sharp breath tells me they’re just as shocked as I am.

“Kade,” my dad says after a moment, his voice softer than before. “We only ever wanted what was best for you.”

“I know,” I acknowledge. “But you don’t get to decide what that is anymore. I do.”

Another silence falls, but this one feels different. Less tense, more contemplative .

“You’re right,” my mom finally says, her voice thick with emotion. “You’re absolutely right, and I owe you an apology.”

“We both do,” my father adds. “We were wrong to pressure you back then. To make you feel like you had to choose.”

The admission hits me harder than I expected.

For years, I’ve carried the weight of that choice, the guilt of hurting Ella, the responsibility for our broken relationship. To hear them acknowledge their role in it feels like a burden lifting from my shoulders.

“We were just scared,” Mom confesses. “Your father and I struggled so much. We didn’t want that for you. We thought if you focused completely on hockey, you’d have the security we never did.”

“I understand that,” I say, my voice gentler now. “But you have to understand something, too. The way I felt about Ella then, the way I feel about her now—it’s not something I can just set aside. Ella and Colton mean the world to me.”

There’s a pause, and then my father clears his throat. “Well, then. It sounds like we’d better have Ella and Colton over for dinner soon.”

I blink, not sure I’ve heard him correctly. “What?”

“We want you to be happy, Kade,” Mom adds. “That’s all we’ve ever wanted. And to be clear, we like Ella a lot. Always have.”

The words wash over me like a balm, soothing wounds I didn’t realize were still open. “Thank you. That means a lot. ”

“We love you, son,” Dad says. “Just focus on getting better right now. The rest will sort itself out.”

After a few more minutes of conversation—focused on my recovery rather than my career—we hang up. I set the phone down on the bedside table, my head spinning.

For so long, I’ve been living with the ghost of my parents’ expectations, letting their fears and ambitions shape my choices. Even after I made it to the NHL, even after I achieved everything they’d dreamed for me, I still felt the weight of their influence in my decision-making.

But not anymore.

I stare up at the ceiling, feeling a strange sense of peace despite the pain pulsing through my head. The concussion has left me dizzy and nauseous, my vision still blurring around the edges. But my thoughts have never been clearer.

I love Ella Smart.

I've never stopped loving her.

And if there's even the smallest chance that she loves me back—that those words I heard weren't just a desperate plea in a moment of fear—then I'm going to fight for her. For us. For the future we should've had all along.

Chapter Thirty

Ella

The hospital corridors stretch endlessly before me, a maze of sterile white walls and squeaking linoleum.

My heart hammers against my ribs as I weave through the early morning crowd—doctors with tired eyes, nurses carrying charts, family members of patients.

Nothing matters more than getting to Kade.

The image of Kade’s still body on the ice keeps flashing through my mind, making my breath catch and my hands shake.

I’ve spent years building walls and months convincing myself that I needed space, that loving him was too risky.

But seeing him hurt, seeing him carried away on that stretcher—it shattered every carefully constructed defense .

“Excuse me,” I mutter, squeezing past a group of visitors huddled near a vending machine. My voice sounds strange to my own ears, thin and breathless.

The smell of antiseptic grows stronger as I near the elevators, mingling with the scent of industrial cleaning products and that indefinable hospital odor that always makes my stomach clench. I jab the up button repeatedly, as if that might make the elevator

arrive faster.

When the doors finally slide open, I nearly collide with a doctor exiting, her white coat fluttering as she sidesteps me with practiced ease.

I mumble an apology she doesn't acknowledge and step inside, pressing the button for the fourth floor—the Trauma Unit.

That's what the woman at the information desk told me after I convinced her to give me Kade's room number.

"He's only allowed family visitors right now," she told me, her eyes sympathetic but firm behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"I am family," I'd lied, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. And in that moment, it felt true—as if my heart recognized what my brain is still catching up to.

The elevator ascends with agonizing slowness. I glance at my watch: 7:05 a.m. It's been over ten hours since they took Kade away in the ambulance. Ten hours of messaging Nate for information. Ten hours of realizing just how much Kade Santos means to me.

Nate said visiting hours were at nine, but I couldn't wait a minute longer. When Valerie offered to take Colton to school this morning, I jumped at the opportunity, heading straight here as soon as she picked up Colton.

When the elevator doors open, I step out into another corridor, this one quieter than the main lobby. A nurses' station stands at the center like a fortress, staffed by two people in scrubs who barely glance up as I approach.

"I'm looking for Kade Santos's room," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Room

412.”

The male nurse looks up, his expression neutral. “Are you family?”

There’s that question again. “Yes,” I lie for the second time this morning, hoping my face doesn’t betray me.

He studies me for a moment too long. “I’ll need to see some ID, ma’am. We have strict protocols for the trauma unit, especially for high-profile patients.”

My heart sinks. Of course they’d be careful with someone like Kade—a professional athlete whose injury was broadcast on live television.

I fumble in my purse for my driver’s license, already knowing it won’t be enough.

“I’m sorry, but your last name doesn’t match the patient’s,” he says after examining it. “I can’t let you through without proper authorization.”

“Please,” I say, my voice cracking. “I need to see him. I need to know he’s okay.”

“I understand, but rules are rules.” His tone is sympathetic but unyielding.

My entire body feels like it might shatter from the tension, from the need to see Kade’s face, to touch his hand, to make sure he’s still breathing.

“Ella?”

I turn at the sound of a familiar voice, and relief washes over me in a dizzying wave. Nate stands a few feet away, looking exhausted but composed in rumpled clothes that still somehow manage to look professional.

“Nate,” I breathe, stumbling toward him. “They won’t let me see him.”

His eyes—so like Kade’s, it makes my chest ache—soften as they meet mine. “She’s with me,” he tells the nurse. “I’ll take full responsibility.”

The nurse hesitates, then nods reluctantly. “Sign her in, please.”

As Nate scribbles on a clipboard, I try to collect myself, pushing my hair back from my face and wiping at eyes I hadn’t realized were wet.

“How did you know I was here?” I ask quietly.

“I didn’t,” he admits, handing the clipboard back to the nurse. “I was just coming back from getting coffee. Good timing, I guess. ”

He gestures for me to follow him down the corridor, and I fall into step beside him, trying to match his measured pace when all I want to do is run.

“How is he?” The question comes out more vulnerable than I intended.

“Stable,” Nate replies, his voice low. “Moderate concussion, but the CT scan was clear—no bleeding or fractures. They’re keeping him for observation. He’s been in and out of consciousness.”

“Has he been awake at all? Has he said anything?”

Something flickers across Nate’s face—something I can’t quite read. “Yes, he was awake for a little while earlier. He was asking about you.”

My steps falter. “He was?”

Nate nods. “He wanted to know if you had come to see him. If you had tried to go with him in the ambulance.”

“I did,” I whisper. “They wouldn’t let me.”

“I told him that.”

We walk in silence for a moment, the only sounds being our footsteps and the distant beeping of medical equipment. The fluorescent lights cast harsh shadows that make everything feel slightly unreal, like I’m moving through a dream.

We stop outside a door marked 412.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Nate says, squeezing my shoulder gently .

With that, he turns and walks back down the hallway, leaving me standing by myself outside of Kade’s door.

I stare at the handle, my fingers trembling as I reach for it. So many possibilities lie on the other side—so many hopes and fears and unspoken words. For a moment, I’m paralyzed by the weight of it all.

But then I remember Kade on the ice, still and vulnerable. I remember Colton asking why Kade couldn’t be his dad. I remember my own voice in the ambulance bay, whispering those three words I’ve been too afraid to acknowledge, even to myself.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

The room is dimly lit, the only illumination coming from a small lamp in the corner and the glow of monitors surrounding the bed. Their rhythmic beeping fills the silence—a steady reminder that Kade’s heart is still beating, that he’s still here.

And then I see him.

He lies motionless, his large frame making the hospital bed seem small. There's a bruise along his temple, purple and angry. Tubes and wires connect him to machines, measuring things I can't see.

He looks so vulnerable. So human. So far from the invincible goalie who stops pucks traveling at impossible speeds.

I approach slowly, my footsteps muffled on the linoleum floor. His eyes are closed, his breathing deep and regular. Asleep or unconscious, I'm not sure which .

A chair sits beside the bed, and I lower myself into it, never taking my eyes off his face. While he sleeps, the years seem to fall away. I can almost see the boy I loved at seventeen—the one with bright eyes and big dreams who made me feel like anything was possible.

Before I can stop myself, I reach for his hand. It's warm and solid in mine, his fingers limp but alive. I run my thumb over his knuckles, tracing the familiar contours of a hand I once knew as well as my own.

"Kade," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the machines. "I'm here."

He doesn't stir, and somehow, that makes it easier. The words I've been holding back for so long—the ones I couldn't say when he was looking at me with those earnest eyes—begin to spill out in the safety of his unconsciousness.

"I was so scared when I saw you on the ice," I admit, tears welling up despite my efforts to contain them. "I don't think I've ever been so terrified in my life."

A tear slips down my cheek, and I brush it away.

“I realized then how I’ve been letting fear control me for too long,” I continue, my voice growing stronger.

“After losing Katie, after Landon walked out on us, I built these walls around my heart. I convinced myself that I was protecting Colton, but the truth is, I was protecting myself. I was so afraid of being hurt again that I wouldn’t let myself take a chance on you. On us. ”

The monitors beep steadily, a metronomic backdrop to my confession.

“But seeing you hurt made me realize that life is too short for that kind of fear. We don’t know how much time we have. And I don’t want to waste another minute pretending I don’t care about you when I do. So much.”

I squeeze his hand, willing him to hear me somehow, even in deep slumber.

“When Landon left, it wasn’t just Colton who felt abandoned.

I did, too. And I think part of me has been waiting for you to leave again.

To choose something else over me, just like you did before.

” My voice catches. “But you haven’t. You’ve been right here, showing up for Colton, showing up for me, even when I pushed you away. ”

Another tear falls, landing on our joined hands.

“The truth is, I’ve been unfair to you,” I admit. “I never gave you a chance to explain yourself all those years ago. I just ran. I was hurt and angry, and it was easier to hate you than to hear you out. Easier to blame you for everything than to admit I played a part, too.”

I take a shaky breath, gathering courage for the words that matter most.

“I love you, Kade. I don’t think I ever stopped loving you. Even all these years we were apart, there was always this Kade-shaped hole in my heart that no one else could fill. ”

The moment the words leave my lips, something changes. Kade’s fingers twitch in mine, then slowly, deliberately, curl around my hand.

My breath catches, and I look up to find his eyes open—those amber eyes I’ve dreamed about for a decade now looking at me with unmistakable clarity despite his condition.

“Kade?” I whisper, my heart skipping.

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His lips curve into a smile. “I heard you,” he says, his voice raspy. “Every word.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “How long have you been awake?”

“Long enough.” His thumb strokes the back of my hand. “Say it again.”

I swallow hard, but there’s no going back now. No more hiding. “I love you, Kade Santos.”

“I love you, Ella Smart,” he says, the words coming out with such conviction, such certainty, that I can’t doubt their truth. “I never stopped. Not for a single day.”

Fresh tears spring to my eyes, but these are different—they’re warm and cleansing. I lean forward, resting my forehead against his, careful of his injuries.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “For running away back then. For not giving you a chance to explain. For pushing you away these past few weeks when all you were trying to do was be there for us.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he says, his free hand coming up to touch my cheek. “For letting my parents convince me that I couldn’t have both you and hockey. For not being strong enough to stand up for what really mattered.”

“We were kids,” I remind him, pulling back slightly to see his face. “Kids trying to make adult decisions.”

His eyes search mine, a question in their depths.

“And now we’re adults,” I say softly. “With adult problems and adult fears. But maybe also with enough wisdom to know when something’s worth fighting for.”

His smile widens, making him wince slightly. “And this is worth fighting for?”

Instead of answering with words, I lean in closer, feeling the warmth radiating from his skin, and press my lips softly against his.

With exquisite slowness, he responds. The kiss is tender and cautious, mindful of the bruises that mar his features, yet it conveys the profound weight of a decade’s worth of longing, of unspoken emotions, of second chances.

His fingers, warm and scarred, flex around mine as the kiss deepens. I savor the taste of him, the essence of him—warm, steady, familiar in the marrow of my bones.

His tongue grazes the seam of my mouth, the contact featherlight. I respond by parting my lips for him, inviting him in. His tongue finds mine with a tentative curiosity, sending a shiver down my spine. I mirror his rhythm, learning the shape of his mouth anew. Each movement feels like a promise.

He exhales softly, and I breathe him in as his other hand settles against my cheek. His thumb traces the edge of my jaw, a silent reverence in his touch. He pulls back just enough to look at me, his eyes storm-dark and full of everything we’ve never said aloud.

“I take it that’s a yes,” he murmurs, and I can’t help but laugh softly.

“Yes,” I confirm. “You and me. Us. It’s worth everything.”

He shifts slightly, making room on the narrow hospital bed, and I hesitate only a moment before carefully settling beside him, my head resting in the crook of his

shoulder. His arm wraps around me, solid and warm, and for the first time in years, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

"What happens now?" I ask after a comfortable silence falls over us.

"I don't know," he admits. "But I do know I want to be part of your life. Yours and Colton's. However that looks like."

At the mention of Colton, my heart swells. "He adores you, you know. He talks about you constantly. When he saw you were hurt..." I trail off, remembering the tears in Colton's eyes when I told him Kade was taken to the hospital.

"I adore him, too," Kade says simply. "He's an amazing kid. You've done an incredible job with him, El."

"He needs a father figure," I say softly. "Someone stable. Someone who won't leave."

Kade's arm tightens around me. "I'm not going anywhere. Not unless you want me to. "

"And what about hockey?" I can't help but ask, the specter of our past looming before us yet again. "Your career, your team..."

"Hockey is what I do, not who I am." He squeezes me tight. "I've spent years building a career I'm proud of. But at the end of the day, it's just a game. You and Colton—you're what matters most."

The certainty in his voice makes my throat tight with emotion.

"Besides," he adds, a hint of his old humor returning, "this concussion might be a

blessing in disguise. It's forcing me to take a step back, to seriously evaluate what I want for the future. And when I picture that future, Ella, you're always there. Front and center. You and Colton, by my side."

I close my eyes, letting myself imagine it—a life with Kade. Mornings making breakfast together, evenings helping Colton with homework, weekends at hockey games where we're both cheering from the stands. Holidays, birthdays, ordinary Tuesdays. All of it, together.

"I want that, too," I whisper.

"Good, because this time, I'm never letting you go."

I feel Kade's warmth enveloping me as he pulls me even closer, our lips meeting once more. But this time, the kiss holds a fierce intensity, a raw passion that neither of us can contain. His hands roam the small of my back as my fingers tangle in his hair.

Our kiss deepens, fueled by years of longing and missed chances.

The world fades away, leaving only the sensation of Kade's lips on mine and the warmth of his touch searing my skin.

I feel a rush of emotions—love, longing, desire—pouring into every fiber of my being, melting away all the walls and fears that had kept us apart.

A soft moan escapes my lips as our kiss becomes more fervent, more urgent. My legs intertwine with his, melding us together as if to erase all the years we spent apart.

In this moment, there's no room for doubts or misunderstandings. There's only the overwhelming certainty that we belong together—that our love is true and

unbreakable.

Chapter Thirty-One

Kade

“Come on,” I say to Colton. “We have to be fast.”

“How do we know she’s not gonna accidentally swallow it?” Colton’s voice fills with concern as I drop the ring into a glass. “She could have to go to the emergency room or something. How would they even get it out? Would they have to, like, cut her stomach open?”

I blink a few times, suddenly rethinking this whole plan.

“Do you really think she wouldn’t notice?”

” I stare at the engagement ring glimmering in the champagne we plan to ring in her birthday with.

It’s a tradition we started together back in high school, where we would stay up the night before our birthdays so we could celebrate it just as the clock struck midnight.

And now—after doing a lot of convincing—Colton gets to experience it with us, too.

“I dunno.” Colton shrugs, his eyes rimmed with fatigue and excitement. “Maybe she’ll just be super thirsty.”

I frown. “I don’t think she’ll down champagne.”

“It’s like soda,” Colton points out. “Just for grown-ups. That’s what she’s always said.”

“Hmm.” I chuckle. “Okay, I’ll figure something else out.” I grab the ring from the glass and rinse off the sticky champagne, trying to come up with a plan B.

“What if she says no?” Colton asks, tilting his head with a wicked little grin on his face. He’s definitely working on all my insecurities at the moment. It’s only been six months since Ella and I started officially dating again.

And I bought the ring the second week.

“She’s not gonna tell me no. Just remember the plan.” I hand Colton the glass of champagne for Ella, along a glass of sparkling apple cider for himself, and he nods.

“I do the cheers and hand her the glass to distract her, and then you’re going to get down on one knee and try not to fall over from nerves. ”

I laugh. “Exactly. Except now there’s no ring in her glass, so I’ll just hold it out to her.”

“What’s taking you guys so long?” Ella calls out from my living room. “It’s 11:58!”

“I know, I know,” I call out, hoping the nerves don’t show in my voice. “We’ll be there in just a second.”

I take a deep breath, reaching out and squeezing his shoulder. “We’re about to blow her away.”

At least, I hope so. In a good way.

I try to steady my hammering heart as I guide Colton through the double doors into the living room.

There, on the couch, sits my beautiful girlfriend, wrapped up in a red fleece throw blanket on the dark leather couch. She's got a smile on her face, and the light from the timer on the television screen dancing across her face nearly gives her an angelic glow.

I'm head over heels for you, Ella. I want to scream it at the top of my lungs, but I keep my cool, standing a few feet to the side as Colton walks up to her with the glass of champagne in one hand and his sparkling apple cider in the other.

"Oh, Kade let you carry my glass, I see." She laughs lightly, then eyes me. She pats the seat beside herself, and I nod to Colton, just as the countdown I set up for us on YouTube starts.

"Take it!" Colton blurts out, his eyes widening. "Hurry!"

Ella bursts into giggles before taking the champagne. "Okay, okay. "

"Countdown with me!" Colton says. "Ten... Nine... Eight... Seven..." As they continue, I drop to one knee, prepared for the moment.

"Five... Four... Three... Two..." Ella counts with Colton.

"One!" Colton shouts.

"Happy Birthday!" we all call out together. Well, I mostly call it out. Honestly, I can barely find my voice. My nerves are choking me, and I feel like all the muscles in my neck are tense as Ella tips back her glass and takes a sip.

She then turns to me, “Kade...” Her voice trails off as she realizes I’m now down on one knee, holding out the square-cut diamond engagement ring in my fingertips. “What are you...”

“He’s about to propose, duh ,” Colton counters, rolling his eyes.

She looks over at him and giggles. “Did you know about this?”

“Of course I did!” Colton puffs his chest out with pride, and I can’t help but chuckle at the way he’s beaming. But still...

I clear my throat. “I need to say my piece.”

“Right, sorry.” Ella’s gaze focuses back on mine. “I’m just so overwhelmed.”

“I know.” I shoot her a wink. “And I had this big, dramatic plan to put the ring in your champagne ... but your son reminded me that was more likely to land you in the ER than make you say yes.”

She laughs and I smile at the sound .

I take a deep breath, suddenly unsure of what I’m supposed to say to her.

All those hours I spent preparing for this in the shower clearly are not coming back like I thought they would—so I just dig deep, right to the source of all my love.

“Ella, my heart has been yours since we met all those years ago, and while life led us away from each other for some time, and while I’d do anything to go back and change that, I don’t see it as a hindrance.

It’s a reminder that our love is long-lasting. It can withstand anything.”

Ella sniffles. “You’re right.”

“Now, we’re building this amazing life together, and I would never trade that for anything.

I’d give it all up for you, time and time again.

I would go to the ends of the earth for your love.

You’re the greatest gift I have, and you come with a plus one that I love just as much.

” I look past her to Colton, whose eyes are rimmed with moisture.

“I want nothing more than to join your little family. I want the three of us to build an amazing, steady life. Together. This isn’t just about me and you—but Colton, too. ”

“So...” I breathe in deeply. “Ella Louise Smart, will you make me the luckiest man in the world and marry me?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I love you so much, Kade.”

I gently slide the diamond ring onto her ring finger. “I love you, too. And...” I reach into my pocket, pulling out a silver chain necklace with a hockey stick on it. “Colton, will you accept me as a permanent, forever part of your family? ”

His eyes grow wide. “Wait... Is that... Is that for me?” His eyes drop to the necklace I’m holding. His name is engraved on the stick.

Ella chokes on a sob as she takes a closer look at it. “Kade...”

“His answer is just as important as yours,” I say softly, looking up at Colton, who

takes a step forward. “Your opinion matters to me, Colton. I love you like my own, and I always will.”

He nods, reaching out and taking the necklace from my hand. “This is so cool.”

“Yeah? I wasn’t sure if you’d want to wear it, and you don’t have to. We can hang it up on your nightstand or something.”

“No, I wanna wear it.” Colton snuffles as I stand to my feet. He rushes to me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I hug him back, and Ella and I exchange a look as tears stream down her face.

“I love you,” she murmurs.

“I love you, too,” I say back and then repeat it to Colton. I kiss the top of his head as he clings to me. Ella stands to her feet, tossing the blanket to the couch. She wraps her arms around the two of us. Warmth spreads from her touch, and I lean over, catching her lips with mine.

I kiss her tenderly as I cling to both of them.

They have no idea how much I love them both and how honored I am to get to call them my family.

I wish I could’ve been there from the beginning—and I wish that Ella wouldn’t have had to endure all the hurt she did along the way—but at the same time, I can’t change the past.

All I can do is ensure that she gets the future and the love that she deserves.

“This is so amazing,” Colton says, leaning back as Ella pulls away. “This is the best

night ever! I finally have a dad.”

“You’ve always had a dad,” I reassure him. “And I know Brett would be so proud of you, buddy.” I give him another tight squeeze. “And I’ll try to make him proud, too.”

“What do you mean?” Colton tilts his head in confusion, and Ella runs her hand across it.

“He just means that we’re going to try our very hardest to be the best parents to you that we can be. To make Brett and Katie proud.”

Colton grows silent. He appears to be in deep thought, and then suddenly gives us both a sly look as he addresses Ella. “Does this mean that you’ll finally give me a sibling?”

She looks at me and lets out a nervous giggle. “Maybe let’s get the wedding out of the way first.”

Colton lets out a heavy sigh. “Fine .”

My heart skips a beat at the love in Ella’s eyes. “Deal. Wedding. Then a baby.”

“Who wants cake?!” Colton squeals.

And just like that, our happily-ever-after begins—with cake, of course.

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Epilogue

Ella

Two Years Later...

“Okay, we’ve got this.” Chandra pats my back as she takes in the sight of the decorated table. “It looks amazing.”

I nod, taking in the adoption sign. “He’ll love it.”

“Yes, he will,” Mom chimes from a few feet away. “I’m glad you and Kade decided to adopt Colton. I know it means the world to him.”

My eyes land on the photo beside the cake—the one where Colton’s grinning with pancake batter on his cheek and Kade’s in the background flipping breakfast like it’s a sport.

That was the morning everything shifted. The morning he asked the question that changed all of our lives.

It was just a regular Sunday, just the three of us. Colton was still in pajamas, curled up at the kitchen table, his hair sticking up in every direction as he devoured his pancake.

He’d looked up to Kade mid-bite, fork in hand, and asked, “So... now that you’re married, if you adopted me ... would that make me yours?”

My heart caught. Kade froze at the sink, dish towel in hand.

“You’re already ours,” Kade said, his voice steady but soft.

“But I want it to be real,” Colton said after a pause. “The papers. The name. All of it.”

I’d walked over, knelt beside him, and said, “Then we’ll make it real, sweetheart. As real as it gets.”

I smile at the memory before turning back to Mom.

“It’s the easiest decision we’ve ever made,” I tell her.

“And Kade and I will make sure he never forgets Katie and Brett’s legacy.

” I let out a breath, feeling an overwhelming sense of emotion.

We’ve already celebrated Colton’s adoption, just the three of us.

Today is about celebrating with everyone we know and love.

“Yeah, and this gives us a chance to celebrate you and Kade, too, since, you know, you had to run off and elope instead of letting us see you walk down the aisle in a white gown.” Mom’s memory is on point today, and I smile even though she’s picking on me .

“You got to see pictures,” I say, shrugging. “We just couldn’t wait for some huge wedding. Eloping in Mexico was right for us, and I’m so glad we did. It was amazing.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Chandra giggles. “I bet it was a beautiful oceanside wedding—and

Colton was there, so that's all that matters."

"Yeah, but he was busy looking for sharks," I add, just as my stomach churns with nausea. I catch my breath, my hand flying up to cover my mouth. This secret has been the toughest one to hide.

Even from Kade.

"I'll be right back," I say, trying not to lose my breakfast. I pick up my pace, jogging to the bathroom off the main dining room where the table is set up. I push the door open and rush to the toilet, dropping to my knees in my dress. I lose everything I've eaten this morning.

I sigh, reaching out and hitting the handle to flush it down. When I lean back, I startle, noticing my mother standing in the doorway. "Sorry," I say quickly. "Breakfast just didn't settle right."

"Uh huh," Mom hums, stepping in and closing the door. "I think there's something you're not telling me. I might have some memory issues, Ella Louise, but I am not stupid. I know the signs... How many weeks are you?"

I breathe in deeply. "Um, I'm eleven weeks. I found out when we finished the adoption paperwork for Colton, and I didn't want to tell them. I thought it would be fun to surprise them with the announcement at the party."

"I bet it's going to be a girl."

"What?" I grab for a tissue, wiping my nose.

"I think it's a girl," she repeats. "I know Colton hasn't stopped talking about getting a baby brother, but I bet it's going to be the cutest little, brown-eyed baby girl in the entire world. Kade and Colton will be absolutely smitten with her."

“Well, I had no idea you were a psychic.” I giggle, shaking my head at her. “But we’ll know soon enough. I opted to get the blood test that tells me the gender. I haven’t looked at it yet, though. I’m planning to hand the envelope to Colton and Kade today.”

“No gender reveal party?”

“I think it’d be more fun to do this way,” I say with a smile. It took some extra planning to make it all work, but honestly, I think Colton will love getting to be the one who reads the gender.

Especially if it’s a boy.

“You know your family best,” Mom hums, reaching out and pulling me into a hug.

She squeezes me, though not too tightly, and then plants a kiss on the side of my head.

“I’m so proud of the woman you’ve become.

You’re an amazing wife to Kade and an amazing mother to Colton.

I know how happy Katie would be to see you in this role. ”

I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat as the tears start to roll down my cheeks. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too.” She gives me one last squeeze and then releases me.

Kade’s voice carries through the house. I straighten and wipe the tears from my cheeks. This has been the hardest secret to keep from my boys, and now that it’s time to share it, I’m bursting at the seams with anticipation.

“Mom!” I hear Colton’s voice above all the others as I exit the bathroom. “Where are you?”

I step out into the hallway, just as Colton pops his head in the opening. “Hey honey, I’m right here. Are you okay?”

He gives me a huge grin and then comes running to hug me. “I made the school hockey team!”

“Congratulations!” I wrap my arms around him and kiss the top of his head. “I’m so proud of you.” As I release him, Kade appears, mirroring Colton’s excitement.

“I take it he told you?” Kade heads toward us, his expression full of pride.

“He did,” I say, ruffling Colton’s hair. “It’s something to be proud of.”

“Yes, it is,” Kade confirms, wrapping an arm around my waist. “It’s all that hard work he’s put into it.”

“I agree.” I reach up and peck Kade’s cheek. I breathe in his familiar scent and then pull away to usher them into the dining room, where the crowd of our closest friends and family gathers for the celebration.

I press my hand to my belly, the anticipation building like a pent-up breath.

Colton wanted forever, and we gave it to him.

And today, I get to tell him—he’s getting something else he asked for, too.

Kade

My heart soars as Colton opens the gifts that family has brought for him. My parents

are all smiles, and Nate and my new sister-in-law Mallory stand hand in hand. Valerie and Aaron aren't far behind. The team also files into the back. This is a big day.

And Colton needs to see just how much we all love him.

Near the back of the room, Colton's grandparents from his dad's side watch quietly, hands clasped, smiles soft. They flew in from across the country for today—just wanting to be here to support their grandson.

We haven't seen much of them over the years, but they've always remembered birthdays and holidays, sending postcards with handwritten notes. When Ella called them to share the news about Colton's desire for adoption, they didn't hesitate.

"We know we're not part of his everyday life," his grandfather said. "But we'd like to be there to honor the moment. And his parents."

Colton slipped away from the group earlier to give them each a hug.

His grandfather pulled him in with a quiet, "Brett would be proud," while his grandmother cupped his face and said something that made his eyes shine.

I didn't catch the words, but I caught the weight of them.

Love. Loss. Gratitude. It was all there.

They don't say much, but there's a quiet steadiness in the way they're here—present, supportive in their own way. The kind of presence that doesn't ask for anything but somehow gives everything that matters.

Family comes in layers. Past and present. Joy and memory. And somehow, today, it all fits.

Colton was family to me before I signed the adoption papers, and honestly, he was family to me before I ever put a ring on Ella's finger. However, now it's official.

And I couldn't possibly be any happier.

"Congrats." Nate slaps a hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze as Colton begins to open up his last present.

"Thank you," I say, looking over at him. "Congrats to you, too." I nod toward Mallory, who's now almost eight months pregnant. "Won't be long until your little girl will be here."

"Can't come soon enough," Mallory groans, rubbing her back. "I swear I have more back pains than a one-hundred-year-old lady. It's absolutely ridiculous."

"Well, it'll only get worse," Addy says, holding Benny, she and Blaze's baby boy. "And then finally, when it happens, you start to find yourself missing the moments of pregnancy."

"Yeah, I don't think that's going to happen for me," Mallory mutters. "If anything, I just think that I'll be lucky to make it out of this thing without any permanent damage."

"Oh, there will definitely be some of that." Addy giggles and then squeezes her little man tightly. "But it's totally worth it."

I smile at the two of them, my mind filling with the image of Ella and a baby wrapped in blankets.

We've been not not trying for almost a year now, and nothing has come of it.

I'm still trying not to get my hopes up, and Ella and I have already decided that we'll

consult with a doctor next summer if we can't get pregnant.

"Everyone." A voice catches my attention, and I look up to see Ella standing at the front of the dining room. "I have one more announcement I need to make before we start dishing out the cake."

I furrow my brow in confusion.

Did someone park in the grass again?

Do we really need to repeat that lecture to everyone?

"Oooh, I'm so excited." Valerie squeals from behind me—and subsequently, Ella shoots her a warning glare.

Okay, this is weird.

"I need Kade and Colton to come up here." Ella's gaze finds mine, and she waves me over.

I keep a smile on my face, but now I'm really confused. "Okay, honey."

"Right here," she tells Colton and me, gesturing for us to stand directly to the side of her. She turns to face us. "I have something for the two of you. Kade will open the first envelope." Ella fishes two out of her sweater pocket. "Colton, you will open the second. Deal?"

"Deal," we both say in unison. I glance down at Colton, who looks equally as confused as me. He clearly is not in on whatever his mother has planned.

"So, I go first?" I say, taking the small envelope from her hand. It's the size of a greeting card, though I don't totally understand why she would be getting me a card

since this day is about Colton.

But okay.

I carefully open it, realizing that it's not a card at all. It's a photo. I pull it out, my heart instantly jumping in my chest as I take in the sight of the tiny little bean on the ultrasound picture.

"Is this..." My voice trails off as the emotion building in my throat cuts off my ability to speak.

"Yes," Ella says softly. She meets my gaze. "I wanted to make it so special for the two of you, so I decided to wait until the party."

"Wait..." Colton's voice drops. "Is that ... is that a baby?"

"It is," I choke out, handing the picture to Colton. I struggle to maintain my composure as the tears fill my eyes. I reach for Ella, pulling her to me. "We're gonna have a baby."

"We're gonna have a baby!" Colton explodes with excitement, holding out the picture for everyone to see. The whole room bursts into applause, and Colton wraps his arms around Ella and me. "I'm finally getting a sibling! This is the best day ever."

"We're not quite done," Ella says, her voice cracking with emotions. "There's still one more envelope to open."

"What's in it?" I pull away slightly, but still keep my arm around Ella. "Another picture?"

"No," Ella answers and then turns to Colton. "The gender of the baby is in the

envelope, and since you're the big brother, I think it's fair that you get to know first."

I squeeze her waist, touched by the thoughtfulness she's put into this, and plant a kiss on the top of her head.

"Go ahead," I urge, squeezing his shoulder with my free hand. "Open it."

Colton takes a deep breath and turns to Ella. "Do you know what it is?"

"No," Ella says, a big smile growing on her face. "You're going to be the very first to tell us."

Colton nods, and his demeanor takes on one of importance. He straightens, then opens the envelope as carefully as I did mine and pulls the card out. His eyes widen, and he looks up at me.

"What is it?" My heart pounds.

"I can't believe it." Colton immediately starts to cry. "This is the best day of my life." He swats the tears away, and I can barely contain my composure as the need to know builds in my chest.

"What is it?" Ella's voice breaks.

Colton looks up at us, tears streaming down his face. "A girl. I get to have a baby sister."

I pull him into me, breaking down in tears myself. "You're right. This is the best day ever."