



# The Walk-Off (Wild Pitches #4)

**Author:** *Megan Cousins*

**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Emma:

I have a decision to make: Do I stay where I am, living a quiet life, content as a librarian and fill-in soccer coach? Or, do I take the offer my agent keeps bugging me about? A chance to get back into the game after injury nearly ended my career. A chance to play the game I love once more, to retire on my own terms. Should be an easy decision, right?

I thought so.

Until an errant baseball changed my life.

Jax:

It's been over a decade since my wife left, leaving me with our – my – daughters, and all the responsibilities that go along with raising them. Games and recitals and doctors appointments, and I've managed it all just fine, thank you very much. But as the girls get older, I'm realizing there's so much that we're all missing out on.

When one particularly lousy batting practice session sends Emma stumbling into our lives, I wonder if she's the missing piece of our puzzle.

The Walk-Off is a closed door, contemporary, single dad romance, featuring own voices/lived experience depictions of ADHD and chronic pain. The Walk-Off is the fourth book in the Wild Pitches series, but can be read as a standalone.

**Total Pages (Source):** 39

## CHAPTER ONE

### FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS

#### JAX

The ringing of my cell phone pulls me from the only sleep I've had in the last thirty-six hours. I'm tempted to throw my phone out the nearest window and go back to sleep, but I can't, because my girls are at home with the babysitter, and if it's an emergency, I'd never forgive myself. I dig my phone out of the pocket of my scrubs and answer without checking the caller ID.

"Hello?" I answer groggily, trying not to yawn, and failing.

"Jax? Are the girls okay?" Penelope's voice rings out over the line and I wake up a little more fully, adrenaline spiking at the sound of her concerned voice. There's no reason that the girls shouldn't be okay.

"Nell? What do you mean? What's going on?" Don't panic. If it was an emergency, the babysitter would have called.

"Jax, Alice called and said there was an emergency. She asked if Jake and I could come to the house, and we absolutely would have, but we're on the air. I excused myself from the opening segment to try calling her back, and now to call you."

"Okay, thanks Nell. I'll call the house and see what's going on."

“Keep me posted?”

“Of course.”

I scrub a hand down my face and brace myself for the call to the house. I haven't been able to keep a babysitter; things are fine when Mom and Dad are able to watch the girls, but they're traveling right now, James and Mandy are on their honeymoon, and Jake and Penelope are in the city for the week. Mackenzie is fine, it's Alice that's the problem. Mom would call her spirited. My romance novel reading brother James would call her a hellion. In fact, he did, the last time he was left in charge of the girls.

I call it terrorism.

And I fought actual terrorists before the girls were born.

I dial the landline, the relic that hangs in my kitchen, but my girls have access to it if they need it – they both know how to dial 911, and know the numbers for everyone in our family. I wait, and finally Mackenzie answers.

“Mackenzie,” I do my best to inject my voice with patience. “What's your sister up to?”

Heaven help me if she says...

“About four feet!”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, hold the phone away from my ear and blow out a ragged breath. I'm going to pummel my brothers the next time I see them. They taught the girls that joke the last time we were together and now it's Mackenzie's favorite response. And her delivery is perfect, I can't fault her for that. But I'm in no mood.

“Mackenzie Claire,” I grumble, quickly losing whatever grasp I may have had on my patience.

“She’s fine, Dad.” I hear the frustration in my oldest daughter’s voice and scrub a hand down my face. Score one for dad. “She’s coloring and watching Uncle Jake and Aunt Nell’s show.”

“Mackenzie, if everything’s fine, why did she try to call Aunt Nell?”

“Because...” she pauses. It’s a loaded pause. Like she’s not sure what to tell me. “Cassie’s boyfriend is here. And when Alice reminded her of the rules she put Alice in timeout.”

Ugh.

My little stickler for the rules.

My pager goes off, signaling that I have a patient to check on. A patient who’s been laboring for six hours and making no progress. The only reason I’m still here, trying to get a few minutes of sleep in the on-call room.

“Hang tight Mackenzie. I’ll be home soon, okay?”

“Okay, Dad.” The dejection in her voice has me thinking, not for the first time, about making a change. I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep missing nights at home with my kids. I have good kids. The best kids. But they’ve run off more than a few babysitters with their antics, and I can’t keep looking for new sitters.

Stepping into my patient’s room, I look at mom in the bed and dad standing nearby. “I have an emergency at home. The babysitter...it’s a long story. I have to run home. I’m calling Dr. Wood and informing him of your condition. He can deliver if I can’t

get back here in time. I am so sorry.”

“Go, Dr. Hutchinson,” Mr. Rodriguez puts a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. Mrs. Rodriguez agrees, and assures me that she’ll be fine. This is their third child and they have their own babysitter horror stories that they promise to share at another time. In the meantime, I call my partner Dr. Nathan Wood and tell him to get ready in case I can’t find anyone else to watch the girls tonight.

I pull into my driveway fifteen minutes later, beside a car that wasn’t here when I left. Taking a deep breath so that I’m not too angry when I confront the babysitter and her boyfriend, but angry enough to get my point across, I walk in and find my daughters in the living room, just as Mackenzie said – watching the latest episode of *On the Field*. Neither one watches for the baseball analysis, only the chance to see their aunt and uncle (but mostly their aunt) on TV.

Mackenzie looks up as I come in the door and points a stern finger toward the kitchen before dropping her nose back into her book. I enter the kitchen to find the two high schoolers making out against my kitchen island, and I get it. I was a teenage boy at one point in my life, but I can’t have the person responsible for my children’s lives being distracted by her boyfriend when she should be keeping my daughters alive.

I cross my arms over my chest and loudly clear my throat which proves ineffective. One more time. The boy springs away from Cassie and I almost feel guilty for the wounded look on her face.

Almost.

“Out. Now. I’ll pay you for the two hours you were here, but that’s it. And don’t expect to hear from us again.”

Once they’re gone, I sink into the couch and Alice scrambles onto my lap, laying her

head against my chest and wrapping her arms around me the best that she can. I nuzzle my nose into her hair and smell the sweet orange shampoo I used on her this morning. I drop a kiss on top of her head and hug her tightly to me.

“Sorry I scared her away,” Alice yawns and snuggles closer to me.

“This one wasn’t your fault, baby girl. She broke the rules, and you tried to remind her of them.”

The last few before Cassie? All Alice’s fault. Between her picky eating (faked), her bedtime routine (exaggerated), and her insistence that she have her glittery pink stuffed cat (imaginary), three babysitters have given me the “it’s not them, it’s me” speech. Translation: your youngest daughter is an emotional terrorist and I don’t get paid enough to deal with it.

But I wouldn’t trade Alice and her antics for anything.

Except maybe a decent babysitter.

Her favorite babysitters are on their honeymoon. Her second favorites, Jenna and Marcus, are in Montana. Just as I’m about to give up and settle in for the night, the doorbell rings. I open it to find Nate and his wife Erin on the doorstep with a pizza, a bag full of board games, and what I think is a bag full of ice cream sundae supplies.

“Erin heard our call,” Nate shrugs as he walks past me to greet the girls. “She insisted.”

Sure she did.

Nate has a soft spot for my kids. I know he does. He heard my desperation on the phone and I’m sure it didn’t take any convincing from Erin for them to come over.

“Besides, while I know I could do a stellar job with Mrs. Rodriguez,” he’s humble too. “She’s your patient. Go. We can handle this.”

I head back to the hospital and check on Mrs. Rodriguez. She’s close. Finally. I scrub in and get ready for the delivery. Tears sting my eyes as I hand Mrs. Rodriguez her baby girl. I love this job. I love bringing life into the world. It’s a far cry from my days as a combat medic. Days spent dealing with death and destruction.

I came home, fast tracked a residency and got myself board certified as an OB/GYN and I’ve never looked back. Now I bring new life into the world, instead of losing men and women to the scars and wounds of war. While the nurses work on baby girl Rodriguez, I check in with my patient before cleaning myself up and heading home to my girls.

Where I walk in to find complete chaos.

Alice is on a couch cushion in the middle of the living room floor, Mackenzie is perched on the arm of a couch, Nate grins at me from where he stands on a dining room chair, and Erin is nowhere to be found.

“Daddy!” Alice shouts when she sees me. “The floor is lava! Be careful!!”

A pillow is flung at my head by my older daughter and I catch it before it can knock my glasses off my face. I kick off my shoes and step onto the pillow to protect myself from the lava.

“Toss me another one, Kiddo.” She dutifully throws me another pillow and I promptly split my feet between the two and slide myself down the hall to my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. I need a few minutes to catch my breath. Maybe take a quick shower, definitely change out of my scrubs. Stripping off my pants and shirt, I toss them in the laundry basket near my closet door and step into the

silence of my bathroom and right into the shower, letting the hot water pelt my body.

I just need a minute to breathe. To collect myself before I have to leave the solitude of this space and be Dad again. I love my daughters, and I've been solo-parenting for seven years now, but there are days that I wish I had a partner to come home to instead of always looking for a sitter, or dropping the girls off with family. I think, not for the first time, about how much easier this would be if I could share the emotional load with a partner. Someone I could tag in when I'm spent. But I can't, so I tag myself back in.

After showering, I change into my trusty flannel pajama pants with tiny snowflakes all over them – part of a matching family set that the girls insisted on last Christmas, and I'm powerless against them – and a tee shirt with the logo of Mackenzie's favorite English Soccer team. Nate meets me in the hallway when I step out of my room, with a promise to handle bedtime while I try to sit down and eat. I feel like I haven't seen my girls all week, and don't want to be apart from them for too long.

"Thanks man. Let them sleep in my bed, okay?"

"Will do, Jax."

Erin cleans the kitchen as Nate takes the girls down to my room to tuck them in and read a story while I eat something for dinner. She puts a plate of food in front of me and I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude for these friends who've become like family for me and my girls; friends who love my girls as if they were their own.

"How's Mrs. Rodriguez?" Nate asks, sitting down beside me after ten minutes or so.

"She's good. So is baby girl. How on earth did you take care of bedtime so quickly?"

"Your girls love me, what can I say? I'm glad to hear everything went well. We'll



take off now. Enjoy your weekend.”

“Thank you both, so much. I honestly don’t know what I would do without you.”

“It’s our pleasure, Jax.” Erin comes around the island and takes her husband by the hand, leading him toward the door and locking it behind them as they leave me in the silence of my house. Turning off all the lights, I head back down the hall to my room, where the girls are tucked in, sound asleep in my bed. Crawling in beside Mackenzie, I gather both girls close to me, and fall asleep with my whole world wrapped up in my arms.

### CHAPTER TWO

#### PLAYING THE FIELD

##### EMMA

I have a Saturday morning routine.

Okay, I have a lot of routines, but my Saturday morning routine is my favorite. Saturday mornings are for soccer. First I practice, and then I watch. There's no one at the community baseball field first thing in the morning, so I can usually use the grass to run my drills before the Owen's Hardware baseball team takes over the field. I'd use the soccer field if it weren't for the youth soccer leagues that have the fields on Saturdays.

Usually, after an hour of drills, I walk home, shower, and eat breakfast while watching whatever English football match happens to be on television. And then I spend the rest of the day doing laundry and cleaning my small house. Once my place is clean, I watch any American soccer game that happens to be on television or I stream it from an app, and read or work on whatever didn't get done during the week. Sometimes, I'll drive over to Boston for the weekend, and visit my parents. But a visit to my parents usually means I'm tagging along and helping Mom lead group tours at the museum, or tagging along with Dad while he leads a tour of the Freedom Trail.

My mom and dad are both retired teachers – high school English and history, respectively – and they were driving each other crazy at home. So, they joined the

local historical society and that was that. Mom works at the museum at the Old State House, while Dad leads a walking tour of the Freedom Trail. When I visit, Dad usually brings me along with him.

I have a teaching degree that led to me being an elementary school librarian. I love helping the kindergarten through fifth grade students at the elementary school find their passion in books, and while some find their passion in non-fiction, many many more find it in fiction. I loved it all as a kid, and still do. Growing up with teachers as parents meant that there were always books in the house, and always trips to the library in the summer. My sister Molly and I would read every book we could get our hands on, and when we finished our books, we'd raid Dad's history texts. Molly has a degree in journalism, and a passion for history like the rest of us, but has found herself in a sort of dead end in her career, questioning her next move. I'm trying to convince her to come for a visit and take some time off, but she insists that she's fine, and I know better than to try and argue with my younger sister.

As September drifts into October, the mornings are getting cooler and staying cooler longer, so this morning finds me dressing in long sleeves with leggings under my shorts before I lace up my cleats, grabbing my soccer ball and cones on my way out the door, and walking to the field. There's a definite chill in the air, as the sun only just starts to rise, I set up my cones in the grass before going through a series of stretches, taking care with my right knee as I do.

Popping in wireless headphones and turning on my training playlist, I start my drills. Cone dribbling was always my favorite, and is still the drill I enjoy the most; weaving in and out of the cones and keeping control of the ball takes mental focus and accuracy with my feet. I do a few passes with my right foot, and few with my left, and a few that force me to control the ball with both feet. A few of the drills I run are holdovers from my physical therapy and recovery, and they frustrate me to no end.

I don't have the speed and control I had in college. I don't have the stamina I had in

college. I was so excited for my first run with the national team, and I didn't think my professional career would end in injury. At least I had a teaching degree to fall back on. After four and a half years of professional soccer, I went down in the middle of an away game in Los Angeles, a long way from my home base in Chicago, and a long way from my actual home in Boston at the time.

It was devastating.

Multiple surgeries.

Multiple rounds of physical therapy.

And the end of my professional career.

It wasn't all bad, though. My recovery brought me here to Saratoga, where I lived with Molly for a while before she moved on to her next new adventure, and I stayed behind. I finished my teaching certification and found myself filling an open librarian position. I have no regrets. Just phantom pain in my leg and a fear that if I'm not careful, I'll tear my ACL again.

Today's drills are going fine until a baseball lands in my path and I can't stop myself quickly enough to avoid it. My momentum carries me forward, my feet tangling with themselves and the soccer ball and the rogue baseball, until I land nearly on my face in the grass. I roll onto my back, a sharp stab of pain running up my right knee. Not a great sign.

I'm also hallucinating?

That's new.

At least he's a cute hallucination.

He seems angry, though. Might even be yelling? I can't tell, thanks to the music in my ears.

"Didn't you see us?" Yep, definitely yelling. I shouldn't have taken out the headphone. He points toward the fence at the other end of the field, where another man is standing with a baseball bat in his hands. I sit up and rub my knee carefully, trying to ease the pain.

"Didn't you see me?" I ask, somewhat indignantly. I am here every Saturday morning from six to seven. I am a decently tall woman, wearing an obnoxiously green, long sleeved goal keeper's kit so that I can be visible out walking before sunrise. I'm also essentially running laps in the outfield. Kind of hard to miss.

"You didn't get hit, did you?" His voice is an annoyed growl, and I'd like to point out that he's not the one in the grass at the moment so he shouldn't be annoyed.

"No. I didn't. I was tripped up by your ball and..."

More than he asked for, Emma. Stop talking now.

He lets out a long sigh. The sigh of a man who is done with the woman in the grass. His brows pinch together as he watches me slowly stand up, favoring my right leg a little more than usual.

"Are you sure you weren't hit? You cut off in the middle of a sentence and I'm starting to worry about possible concussion."

"No, I..." Started to share more than he'd asked for and that's where I always start to lose people. "No. I'm fine. I wasn't hit. I tripped."

"As long as you're okay." He walks away, and I'm momentarily distracted from my

pain by the sight of him as he saunters away from me, all broad shoulders, dark hair, and long, toned legs.

It's a shame he's not nicer.

My tweaked knee makes for a long walk back to my house. And unfortunately, I have to walk past my grumpy, non-hallucination to get to the main road, and I hear the two men arguing in hushed tones as I try not to limp toward the road.

"It's the right thing to do," the other man, I'm guessing a younger brother, by the looks of him, emphatically grinds out, and my non-hallucination turns to me with weary eyes and a resigned sigh.

"Can I give you a ride home?" He asks as if in some kind of pain.

"Not if you're gonna be like that," I mutter, and pray he doesn't hear me. But, as I've been told before, I'm not exactly quiet.

"Okay. Great."

"Jax!" The other man exclaims, a dumbfounded look on his face. "She's clearly in pain. You of all people..."

"James," Jax – the name suits him – rubs his brow and turns away from me. His shoulders heaving with a breath. The other man, James, flicks his gaze back and forth between us, waiting. "You're right."

Jax turns back to me, his features softer somehow. He runs a hand down his face and the gentle rasp of stubble against skin sends a shiver down my limbs. His intense eyes find mine and while he doesn't smile, he doesn't scowl either. Feels like progress to me.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been very rude. Please, let us give you a ride home.”

“No, really, I can make it.”

“Wow, you’re stubborn,” he huffs out a humorless laugh.

“Not stubborn,” all humor is gone from my voice. “Safety conscious. I’d rather walk through town on a tweaked knee than get in a car with strangers. And two strange men, to boot.”

“Are you new in town?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“I’m really screwing this up, aren’t I? Can I start over?”

“I really should be getting home...”

“I’m James,” the other man rolls his eyes and offers me a handshake. “James Hutchinson, I own the hardware store in town. This bumbling idiot is my brother Jax. Thirty nine. Single. Dad of two daughters. Doctor.”

Jax turns bright red. We’re talking cheeks, neck, even the tips of his ears. It’s cute.

“I’m the one that hit the ball that nearly took you out, and I can tell that you’re favoring your right leg – I’m assuming it’s an old injury because while you were doing your drills I could tell you were favoring it...”

“Oh, so at least one of you saw me.” Good going Emma. Snark always makes for a good first impression.

“I did. Sorry about that. Please, let us drive you home.”

I should say no, but I can't put weight on my leg without pain. So. I'll risk being kidnapped. This time.

“Okay. Thank you. And yes, for the record, I am new-ish here. I moved here at the end of last school year,” I offer as we walk toward the parking lot. And then I remember I haven't given them my name, but that's all they're getting. “I'm Emma.”

“Nice to meet you, Emma,” James offers, while his brother remains silent. Fine by me.

The ride to my house is silent but for me giving directions and that's okay because it allows me to observe the man in the passenger seat – his dark hair has a slight wave to it, a bit of gray at his temples and in the stubble along his jaw. His eyelashes are distractingly long, and there's a weariness in his eyes as he leans his head back against the headrest of his seat.

I thank them both for the ride and head toward my house, dreading the stairs from the bottom of my deck to the front door each step of the way. With my hand on the railing, I start to slowly climb to the top of my deck, but a car door behind me gets my attention.

“Let me help you?” Jax steps out of the car and gives me a pleading look. I want to say no, that I can do it myself, but I really wouldn't mind the help.

“Okay,” I nod and he rushes to my side, wrapping a strong arm around my back and taking most of my weight as he helps me up the steps.

I expect him to let me go when we reach the top of the stairs, but he stays with me until I reach my door. I fumble for my keys and after unlocking my door, he stops me



with a gentle hand, turning me toward him.

“I’m sorry...about earlier. I didn’t mean to be so rude. It’s been a long week. I won’t bore you with the details of it all, but suffice to say, we’ve endured a whole range of emotions in my house this week and unfortunately I took it out on you instead of on the baseballs like I was supposed to.”

“It’s okay, Jax. I...thank you. For walking me to my door. And for apologizing. I’m rambling,” I look at my shoes instead of at him, looking for a way out of this conversation. “Sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” He gives me an out by turning and heading down the stairs. I walk into my house, where I elevate and ice my knee and spend the rest of the day thinking about Jax and his beautiful eyes and the way that I wouldn’t mind being bored by the details of his day.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### HEART TO HEART

##### JAX

That couldn't have gone worse.

Actually, it could have. I could have been responsible for giving her a concussion if the ball had actually hit her, but no, instead I bungled the whole interaction. I wasn't lying when I told her it's been a long, frustrating week, at the end of a long frustrating month, nearing the end of a long frustrating few years. Also doesn't help that today I should have been celebrating my eleventh wedding anniversary instead of taking early morning batting practice with my brother.

"What is wrong with you?" James asks the minute I open the car door and slide in beside him. "The only way that could have been worse is if you'd concussed her."

"I'm not in the mood, James. Not today."

"I know," he still hasn't turned on the ignition, so we sit in the silence of his car in a virtual stranger's driveway. "And you can take it out on me all you want, but when you start snapping at strangers you've only just met, we need to deal with some things."

"I know." I scrub a hand down my face, and lean my head against the seat.

“Jax. Talk to me.”

“When I sent them back to school last month, they each had one of those about me papers to do, and this one asked about parents, which led to the inevitable questions.” Where’s our mom? Did she leave? Is she coming back? How do you explain to your eight and ten year olds that their mom left because she didn’t want to be a mom anymore? Because she didn’t want to be my wife anymore? There’s no good way to explain it. “I don’t know what to tell them anymore, James. There’s no way to explain it without it looking like she left because of them. ”

I can’t be a mother anymore.

Her words are seared into my brain.

It would have been one thing to leave me , it’s another thing altogether to leave those girls. When Angela left, leaving me on my own with an infant and a toddler, I moved back into Mom and Dad’s house for a while, taking all the help I could get. There were so many days that I wanted to give up, so many days that I wished I could pinch myself and wake up from what was surely a bad dream, but then the divorce I never wanted was finalized, and I had full custody of my daughters. She didn’t want anything to do with them, and that was when I realized that we were dealing with the best possible outcome for them – they are with a parent who loves them so, so deeply. With a family that will do anything for them, and I can’t imagine my life without them.

“I love my kids, James, and I can’t help but wonder sometimes if they’re missing out because I work so much, or if they’re missing out because I haven’t dated and settled down with anyone...”

“No,” James puts a hand on my shoulder, “Jax, they have the best dad in the world, and a family that loves them as much as you do. There’s never been any question that

you love your girls, and sure you work, but more often than not the girls are with any number of us. Mandy spoils them rotten, and loves being able to babysit...especially after they ran off the last one.”

I sit up with a laugh, turning to my brother. He's heard all of the babysitting horror stories, but the last one happened while he and Mandy were gallivanting around the United Kingdom on their honeymoon, and I apparently haven't filled him in yet.

“They didn't run the last one off, as a matter of fact. I fired her.”

“You fired a teenager?”

“I have one rule: if you're under twenty-one, no significant others in my house while you're watching my children. She had him come over one night, probably thinking the girls wouldn't say anything...”

“Had she met Alice up to that point?”

“Nope,” I laugh, for the first time in a long time, I actually laugh. Because Alice is my little stickler for the rules and everyone knows it. She's also a reader, which makes her dangerous. She just started third grade and reads at a fifth grade level, probably because every member of my family – including me – has been reading to the girls since the moment they were born and then shoving books at them ever since. “Alice called Nell, Nell called me. I fired the girl on the spot. I could have probably handled that better than I did, but here we are.”

“So why the grumpy pants routine today?”

“Today would have been our eleventh anniversary, if Angela had stuck around.”

“Have you heard from her?”

“One time since she left. Not on a birthday or for Christmas, or even to check on the girls. No, she called to see if she’d accidentally left her passport with me or her parents. I told her she was free to come and look for it, that the girls and I wouldn’t be there.”

James sits silently beside me, his face stony, hands curled into fists.

“I can practically feel your brain buzzing. What are you thinking?”

“Mom raised us not to say anything at all if we couldn’t say anything nice, and I have nothing nice to say about her.”

“Fair enough.”

When she left me, if she’d gone off on a worldwide backpacking trip, or told me she was going to move to the arctic to be a survivalist, I thought maybe I could handle that. But when she reached out two years later, I looked for her passport, which I didn’t have, and then I dropped the girls at Mom and Dad’s and ran until my lungs burned and my heart was beating so hard that I thought I was having a heart attack.

She needed the passport for her honeymoon.

She’s married and living in Southern California, about as far away from us and her parents as she could get. I didn’t ask many questions when we talked, I don’t want to know the answers. She didn’t ask about the girls or her parents, didn’t ask about me, and I’m fine with that. As far as I’m concerned she doesn’t deserve to know how the girls are doing, or that despite everything, her parents have become a part of our family.

She doesn’t deserve to know that Alice is reading through books faster than I can keep them in the house, or that Mackenzie is a whiz with a soccer ball. She doesn’t

deserve to know about the chicken pox outbreak a few years ago that claimed both girls...at the same time that I had pneumonia. Sure, we were all sick for a week and a half, but it was a week and a half that I got to spend, uninterrupted, with my girls. She doesn't deserve to know that Alice wakes up with nightmares and more often than not sleeps in my bed. Or that Mackenzie worries so much about her little sister, that she sleeps curled up on her other side.

She didn't want those things back then.

She doesn't deserve them now.

Not that she ever asked.

"Do you have plans for the day?" James asks, finally turning on the ignition and pulling out of Emma's driveway.

"I need to take the girls shopping; they're outgrowing everything faster than I can keep up with them."

"Let Mandy and I do that."

"I can't ask that of you, James." I heave a sigh and sink deeper into my seat, thinking of everything else we need for the weeks ahead, and that I get to go to one of Mackenzie's soccer games since I won't be on-call this weekend. For once.

"When's the last time you slept?" James asks, pulling me out of my self reflection.

"Last night."

"I mean, when's the last time you slept without your children in your bed?"

“It’s been a while.”

James turns away from the road that would take us to Mom and Dad’s and starts driving the opposite direction. I don’t question him – I’ve learned not to question James, he usually knows what he’s doing. When he pulls to a stop in my driveway, we sit in silence for a long moment.

“Go inside and go to sleep. Mandy and I will take the girls for the day and then you can meet us back at our place for dinner tonight. No arguments.”

“You caught me on a good day,” I laugh as I climb out of the car, and dig my wallet out of my pocket before passing James my credit card. “I’ve got no fight left in me today.”

I don’t bother with a shower or even changing out of my sweaty tee shirt and shorts. I kick off my shoes and remove my socks before falling onto my bed without bothering to turn down the comforter or remove the pointless decorative pillows, and when I wake up, it’s growing dark. I missed dinner with the family, and a slew of texts from James are waiting for me.

James: We’ve got leftovers for you.

Mandy says we can keep the girls overnight if you want.

Having a campfire. Mom and Dad walked down. J I’m thankful Amanda and Penelope – the responsible adults – are with them. When I get to James and Amanda’s house, Amanda meets me in the kitchen with a plate of leftover roasted chicken and macaroni and cheese. I bring it out to the fire and sit down on the blanket Alice and Mackenzie are occupying, and Alice snuggles up against me almost immediately while Mackenzie stretches out beside me, leaning against my shoulder as I eat dinner.

These girls of mine.

As much as I loved being able to rest today, I love this more: being here with them and the rest of the family, for the first time in too long. I've missed so much over the years, and as the girls get older I don't want to miss any more. As I watch Jake hold his infant daughter, I feel a familiar longing in my heart for time spent with my daughters. As Leigh toddles over to her dad and baby sister, I remember those days with my own girls and can't help the tears that sting at the back of my eyes.

"Hey kiddo," I drop a kiss on the top of Mackenzie's head, "why don't you and your sister go get into your pjs?"

"We still get to say the night with Uncle James and Aunt Mandy, right?"

"Yes," I chuckle at the earnestness in her gaze. "You do. Now go up and change."

I watch as Mackenzie takes her sister's hand and the two of them walk up the sloping lawn toward the steps of the deck and scrub a hand down my face as the door shuts behind them.

"I think it might be time for us to go," Penelope stands as Jake passes baby Juniper into her arms and Jake stands to pick up Leigh.

"Hold on," I stand and step toward Nell, "I haven't seen Junie in too long."

Penelope transfers my niece into my arms and I'm graced with a wide-eyed grin from the newest member of our family. I hold her for a minute and kiss her forehead before passing her off to her mom's waiting arms. Mom and Dad walk back toward their house with Jake and Penelope, leaving me with James and Amanda.

"Okay. Enough stalling," James watches me from across the dying campfire. "What's



on your mind?”

“I’m sorry you had to take them today.”

“Don’t ever apologize for letting us spend time with those girls, Jax.” This, from Amanda. “But, I have a feeling this is a conversation that’s been brewing for a while, so I’m going to go up and check on the girls and help them make up the campsite that I promised them in the living room.”

Amanda makes her way up the lawn, and James watches her before shifting his focus back to me.

“Do you remember what you said to me in the hospital the night of my anxiety attack?” James asks, eyes straying to the crackling fire.

“I vaguely remember saying something wise and big brother like, yes.”

“Sounds about right,” James cracks a smile and looks my way. “You said, ‘I’ve been in this hole and I know the way out.’ And Jax, I’m here to tell you that I think you’re still getting out of the hole.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, after Angela left you worked and parented. You had, and still have, the support of the family, and Mr. and Mrs. O, but Jax, if you don’t make a change, you’re going to completely burnout. And trust me, you don’t want that. I mean, for crying out loud, when was the last time you took a day off?”

“Excuse me, I took time off when my daughters both had chicken pox.” That was the worst week and a half of my life. I love my daughters, but trying to keep them mostly away from each other because the virus was running on different timelines in each of

their bodies, convincing Alice not to scratch even though she really wanted to, and then the stomach flu that hit us all right after? I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

“Jax, all I'm saying is consider a schedule change at work. Talk to Nate and Erin, I'm sure they'll be understanding. Let me, let us, help you for a while longer, okay?”

“When did you get so wise?” I ask my brother, only partly joking.

“When I married Amanda,” he answers without a hint of laughter, and it's true. Ever since he met Amanda, I've seen a change in my brother, I've seen how he's grown and couldn't be prouder of him.

“Thanks James.”

“Always, Jax.”

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### ADJUSTMENT

##### JAX

Monday morning, Mom comes over and I leave the girls in her capable hands to get them up and ready for the school day. Scooping a handful of letters out of the printer in my home office, I shove them down in my work bag before heading to the office complex near the hospital. Nina, our office manager, greets me as I walk into the office, handing me my patient files for the day, and the weight of what I'm about to do hits me like a brick.

"Staff meeting in ten," Erin calls as I head toward my office. Staff meeting, meaning Nate and me, Erin, Nina, and our handful of nurses and techs gathering to talk through the week ahead. It also means a few minutes alone with Nate. I sink into the chair behind my desk and my eye is immediately drawn to the picture of my girls, and the weight of what I'm about to do is lifted. Because I'm doing it for them. Gathering my notes for the meeting, and the letters from my bag, I come across another paper that was in the printer.

Mackenzie's soccer schedule. Mackenzie has been expressing interest in playing on a youth soccer team for years, and I finally signed her up a few months ago. Trying to figure out how to make my schedule match up with her game and practice schedule, wrangling family members into attending practices and games and taking care of transportation when I can't be there was easier than I thought it would be, but so far I haven't been able to attend a game yet and we're nearing the end of the season.

I quickly grab the schedule and tuck it alongside the letters I wrote, and oddly the schedule gives me the courage I need to have the conversation with Nate, who I bump into in the hallway on the way to the conference room.

“Do you and Erin have a few minutes after this meeting?”

“Sure do. What’s up?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until after staff.”

“Sounds good.”

Nina runs the meeting, as she does every week, and when she’s done, I follow Nate down the hall to his office, with Erin on our heels. This weekend with James and Amanda was eye-opening. I had nothing but time with the girls, who were thrilled to spend the weekend with their Aunt and Uncle but didn’t want me out of their sight. So while they camped out on the living room floor, I crashed in the guest room upstairs, and we spent our days on the boat with James while his staff covered the shop and Amanda worked, and we cooked out with Mom and Dad at night.

Jake, Penelope, and their girls are in town so my kids got to see their cousins, and I got to see my nieces. I’ve had nothing but time to think about this, and I know it’s the right decision for me. I reach for the letters I have stashed in the pocket of my jacket, and take out the soccer schedule instead, laying it on the desk between us.

“Are we...playing youth soccer?” Nate asks with a lopsided smile as he reads the form and puts it down on the completely un-cluttered surface of his desk.

“No. But Mackenzie is. I’ve had her schedule sitting in my printer for a week while I tried to figure out a way to be present for Mackenzie and Alice. And I think I’ve finally come up with a solution.”

“You know,” Nate leans back and kicks his feet up on the edge of his desk, “the night that we stayed with the girls, before the floor turned to lava, they were upset to see you leave. Mackenzie turned on Jake’s show and settled into the couch with Alice, as if Erin and I weren’t there. They didn’t need us, because they had each other. But they missed you, that much was obvious. Erin told me that this conversation might only be a matter of time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What are you talking about?” He counters with another lopsided smile and a raised eyebrow. “Because I’m ready to hear whatever you’re proposing.”

“I’m starting to realize that I’m not being the best dad that I can be to my daughters.” I chose obstetrics as my specialty because after years of being a combat medic in the Marine Corps, I wanted to bring life into the world, be a part of families' happiest moments. Sure, there is still a lot of loss in this field, but nothing like what I saw. However, the hours are unpredictable; when I’m not in the office seeing patients, I’m called to the hospital for deliveries and emergencies and more false labors than I care to talk about. I’ve missed school concerts and parent teacher conferences and am rarely home to put my girls on the bus or pick them up in the afternoon. “Nate, I need to be Dad. And I don’t feel like I’m able to right now. I don’t think I have in a while, actually.”

“So we reduce your hours,” Nate replies without hesitation. “We set strict nine to...when do the girls get out of school?”

“Dismissal is at three.”

“Nine to two-thirty. Strict , nine to two-thirty hours. I’ll tell Nina that you can no longer take appointments after one in the afternoon. And as far as on-call hours, one day. Twenty-four hours. If a patient goes into labor outside of your on-call hours,

Erin or I will take it.”

“That’s not going to work, Nate. You and Erin can’t do all the on-calls.”

“I know that. We’ve been talking about adding a fourth to the practice. We find someone willing to be on call an extra couple days. Someone that our patients can trust to be there for them when needed. But, I’m making the executive decision that your new hours start today. Any appointments that you have after one o’clock today are mine now, and you’ll be going home.”

“Thank you Nate.”

“One more thing,” Erin stops me as I push myself out of the chair across from Nate’s desk, a stern look on her face. “Absolutely no weekends.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“I don’t deserve you. Either of you.”

“Of course you don’t,” Nate grins.

My caseload has me in and out of the hospital today with one delivery and a couple of admitted patients, and I find myself with a spring in my step that I haven’t had in a long time. I’m looking forward to dinner at Mom and Dad’s and baseball with James and the team afterward. But more than anything, I’m looking forward to going home with my daughters at the end of the day.

Mackenzie is kicking a soccer ball around in the grass with Jake when I pull up to the house, and she runs to me as I get out of the car. I press a kiss to the top of her head

before grabbing the bags from the backseat of my car, and heading into the house where Alice greets me at the door with a hug around my legs. Shifting my bags to one arm, I lean down and scoop Alice up into my open arm and plant a kiss on her cheek as I walk toward the kitchen where I find the rest of the family.

After depositing Alice on a stool next to Mandy, I drop my bags on the counter where Mom and Dad are prepping dinner with help from Penelope. In the bags I have two four packs of Penelope's favorite ginger ale, a new book for Alice that I'll give her later, and a celebratory cake because sometimes you need a dose of store-bought frosting. James spots me from his perch on the deck, eyebrow quirking in my direction; snagging two long-neck bottles of ginger ale, I step outside and hand one to him. He twists off the top of his, and I do the same, holding my bottle out in a toast.

"Here's to reduced hours, one on-call day a week, and the best part of the deal? No weekends."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I talked to Nate today, and can't even begin to thank you for giving me the kick in the pants that I needed to take this step."

"Jax, after everything you've done for me over the years, I'm glad that I can finally help you."

"What do you mean finally? James, you've been helping me everyday since Angela left. You've helped raise my kids, that's not nothing." I wrap my arms around my brother and pull him into a tight hug as he squeezes me back.

"Dinner's ready," Mom pokes her head out the door and scrutinizes us with a very Mom look, before stepping outside and cornering us. "Okay. Spill."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say at the same time that James cracks like an egg.

“Jax is working new hours so that he can spend more time with the girls and, by extension, us. ”

James could never hold up to Mom’s interrogations. When we were kids, he sold the rest of us out each and every time, and clearly nothing has changed. But I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“So we’re celebrating?” Mom asks.

“Definitely.” I answer with a kiss on her cheek as we make our way back into the house to join the family for dinner where I sit between my girls and laugh with my family, feeling, for the first time, like a weight has been lifted. And after dinner, as a family, we head to the ball field.

James and I are selected as captains for tonight’s game, as friends and family line the grass behind the fences, ready to watch our rag-tag group of veterans divide up and play against each other. Mandy sits on the bench with a scorebook in her lap, and Penelope sits beside her to call out any plays that Mandy misses while making her notations. Jake is behind the plate, calling balls and strikes, and after a hearty ‘play ball’ from Alice, the game is underway.

I take the mound and put everything I have into my pitch, throwing it right over the heart of the plate, and give Jake a pass when he calls it a ball, but don’t have the same grace the next inning when he does the same thing.

“That was a strike!” I shout as I reset on the mound and Jake hits me with a stern ‘don’t argue with me’ look. And I wouldn’t argue with him, except that in the next half inning he calls the same pitch a strike when James throws it. This could very



easily turn into a family feud if I'm not careful, but Jake is clearly calling this game in favor of James and his team.

I'd rather have Penelope behind the plate calling the game, but she has her hands full with Leigh and Junie, which is fine, I guess, but she has a better eye than her husband. And tends to have a more consistent strikezone. Every now and then Mandy will offer advice to our hitters on how to adjust their swing, no doubt using tips that she picked up from her time working for Seattle's baseball team; she distributes her tidbits of wisdom equally to both teams, as she continues to diligently score the game.

My next time on the mound, I'm distracted by a shock of mahogany hair in the crowd, but more than that, it's the bright, almost fluorescent green jersey that gets my attention. The same jersey I saw in the outfield last weekend. Emma stands back, away from the assembled crowd, watching the action on the field, I'd like to think she's watching me. I wind up and fire a pitch right over the heart of the plate, but my reaction time is slow, and I can't get out of the way of the line drive. The next thing I know I'm flat on my back on the pitcher's mound.

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### FOR LOVE OF THE GAMES

##### EMMA

Jax drops to the ground after being hit in the chest with the ball, and I watch as his brother James, and the man who was acting as umpire rush to him, along with a handful of others. They help him into a seated position, and I finally feel like I can breathe again. Jax gets to his feet, and James helps him off the field while the other man takes the glove and ball and begins to throw.

I want to make sure he's okay, there's a part of me that feels drawn to him, even though we met only briefly. His eyes meet mine as he makes his way to the bench, and as much as I want to stay, and check on him, I turn to head back to the rec center, to get away from the noise of the crowd as much as to get to my car and head home. I have work to do for the week ahead, and I probably shouldn't hang around like I have any claim on Jax or any reason to make sure he's okay, but there's a part of me that needs to be sure. I've been the injured athlete on the field before, and even with everyone's concern, it's a lonely place.

When I tore my ACL, once I was off the field, I was by myself in the training room, waiting for the team doctors to come check me out, trying really hard not to scream from the pain. My family was on the other side of the country at the time, and even though I was surrounded by people, I felt completely alone. But Jax, he isn't alone, he's here with his brother, and I assume more of his family is in the assembled crowd. I'm just the strange woman he almost knocked out with a baseball over the weekend.

I make my way to my car and drive back home knowing that I have work to do to get ready for the week ahead. Once I'm home, I make a quick dinner and eat on my deck, my eyes drawn to the calm waters of the lake in front of me, but my mind wandering to the rec center baseball fields down the road.

I was born and raised in Boston, a town that takes their sports seriously; baseball weekends means traffic jams and less interest in tours of the city, which is fine, because you'll typically find my parents in the stadium, sitting in the seats they've had for twenty-five years. Sometimes Molly will tag along with Dad, when she's in any one place long enough to drop her suitcases, but more often than not, Mom is the one that sits beside Dad at every home game – side by side in their matching Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell jerseys.

Dad took me to one game when I was about twelve, and I was bored to tears by the game. I felt bad, because Dad was having such a great time teaching me about baseball, and I wasn't into it at all. Soccer moves so fast, and is so non-stop in its pace of play that baseball couldn't hold my attention. By that point, I'd been playing soccer for four years, and in my pre-teen brain, nothing could top my favorite sport. Thankfully, I have parents who supported me in my soccer dreams.

Dreams that were torn apart at the same time as my ACL.

I watched a lot of baseball during my recovery, because I couldn't bring myself to watch the sport I loved, and I learned enough of the game that I could carry on a conversation about it with my Dad at the time. And then my ADHD hyperfixation got involved; for six months, the duration of my physical therapy, I listened to every audio book available to me on the vast, hundred and forty plus year history of baseball.

I read about the players who pioneered the game, I read about the great rivalries that exist between teams, and after every physical therapy session, I'd talk to Dad on the

ride home about the book I'd been listening to, and he'd recommend a new one for the following week. I came to appreciate the game in a new way, and it took my mind off of the fact that I wasn't playing soccer and probably wouldn't play again. As soon as I was comfortable getting around again, Dad took me to a game, and I was enamored from the first pitch to the final out, because I finally understood what was going on.

More than that, I understood my dad in a new way, and it allowed us to bond in ways we hadn't before. I finish my dinner and after washing my dishes, I turn on my work playlist on my nearby speaker, and a baseball game on television – the combination of familiar music and baseball helps my brain focus on the task at hand, eliminating other distractions. I learned this trick in elementary school when my frustrated mom couldn't figure out why I wasn't doing my homework at the dining room table. Molly had no trouble, why couldn't I buckle down and do my work like Molly could?

It took some convincing, but Mom finally let me do my homework on the living room floor one night, and there was something about being near Mom and Dad, and having the sound of the nightly news in the background, that helped me focus on my work. So, I kept it up. Sometimes I mix up what I put on television – baseball, cooking shows, my favorite political drama from twenty years ago – but my music is always the same: Beethoven, Mozart, Holst, and Copeland. No lyrics to distract myself with.

Sitting down on the floor in front of my couch with my laptop, I start working on my plans for the library for the next month; reading groups, after school activities, and book fairs are all on my schedule for the year, and I look forward to just being in the library for the kids on a daily basis. I have order forms pulled up for library supplies, and new sets of books to replace a few that have gotten too old or damaged over the years.

The alarm on my phone pulls my focus away from the spreadsheet on my computer screen and reminds me that it's time to get ready for bed, otherwise I'd stay up all

night and keep working. It takes a while once I'm into my pajamas and into bed, for my mind to stop racing enough for me to start to relax, music – a different playlist this time – playing softly in the background, lulls me to sleep.

I wake in the morning to soft sunlight pouring in through my bedroom window, and get ready for a staff work day to mark the end of the marking period. With an audiobook in my ears, and giant rolls of paper in the hallway, I transform my 'back to school' library bulletin board into a soccer field, complete with goals, touch line, and shaggy green grass.

"Emma!" Lucy Hernandez calls down the hall from the direction of the gym. "Emma, I need your help."

"What's up Lucy?" I pop out one headphone and pause my book, giving her my full attention.

"I've had a bit of a family emergency crop up and I'm not going to be able to be around for the rest of the soccer season."

Oh no.

No.

I turned down the offer of coaching youth soccer when it was extended to me back in August, but the desperation on Lucy's face makes it really hard for me to tell her no. It would give me time on the field, and there's only a few weeks left in the season. I could do it for a few weeks. Right?

"I can do tonight's practice and the game on Saturday but Emma, I wouldn't ask if I wasn't in such a tough spot."

“Send me an email with all the details; roster, schedule, parent information. And Lucy, make sure you email the parents so they aren’t surprised when I show up instead of you.”

“You’re a lifesaver!” Lucy throws her arms around me in a tight hug before making a beeline for the front door. When her email arrives later that afternoon, I’m about to read through the roster when Mrs. Owens wanders into the library.

“Lovely bulletin board, Ms. Mitchell. Are you ready to talk about extending your contract?”

Because of the uncertainty of my future, I signed a one year contract with the school, not knowing when – or if – I may find myself back in the game. Mrs. Owens was understanding, but reminds me every chance she gets that a long term contract is an option.

“I’ll let you know, Mrs. Owens.”

“See that you do.”

The future is still filled with unknowns, so I tamp that one down again, hoping to tuck it away for a while longer and choosing to take my mind off of it by treating myself to take out from the nearby diner for dinner, and eat a solo picnic on a bench near the park. I watch families riding bikes, others playing catch, and a handful of other picnickers, but my attention is drawn to the tall, lean form a few yards away with two young girls, girls I recognize from school – Mackenzie and Alice. They’re kicking a soccer ball around. When the taller of the two girls gets the ball, she squares up and kicks it with a little bit of force behind the touch, and the ball rolls swiftly through the grass, in my direction.

I stand and stop it with my foot before it can roll onto the nearby path. And, in a bit of

a show-off moment, I flip the ball up onto my foot and juggle it a bit, before carefully bringing it back down to the ground and tapping it in Mackenzie's direction. She stops it with her foot and scrutinizes me for a long moment,

"Do you play, Ms. Mitchell?"

"I used to," I tell her, and for the first time in a while, I don't feel a stab of regret for not going back to the game. "Do you?"

"I do! I'm on the team that Mrs. Hernandez coaches."

"Mackenzie!" A voice calls from nearby. I turn and come face to face with a set of beautiful bronze eyes framed by unfairly long lashes, a jawline covered in dark stubble, and...a smile? I didn't see that last time.

Jax.

"Mackenzie," Jax drops to a knee in front of his daughter, "you can't just go bugging strangers..."

"It's no trouble. Really." I protest, fighting the urge to reach out and run my fingers through his dark, enticing hair. "And, I work at their school, so no stranger danger here, if that's what you were afraid of."

"I'm sorry," Jax stands and faces me, "I try to work on boundaries, and stranger danger and all that, but sometimes they get excited."

"That's okay, I was the same way at that age," I assure him before turning to his daughter. "It was nice to see you, Mackenzie. We'll have to get together to play sometime. Your dad knows how to find me."

His lips tilt into a lopsided smile, one hand scrubbing at the back of his neck as he looks away from me. “Yes, I do.”

“Anyway...” I try to make a natural exit but there’s no good way to just...bolt. “I should be going.”

“Goodnight, Emma,” he says once I’ve turned around, and I’m thankful that I’m walking away and he can’t see my face as heat floods my cheeks and a thrill runs through me at the sound of my name on his lips.



## Page 6

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### CHAPTER SIX

#### NEW ROUTINE

#### JAX

“Wake up, Dad!” A small voice calls through the fog of sleep and a weight lands right on my chest as two little hands cup my cheeks. Opening my eyes, I prop myself up on my elbows, meeting the bright blue eyes of my youngest, perched on my chest. Her blonde curls stick out in every direction, and the neck of her sleep shirt – one of my old baseball tee shirts – hangs off of her shoulder, and she is wide eyed with excitement. I grab her around the waist and draw her against my chest, pressing kisses to her cheeks as she giggles. It’s not long before we’re joined by a bleary-eyed, less enthusiastic Mackenzie who crawls under the covers beside me and buries her head in the pillows.

“Alright,” I throw the covers off of Mackenzie, and gently move Alice to the floor. “You girls go get dressed, and I’ll start breakfast, okay?”

Alice scampers off down the hall to her room, and Mackenzie follows slowly, wrapped in the blanket that she stole off my bed. As I listen to the sounds of my girls getting ready for school, I’m thankful once again for Nate and Erin’s understanding. Today is my first day with new hours and no on-call responsibility. There’s a freedom in my morning that I haven’t had in a long time; I’m not passing the girls off to a family member before going to work, and relying on family to be here when they come home. It’s all me. All dad. And I can’t wait.

Before I start on breakfast for the girls, I work on a pot of coffee. Mackenzie comes by her morning surliness very naturally, and coffee is the only thing that helps me with Alice and the enthusiasm with which she approaches every aspect of her life. As the coffee brews I start scrambling eggs and frying bacon, and when Mackenzie joins me in the kitchen she loads the toaster with slices of bread.

“Do you want to buy your lunch today, or pack it?” I ask as she takes out plates and silverware for the three of us.

“Hmmm...” She thinks about it for a minute, before deciding. “I’ll pack.”

“I can pack it for you,” I offer.

“Nope. I’ll do it. Alice!” Mackenzie steps into the hallway and shouts for her sister.

“Do you want me to pack your lunch?”

“Yes please!” Comes a response from down the hall.

Pulling the bacon from the pan to drain on paper towels, I kill the heat on the eggs and make my way down the hall to investigate what’s taking Alice so long to get ready. One step into her room, and I stop in my tracks – I knew what I’d find, but I still have to gather my patience to approach it.

The room is a mess. I know she’s capable of cleaning it, but keeping it clean and organized is another story. But I can’t worry about that right now. I find Alice standing in front of her dresser in a pair of jeans and her sleep shirt as she rifles through the drawer.

“What’s up, Kiddo?”

“I can’t find it.”

“Find what?”

“Aunt Nelope’s shirt.”

“I washed it yesterday, go look in the dryer.”

Alice takes off down the hall toward the laundry room in search of her On the Field shirt, and I follow, shutting her bedroom door behind me, blocking out the mess to deal with another time. Once everyone is dressed, I dish up breakfast and send the girls to the table to eat, while I finish packing their lunches. Mackenzie made them each a peanut butter and jelly sandwich that I bag up and tuck into each girl’s lunch box with carrot sticks for Alice, celery for Mackenzie, and a cookie from their grandpa for both of them.

“Juice box or water?” I ask, standing in front of the open fridge and looking over our options.

“Flavors?” Alice responds after tearing into a piece of bacon.

“Apple, grape, and...” There’s one juice box tucked all the way in the back of the fridge that I have to reach for. It’s probably been there for months, and I’m just now seeing it. “Orange.”

“Apple!” Alice calls.

“Grape!” Mackenzie echos.

I drop a juice box into each lunch box before sitting down at the table with my girls and my coffee. I don’t quite know what to do with myself if I’m not rushing around and getting for work, and I haven’t done the school morning thing in a long time, so I sit and listen to the girls talk about what they’re looking forward to in school, and

soak up this time that I'm able to spend with them. With a few minutes to spare, we get shoes and backpacks on and I walk the girls down to their bus stop at the end of the road, and choke back a few tears when I watch them get onto the bus for the first time.

Mom and Dad usually handled this part, and I could separate myself from the actual act of them leaving for school. I knew they were going but I didn't have to see them leave, and I knew that once they got there, their Grandma Elaine – Mrs. Owens, to them while at school – would keep a watchful eye on them. But as much as I don't like seeing them leave, what's even worse is the silence of my house when I walk back inside to fix my own breakfast and get ready for work.

"How did this morning go?" Erin presses a cup of coffee into my hand when I walk into the office.

"I don't want to talk about it," my voice is thick with emotion as I think about putting the girls on the bus, and knowing that I have to do it again tomorrow. Nate claps me on the back, his expression a mixture of sympathy and mirth. "I hated every minute of it. I don't love the feeling of that bus pulling away."

"Imagine how you're going to feel this afternoon when the bus pulls up and those girls come home." Erin smiles before heading down to her own office.

"I'm ready, man. Putting them on the bus was somehow worse than being at work and knowing they're at school. But I can't wait until we're all home together tonight."

"I bet. Hey, I was going to save this until after staff meeting, but I made some phone calls. We've got a few candidates lined up to interview. A couple old friends of mine from medical school, one with ties to the area that I'm thinking might work out."

“Sounds good,” I grab the files from the mailbox outside my door, “I’ve got a pretty light day today, and don’t start on-call hours until next week anyway, per our arrangement.”

“Right,” Nate grins, clearly proud of himself that I’m acknowledging the arrangement. “First interview is in about an hour. I’ll see you then.”

“I don’t do well at the sight of blood,” the newly minted Doctor Lambright sits across from us in the small conference room, his face awash in the harsh fluorescents overhead. “I fainted during my first birth.”

“Well, I’m sure we could keep you on gynecology instead of obstetrics if that’s what you’d prefer. You may be called in to assist with births at some point though.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “No births.”

“Okay...We’ll be in touch,” Erin’s voice is laced with sweetness as the young man walks out the door, closing it behind him.

“Not a good fit for us.”

“Nope,” Nate shakes his head and scratches Dr. Lambright off the list. “We need an OB that won’t pass out with every birth.”

“Speaking of, I’ve got a C-Section, and then I’m going to go grab lunch with my brother so I’ll see you both later.”

Once at the hospital, I change into scrubs and meet with my patient and her husband before scrubbing in and stepping into the operating room on the labor floor. Familiar nurses greet me as they join me in the OR, getting ready to bring this new little life into the world. It never gets old. The operation goes off without a hitch and soon I’m

passing a healthy baby boy into the hands of his waiting parents. I scrub out and change back into my office clothes, throwing on my white coat as I step into the patient's room to check on her before heading back to the office.

"Thank you so much, Dr. Hutchinson," she doesn't even look at me, the brand new bundle in her arms is the priority, and believe me, I get it.

"You're very welcome. Congratulations to you both."

It's a quick drive from the hospital to the deli where James has our order waiting, and then on to the hardware store where I find my brother in the lumberyard helping to load a truck with lumber and supplies.

"How'd it go this morning?" James asks as we walk toward his office.

"Good. I'm more excited for the bus this afternoon though. Nate and Erin are sending me home early enough that I can have a snack ready for them before dinner."

"About that," James clears his throat and rubs a hand across the back of his neck. "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but Mom and Amanda have a meal planned for tonight. They wanted to bring it to you, don't tell my wife I told you."

"Why am I not surprised?" I laugh as I sit down beside my brother and start doling out our sandwiches. After a carefree and easy lunch with James, we clean up and I get ready to head back to the office, spying a shock of mahogany hair at the help desk on my way toward the front door, and no one around to help her. Stepping behind the desk, I'm greeted by a familiar face, patiently waiting and fidgeting with a piece of paper in her hand.

"Emma," her gaze snaps to mine and she gives me a cautious smile. "What can I do for you?"

“Jax?” Her brow furrows for just a moment, “I thought you were a doctor? What are you doing here?”

Her face falls and she crumples the paper in her hand more than before, and shrinks in on herself. The change is subtle, but quick, and I’m not sure what brought it on, but I find myself wanting to know. Thankfully, Emma seems like a talker so I don’t have to ask.

“I’m so sorry. That’s none of my business. Don’t feel like you have to explain yourself.”

“That’s okay,” I gently still her fidgeting fingers and her eyes finally meet mine. “I am, in fact, a doctor, but my brother owns this place and I know enough about the store to be either really helpful or...incredibly chaotic. Is there something I can help you with before I head out?”

“Paint sticks.”

“Paint...sticks?”

“You know, this long,” she holds her hands apart from each other, “little indent on one end...paint sticks.”

“Lucky for you, I know right where to find those. Follow me.” I lead her over toward the paint department and step behind the counter, where a box of stirrers resides on the floor. “How many do you need?”

“Forty should be enough,” she starts to think out loud, muttering about classes and kids and growing legs and walking away. “So lets say forty.”

“I seem to remember you’re a librarian,” I comment, counting out forty paint sticks

and laying them on the counter between us. “What do you need forty paint sticks for?”

“Shelf markers. The kids put them between the books on the shelf before they take out the book they want, and then they know where to put the book back if they decide they don’t want it.”

“Well then, Ms. Mitchell, consider this a donation from Owens Hardware.” Her cheeks turn a curious shade of pink as she gathers the paint sticks with a hurried thank you, and makes her way toward the front of the store, leaving me at the paint counter hoping I get to see her again. And gathering my courage to let James know that he just made a donation to the school.

No sooner does the clock strike two-thirty and Nate is in my office shooin me home for the day. I’m out the door as quick as my feet will carry me, getting home in time to have a snack ready, and then sitting at the bus stop until the bus pulls up. It’s such a small thing, but it’s the first time since Mackenzie started school that I’ve ever been here for the bus to drop the girls off, and I can’t wait to hear all about their day.



### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### BACK TO THE FIELD

##### EMMA

There's a slight chill in the air as I gather up the soccer equipment and load it into my car to take to the field. I'm meeting the team today for the first time, and I'm excited to meet the girls, and see what I'm working with for the next few weeks.

My old kit hangs in my closet, and I pull it out, for the first time in over a year, and run my fingers over the embroidered stars above the logo, one of which I helped my club earn. I held the trophy in my hands and hoisted it above my team. I wore the captain's armband that season for my club.

I was wearing it that night, for my country.

My first season with the National Team.

"Mitchell!" Alexa calls as the sub board is raised by the fourth official standing on the sideline, her number blaring red as the crowd cheers her off the field. I jog to meet her just before the touchline and she slips the captain's armband up to the edge of my sleeve and adjusts it so it fits just right. "Go get 'em, Captain."

I pull her in for a quick hug before play resumes. My knee is a little tight, and has been getting worse as the game progresses, but there's just a few minutes left on the clock, I can do it. I can push through for the rest of the match. The ball is passed my

way and I get swarmed by defenders all around me, I feign left, and juke right, my knee popping and giving out on me when I do, sending me to the ground clutching my knee, the pain is so intense that it brings tears to my eyes.

The on-field official rushes over as I'm surrounded by my teammates and a few of our opponents as well, completely unable to move my right leg. I'm determined to leave the field under my own power, but I don't know if I'll be able to. A hush falls over the crowd and I know the trainers are on their way. Someone kneels by my legs and tries to straighten my right leg, I bite back a scream as they do. Hands feel around my knee and calf, every touch sending a stab of pain right to my knee. I'm not walking off the field on my own.

I slip the armband off and clutch it in my hand.

"Lara," I shout for my fellow midfielder, and she runs over, bending down beside me. I press the armband into her hand and choke back the tears that threaten. "It's yours."

A wave of pain, so strong that it makes me want to vomit, wracks my entire body and my world goes dark. I wake up with fluorescent lights blaring down on me, my leg iced and elevated.

"Emma, you're going to need an MRI as soon as possible. Is there anyone you'd like us to call?"

My parents are in Boston, it's past midnight there so I don't even know if they've been watching, but I'd hate for them to see this on the morning sports report tomorrow. I'm not sure where Molly is, but she's my family member most likely to be awake right now. Someone calls her, but it's a blur as I'm moved from the training room.

The MRI machine is imposing as the nurse situates me on the table, getting my knee

ready to scan. The room is small and absurdly cold. I'm sweating and shivering as the walls seem to close in on me. A panic button is pressed into my hand. "Push this if you need us to stop the scan," the nurse says. "Don't make me go into this machine," my brain responds. But then the nurse is gone, and I'm moving, feet first, into the machine. It stops with the outer edge of the tube right above my eyes.

"Relax," a disembodied voice tells me.

"Easier said than done," I respond, my voice drowned out by the sound of the machine.

"Complete tears of the ACL and meniscus."

"Out for the year."

"Next year, too, most likely."

It's as if I'm not even in the room. Doctors, coaches, training staff, my agent, all in the room with me, talking about me as if I'm not here. Making these decisions for me. I'm too stunned to speak. The physical pain has lessened to a dull roar, but the emotional pain is a different story. That's a punch to the gut. That's the worst part of all of this.

Hanging the kit back in my closet, I opt for something with less emotional baggage, like a long sleeve tee shirt from my favorite English club team. I pull the shirt over my head and see the team motto reflected back at me. A reminder of the community and unity that can be found in soccer. A reminder of the game that I love. A reminder that I need today. I lace up my tennis shoes and head out, getting to the field a half hour early to set up for drills and run a few myself.

I take it slow, feeling that familiar tightness in my knee, that tightness that might keep

me off the pitch for good. My agent, Scott Sanford, has reached out, a few teammates have as well, asking if I'm "in playing shape" or if I'm "good to go again", and part of me wants to say yes, but then I can't do a simple drill without pain in my knee. Without reminders of that night. Without reminders of the surgeries and the loneliness that followed as I recovered.

My career ended, and the soccer world went on without me.

My ringing phone pulls me out of my memories. Speak of the devil.

"Emma!" Scott's voice calls through the phone. "How are you this beautiful morning?"

"I'm great, Scott," I lie through my teeth and pray he doesn't realize. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

"Have you given any more thought to that contract offer from Chicago?" The sound of his fingers flying across his keyboard rings through the line, and I know he's pulling up the offer and looking it over. Again. Probably forwarding me the email. Again. It's a good offer. A great offer. I love the thought of getting myself back into the game, but don't know if it's possible. I don't know if I can keep up the way that I used to. My speed and stamina aren't what they used to be, even with continued physical therapy. Coaching kids is a way for me to get back into the game without putting my own body on the line again and risking reinjury.

"When do they need my answer, Scott?"

"The season starts in February, they need your answer by the end of December."

"I'm untested, Scott. Is there any opportunity for me to play between now and then? Before I make the decision?"

I hear the click-clack of his keyboard and then, “Yes. There’s a friendly you can be a part of in December. In Los Angeles. I’ll send you the details.”

December.

That gives me about two months to get ready.

Kids and parents start to arrive at the field, parents setting up chairs along the side lines, some of the girls start kicking balls around as they wait for the rest of the team to arrive.

“Scott, I have to go. I’ll let you know what I decide soon, okay?”

“I need to know the first of December, Emma.”

“You got it, Scott.”

Hanging up, I tuck my phone into my bag and gather up my girls to make introductions.

“Good Morning, I’m coach Emma Mitchell, and I’m looking forward to being your coach for the rest of the season.” I raise my voice to get the attention of the gathered girls and their families and I see the moment my name registers with some of the adults gathered; wide-eyed glances, whispers between parents, and a few excited squeals from the girls. “Yes. That Emma Mitchell.”

I move on before anyone can ask any questions.

“Grown ups,” my gaze lands on Jax Hutchinson, Mackenzie in front of him, and what looks like their entire extended family gathered around, along with Mrs. Owens and her husband. Jax gives me a sheepish smile, his hand going to the back of his neck, in

a gesture I'm becoming oddly familiar with, "You should have received an email from Coach Hernandez alerting you to this change; she's had a family emergency and is going to be out of state for the rest of the month dealing with that, so you're stuck with me."

The girls take the news just fine, heading onto the field for warm-ups without question, as some of the parents grumble but a familiar voice comes to my defense, quelling their unease with words of assurance. Warmth floods my body at the thought of Jax vouching for me; we've had only a handful of interactions, but in that time I've come to like Jax, and look forward to the opportunity to see him around more often.

"Dr. Hutchinson is right," I turn at the sound of Mrs. Owens' voice, "I have great faith in Ms. Mitchell to coach your girls for the rest of the season. You have nothing to worry about."

Mrs. Owens gives me a decisive nod, and Jax grins at her as I turn back to the girls waiting for me on the field. The game kicks off and I can tell that I've got my work cut out for me with this team. They clearly understand that the point of the game is to kick the ball, but they seem to be struggling with kicking the ball to each other and not their competitors. Mackenzie is clearly a leader on the field, pointing out to her teammates who is open and who has opportunities to score; more often than not she'll take a pass rather than a shot on goal.

At halftime, I gather the girls around me and as they take their water break, I lay out a game plan on the back of my roster sheet. "Okay girls, we're going to switch things up and play a three-four-three formation. Mackenzie, I want you Allie, and Nichelle in the front. Kristen, Taylor, and Sarah on the back line. The rest of you in midfield."

When I look up from my rough sketch, I find eleven pairs of eyes staring back at me with similar expressions of confusion. I divide them into groups: front three to my left, back three to my right, the other four in the middle with our goal keeper.

“I want you three playing closest to their goal. If the ball comes to you, you’ll be in the best position to take a shot. You four,” my midfielders, the position that holds a special place in my heart. “You stay in the middle, between the goals. Your job is to move the ball forward. Can you do that?”

Heads nod. Tentatively and a little hesitant, but they nod.

“Good. You three,” I look to my back line. “Your job is to make sure that Sarah doesn’t have to block a shot. You defend so that the other team can’t score.”

The girls still look confused, but slightly less so, which doesn’t exactly inspire confidence, but when the ref calls us back they take to the field and take a rough approximation of a three-four-three formation. But then the wheels fall off the wagon. My midfields, bless their hearts. They don’t move from midfield, which was not the plan.

“You have to move the ball!” I shout from the sideline, waving them toward the action. “Push it forward!”

By some miracle, the ball finds it’s way to Mackenzie, who passes to Allie, and Allie scores. By the time the game is over, we’ve scored another goal, and the girls walk away with their first win of the season. Several of the parents thank me for stepping in as they gather their kids and leave at the end of the game, with one family still hanging back, ignoring me as Penelope Hutchinson animatedly tells a story nearby.

“Well done, Coach,” Mrs. Owens claps me on the shoulder. “Just a reminder though....they are only ten.”

“Right,” I exhale an almost laugh as heat creeps into my cheeks. “I’ll remember that for next time.”

Mrs. Owens nods and walks away after giving me another supportive pat on the back.

“Coach Mitchell!” Mackenzie jogs over to me, a smile on her face. “We’re going for ice cream to celebrate. Want to come with us?”

I look at her gathered family, prepared to say no, the idea of being on around so many new people is a bit overwhelming. And then Jax looks at me with that way he has, and I find myself saying yes. Mackenzie helps me pick up the cones and soccer balls, carrying them to my car before I walk with the family to the ice cream shop down the street. I hang back with Mackenzie, listening to her chatter to her sister, Alice, about everything she did in the game today and Alice responds by telling Mackenzie about the book she was reading on the sidelines. They remind me so much of me and Molly at that age, that I can’t help but smile as I watch them.

Jax slows his pace as we near the shop, positioning himself beside me as we walk, hands in his pockets as we walk side by side in silence. He stands beside me as we peruse the menu board at the shop, his family going ahead of us and placing their orders before scoping out enough chairs for everyone to sit down. With my double scoop of cookies ‘n cream in hand, I sit down beside Jax, the only person in this group that I actually know. He shifts his chair a bit closer to mine as if sensing my trepidation, tensing – as I do – when the inevitable question is asked.

“When you said ‘that Emma Mitchell’ tonight, what exactly did you mean?” James, the one I met the day I was nearly killed by a baseball, asks from across the circle of chairs, earning himself a smack on the shoulder from the woman beside him.

“I told you,” she whispers furiously, “that I’d tell you when we get home. Don’t embarrass her.”

“I appreciate that,” I shovel a bite of ice cream into my mouth in part to hide my grin, but mostly to keep my ice cream from melting. “But, I don’t mind. At least not in a



smaller group like this.”

Jax stretches a hand in my direction, and for a moment I wish that he’d make contact with me, but he seems to decide against it, resting his arm on the armrest of his chair...and mine. There’s something strangely comforting in that simple touch. It gives me the boost I need.

“I played midfield for Chicago...and for the Women’s National Team. A year ago, I tore my ACL and meniscus in the middle of a game and haven’t played since.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jake Hutchinson meets my gaze as he bounces his daughter on his knee. I know Jake and his wife Penelope, or at least know of them thanks to my crash course in baseball during my recovery. This family is no stranger to career ending injury, which is why the usual pity that I’m met with is absent, and in its place is an empathy I’m entirely un-used to. “I’ve been there. If you ever want to talk about it...”

“You mean that, don’t you?” I ask, earning myself a smile from two of my favorite baseball analysts.

“I do. Any time.”

“Thank you.”

With the “Who is Emma Mitchell?” conversation out of the way, the family erupts into conversation, everyone talking over one another, telling stories and laughing at something Alice says. It’s overwhelming, to say the least. I scoot my chair back the slightest bit, looking for some kind of relief, and Jax, unfortunately, notices my movement.

“You good?” His voice is a rough whisper near my ear.

“Just...” completely overwhelmed by extended social interaction and craving time in my silent house, “tired.”

“Let me walk you back to your car.” Jax stands and holds a hand out to me, offering me an out and making no attempt to convince me to stay. “Please.”

“Thank you,” his hand envelopes mine as I stand, and releases it just as quickly, leaving behind the ghost of his touch as he clenches his hand into a fist.

“How does your knee feel?” He asks when we’re out of earshot of his family, our pace slow to accommodate the ache. “And before you try to downplay it, know that while I spend my days dealing with pregnant women, I spent the first part of my career in combat medicine.”

“Hovering somewhere between six and seven right now.”

“What’s a ten for you?”

“A ten is my ACL and meniscus completely tearing. Or my physical therapist bending and stretching my leg at the end of a really hard session.”

“Are you good to drive yourself home?” He asks as we approach my parked car, concern evident in the pinch of his brows, and slight scowl twisting his lips.

“I should be.”

“That’s not a yes.”

“I suppose telling you that I’ve driven with worse pain isn’t going to help my case, is it?”

“It’s not. In fact, I might have to insist that you let me drive you home. Someone from my family can get the girls home.” He holds out his hand for my keys.

“How will you get home?” I ask, stubbornly clenching my fist around my keys.

“I can walk back to my car.”

Oh. Well then. He’s taken away every argument I can think of. I drop my keys into his waiting hand and he helps me slide into the passenger seat of my car, shutting the door before making his way around to the driver’s side.

“How long has Mackenzie played?” I ask, breaking the silence that hangs between us as he drives.

“This is her first year on a team, but she’s been kicking a soccer ball in our backyard almost since she could walk.”

“Really?” I don’t bother to hide my surprise. “I thought for sure that she had team experience. She was really good tonight, she has incredible skill with the ball.”

“Thank you,” Jax beams with pride. “I’m glad she gets to play this year. My schedule never really allowed for much extra curricular activity for either of the girls, and seeing Mackenzie take to the game the way she has, I’m glad I get to be around to see it.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m the lucky one, Coach Mitchell, believe me.”

Once again, Jax helps me up the stairs to my front door, letting me lean most of my weight on him as we slowly climb the steps, but unlike last time, he doesn’t leave

right away. His hand goes to the back of his neck, as he watches me, almost as if he wants to ask a question but doesn't quite know how...until he does.

“Is there anything you need? Anything I can do for you before you go?”

“I just need to ice it, that's all.”

“Let me help. Please.”

All I can do is nod, and that's all he needs.

Jax guides me into the house, and helps me settle onto my couch, making sure that my knee is elevated, propping it up with the pillows and foam wedge that I keep in my living room for exactly this purpose. Finding my ice packs in the freezer, he wraps them in a tea towel before positioning them on and around my knee with gentle, practiced hands.

“All good?” He asks, making final adjustments to the pillows propping me up.

“All good.”

“See you later, Coach.” He squeezes my shoulder, his hand lingering for a long moment before he makes his way to my front door. “I'm locking the door behind me. Take it easy getting up from the couch, and if you need anything...”

Silence.

A long pause as he considers his next words.

“Don't hesitate to ask.”

The door shuts behind him with a soft click and for the first time in a long time, the lonely feeling I'm so used to is nowhere to be found.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### OF ALL THE GIN JOINTS

##### JAX

My phone has been buzzing in my pocket since Emma and I made it to her car in the rec center parking lot. I'm almost afraid to check the screen, and am not at all surprised to see texts from...everyone...when I finally do. And missed calls.

James: Mandy and I have the girls. We're kicking a ball around the yard. Hurry up, it's getting cold and I don't have my key to your house.

After the walk back to my car, it's a quick trip home, taking me right past Emma's house. It takes every ounce of my self control to keep from checking in on her, instead I drive by, making note of the dimmed lights and hoping that she's taking it easy. When I make it home, I find James and Alice sprawled on the patio, and Amanda and Mackenzie passing a soccer ball back and forth across the yard.

"Is Emma okay?" James asks as I drop into a patio chair beside him.

"I got her home, made sure she elevated and iced her knee."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. She looked a little overwhelmed by all of us, and I'm sorry if I contributed to that."

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to," I tell him, clapping him on the back, "but

I think you're okay on that front."

"Goodbye Jax," Mandy loops her arm through her husband's before guiding him toward the gate.

"See you two later."

The girls and I spend the rest of the afternoon and evening finishing up their homework, playing a few board games, and ending with a baseball game before bed. After locking up for the night, I follow the sounds of my giggling girls toward the hallway and find them rock-paper-scissors-ing for who gets the bathroom first. Mackenzie wins, so Alice and I snuggle on the sofa and find a soccer game to watch for a few minutes while Alice tells me about the newest book she checked out from the school library.

"Did you bring it home with you, kiddo?"

"Yeah," she yawns, sinking deeper into my side.

"Do you want me to read it to you tonight?"

"Okay."

I help Alice off the couch and down to the bathroom for her chance at the shower, and Miss Independent insists she doesn't need my help, but that doesn't stop me from standing guard nearby. Once she's dried off and in her pajamas the three of us climb into my bed for one chapter out of Alice's book and then I tuck them each into their own bed, spending a few minutes alone with each of my girls. And then I find myself at the computer in my home office.

I recognized Emma's name as soon as she introduced herself that day on the field, but

I type her name into the search bar of my browser anyway. After Jake's injury, I remember seeing videos on every corner of the internet – analysts breaking down his career, armchair experts talking about what he should have done differently, and every camera angle imaginable of the injury in real time thanks to the age of the smartphone.

My curiosity gets the better of me and I click on the first video I see.

One of the players is leaving the soccer field, sliding the captain's armband off of her own arm and onto Emma's, they quickly hug and Emma jogs back onto the field. Her teammate passes her the ball and she's swarmed by opponents when she goes down, pain evident on her face. She turns her face into the grass, almost as if to muffle a scream and then she rolls onto her back, clutching her knee.

I click out of the video before the trainers are on the field with her, the pain on her face feels too private for me to be watching like this. Me, and the millions of others who've seen this video as the number of views points out. It's too much to take in after hearing her talk about her injury tonight, so instead, I click into an article from the year she made the National Team, my eyes skimming the page...

...top-ranked midfielder...rising through the ranks...Chicago's captain.

Emma led her Chicago team to a national championship the year before she made the national team, and in her first season with the national team she completely tore her ACL and meniscus. Complete tears of both take longer to recover from thanks to the surgeries required, and I'm sure Emma has gone through extensive physical therapy, and would be surprised if she isn't still doing therapy for that leg.

I send one last article to my phone to read while getting ready for bed, and as I settle into my mattress, I read Emma's last interview where she discusses the rehab and recovery process, and her plans for life after soccer. A life here in Saratoga, living



with her sister at the time, and looking forward – she said – to using her education degree to work in a local school. At the time she was subbing for the librarian.

Would you go back to the game? The reporter asked in an article dated nearly a year ago.

I haven't decided yet. Emma answered. Right now it feels impossible, but I'm not ruling it out.

I stop reading when the article goes into details on her personal life, it feels like crossing a line that we haven't even approached yet. I don't want to know more than she's comfortable with me knowing, so I close out the article and plug in my phone for the night, falling asleep to the sound of the first baseball game I can find.

On Monday morning I get the girls on the bus, and dress for work, making plans for a special breakfast Saturday morning, when we wake up stupid early to watch soccer, I'm sorry, football, as Mackenzie reminded me with a smug smile on her way out the door. It's early enough that I have time for coffee with my brother before I'm needed in the office.

"Did you catch the game last night?" James asks as I sit down and pour myself a steaming mug of coffee.

"Which one?"

"The baseball game. Detroit and Minnesota."

"No...I um..." can't believe I'm nervous to tell my brother this. "I looked her up. Emma; I watched clips from some of her games. I knew I recognized her name when she introduced herself the Saturday you almost killed her with the baseball, but I wanted to be sure."

“Oh really,” James smirks, eyebrows dancing up and down. “And what did you find?”

“I found some videos of her injury, and read a few articles, ended up falling asleep watching the game.” The game I played for nearly twenty years, myself.

“First of all, you hit that ball, not me. You can’t keep trying to blame me.”

“I can, because you threw it. It was a bad pitch.”

“That you couldn’t hit!” James grins. I haven’t felt this loose and carefree with anyone in a while, let alone my family, and it feels good. I leave James with a quick slap on the back and head into the office knowing I have a handful of patients today, an interview to conduct with Nate and Erin to hire a new doctor for the practice, and I have a good feeling about today’s candidate, and not just because she graduated from my alma mater; she’s got an impressive track record, experience with emergency medicine and obstetrics, and stellar references.

“You don’t pass out at the sight of blood, do you?” Erin asks midway through the interview and Dr. Moriah Williams looks more than slightly confused.

“Um...you’re kidding, right?”

“You’d be surprised,” Erin replies with all seriousness. After the last interview, anything will be a win for us.

“No. I don’t get squeamish at all. I wouldn’t have chosen this field, or specialty, if I did.”

“You’re okay with the on-call hours we laid out over the phone?” Nate asks, as I look down at the proposed schedule in front of me. Because of my reduced hours and ban

on weekends (unless in case of an emergency), anyone we hire would take additional on-call days.

“I’m fine with that,” she doesn’t hesitate.

“Moriah, will you give us a few minutes?” Nate asks, and the three of us step down the hall to my office.

“I think she’s a good fit,” Nate says the minute my door is shut, and Erin agrees. “I think we extend the offer right now. Put the ball in her court.”

Moriah accepts the position almost immediately, and my mind is put at ease as she begins to meet our patients, and I watch her interact with the rest of our staff. She is already fitting in here, and knowing that we can trust her with our families, and let her take on patients is a relief. Especially when my phone starts to ring, the name of the girls’ school lighting up the screen.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Hutchinson? This is Mrs. Bennet at Teddy Roosevelt Elementary, calling on behalf of Mrs. Owens. We have Alice here in the office for pick-up?”

“I’ll be right there.”

I find Nate and let him know I’m headed to the school to get my girl. I didn’t ask questions, I should have instead of just taking off toward the school with my mind racing with every worst case scenario of why I’m picking Alice up early, but nothing could have prepared me to find her sitting in the office, face streaked with tears as she clutches a wad of tissues in her hand.

“Why can’t I go back to class, Daddy?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out, baby girl.” I press a kiss to the top of her head before the secretary ushers me into the principal’s office where I find out that my youngest has been skipping recess for the last two weeks, and hanging out in the library instead.

“Jax,” Mrs. Owens looks down her nose at me, “recess is about socialization. Alice needs to socialize with her peers. We are not going to make an exception for one student to sit alone in the library when she should be outside on the playground.”

“But that’s the thing, Mrs. O,” I do my best to control my tone of voice, tempering my frustration with the woman sitting across the desk from me. I love Mr. and Mrs. Owens, but inside the walls of the school, Mrs. Owens is hard nosed and stubborn, and it can be hard to reconcile that with the grandmotherly woman that my girls love so much. “There might be other students like Alice that would like to be in the library instead of on the playground. They could socialize in the library. ”

“Jax, that would require our librarian, Ms. Mitchell, to be in the library everyday, for every lunch period, giving up her own lunch hour. We can’t possibly ask that of her.”

“Um, actually,” a familiar face pops into the doorway of Mrs. Owens’ office. She steps into the office, her hair hanging in waves slung over one shoulder and held away from her face with a thin headband, and she’s dressed in a navy blue dress dotted with yellow and white stars, with a matching cardigan over top. A far cry from the workout gear she was in when we met. My heart stutters into my throat at the sight of her standing in the office. “I couldn’t help but overhear. Mrs. Owens, I am always in the library for every lunch period. I eat at my desk. You know that.”

Emma – Ms. Mitchell – smiles so sweetly at Mrs. Owens, who scowls at her before shoos her out the door. But Emma doesn’t get the hint, instead, she steps fully into the office and sits down next to me, turning to me with a brilliant smile and holding out a hand for me to shake, for Mrs. Owens’ benefit I suspect.

“Nice to see you again, Dr. Hutchinson.”

“Nice to see you again, as well.” Her hand fits into mine and I let my hand linger perhaps a moment too long as Mrs. Owens very pointedly clears her throat to get our attention. Emma is unphased by the stern woman across the desk from us, turning the full force of her smile, and charm, on the old woman, regarding her with a quirked brow.

“Mrs. Owens, I would have absolutely no problem opening the library at lunchtime for kids that would rather be inside. Readers Who Lunch. Lunchtime Librophiles. I’ll workshop the name.”

“Ms. Mitchell,” Mrs. Owens removes her glasses and pinches the bridge of her nose with a look on her face that says this is normal interaction between the two. A look I’ve seen more than once when Mr. Owens is up to his usual antics on the ball field. “Children need recess.”

“I agree,” Emma’s demeanor takes on a serious expression, more serious than I’ve seen since she walked in the door. “And I’m proposing we give them another option for recess. The library is already open, I am in there every day. Some children need a quieter space. Some children need to recharge their batteries before going back to class. Trust me, Mrs. Owens. This is going to work.”

Mrs. Owens throws her hands up in defeat before agreeing to allow Emma to open the library for alternative recess. And as she dismisses Emma, she makes it very clear that I’m to stay behind.

“I wouldn’t be suspending her if it weren’t district policy. It’s not my choice, it’s my job . Please make sure she knows that.”

“Of course,” my frustration recedes as Mrs. Owens regards me from across her desk.

Sometimes, I see her daughter when she looks at me like this, and other times I see the pain that her daughter left behind when she left. “I’ll make sure she knows. Will you let Mackenzie know that Alice is leaving for the day? She’ll worry herself sick otherwise.”

“I’ll tell her myself,” She assures me.

“Thank you. Will we see you Saturday?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Stepping out of the principal’s office, I take a deep breath, doing my best to calm my racing mind. When I look up, I find Emma seated next to Alice in the chairs across from the secretary’s desk. I sit down on the other side of Alice, and pass her a tissue to wipe the tears that still sit on her cheeks.

“Go grab your backpack from class, kiddo. I’ll wait here for you.”

Alice walks out of the office and makes her way down the hall, leaving me alone with Emma, an empty chair between us.

“Of all the gin joints,” I whisper.

“You walked into mine, Dr. Hutchinson.” She grins and I can’t help but do the same.

“I’m sorry if Alice has caused you any trouble.”

“She’s no trouble,” a slow smile spreads across Emma’s face. “She’s a sweetheart. This isn’t the first time she’s been in the library at lunch, I always keep an eye on her...this is just the first time Mrs. Owens has caught her.”

“Ah.” I don’t know what else to say. But I like knowing that this woman has been looking out for my daughter. And that she went to bat for her today. My guess is, she doesn’t know the relationship between my girls and Mrs. Owens, and the four of us have worked hard to keep it that way. We’ve never wanted the girls to think they are receiving special treatment, or for anyone in the school to think that they receive special treatment just because the principal is their grandmother.

“She’s a good kid, Jax. She gets overwhelmed when she’s around other kids, I’ve seen it when her class comes down to check out books. It’s chaotic. And loud. And overwhelming, even for me. I can tell that Alice likes the quiet. Like I told Mrs. Owens, she recharges in the library before going back to class.”

“Forgive me Ms. Mitchell, but it sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“I am,” she shifts nervously in her seat, her expression losing some of its previous glow. “And I know how isolating it can be when you feel like you’re different from the rest of your classmates. To be clear, I’ve been wanting to do this for a while, this lunch with the librarian thing, but Alice gave me the push I needed. I only wish I could have done it sooner.”

When Alice returns, she sits between us again and Emma turns to her, gently brushing a loose curl behind her ear and passing her a tissue to wipe her eyes and nose. “Alice, I hope you’ll come back and see me tomorrow during lunch. You won’t get in trouble for it this time, I promise. The only reason you got in trouble for it today is because your teacher didn’t know where you were. You understand that, right?”

Alice snuffles and nods, tears falling silently. My girl loves school, and I know she’s more upset about being sent home today than she is about getting in trouble. I’m not of the opinion that the punishment fits the crime, but as Elaine said, it’s district policy. If we were anywhere but here, I’d have no problem facing her, and I don’t

want to get Emma in trouble, or get Alice in any more trouble, so I let it go.

“Thank you, Ms. Mitchell.”

“You’re welcome, Jax,” Emma says low enough that only I can hear it.

“Alright kiddo, let’s go.” I take Alice’s hand and walk her out to the car, helping her buckle into the backseat and gently wiping away the tears that silently fall from her eyes. I know I need to do the dad thing and talk to her about her behavior, but I want to give her a chance to calm down first; Emma seemed to do a good job of stopping the tears, and that’s half the battle with Alice.

“Do I hafta go to Grandpa and Grandma’s now?” Alice’s voice wavers as she calls up from the backseat. “So you can go work?”

“Nope, you’re stuck with me, kid.”

I glance in the rearview and see a small smile spread across her little face. As much as I hate the circumstances, I get to spend the rest of the day with my kid, and I plan to make the most of it.

“Did you eat your lunch?”

“Only the carrots so I didn’t get the books messy,” she responds as if that’s obvious and I should have just known. I pick up lunch for the two of us, and we eat together on a bench in the park, with a view of the lake. Alice sits silently beside me, slowly eating her sandwich and watching the ducks swimming nearby.

“Why don’t you go to recess?” I ask after a few minutes have passed.

“There’s too much…” she says, scooting closer to me.



“Too much what?” I ask, trying to understand what’s going on in that little brain of hers.

“I don’t know what to do out there,” her voice raises a bit, she’s getting frustrated and I can tell she doesn’t quite know how to express what she’s feeling. I drop my arm around her shoulders and she sighs, relaxing against me. I decide not to push it anymore, but plan to address these things with Mom soon.

### CHAPTER NINE

#### FOOTBALL SATURDAY

##### JAX

O n Saturday morning, I wake up early and start on breakfast for me and the girls before another busy day of soccer and baseball. Mackenzie trudges to the kitchen in her usual morning mood, with Alice bounding down the hall behind her, curly bed head sticking out in every direction.

With mugs of chocolate milk, because thanks to Dad my girls are too good for instant hot chocolate now, the girls sit side by side on the couch watching the early games from England.

“That’s a penalty kick,” Mackenzie patiently explains to Alice as they watch the morning’s first game. I took a few PKs in my day so I’m very interested in seeing how this plays out, but I return my focus to the task at hand: Pancake batter.

“See the box he’s standing in?” Mackenzie asks.

“There are two boxes,” Alice helpfully supplies.

“The bigger box,” Mackenzie’s patience is waning.

“Yes, I see the bigger box.”

“Okay. When a foul happens inside that box, the person who was fouled gets to take a penalty kick. It also happens if there’s a handball inside that box.”

“And that’s when they touch the ball with their hands, right?” I ask, earning myself an eye roll from my oldest. Score one for Dad!

“Yes Dad.”

“Okay. So what about a foul outside of that box?” Alice asks.

“That’s a free kick.”

“And what’s a corner kick?” I ask, having more than a little bit of fun this morning.

“You have to ask Grandpa about that one,” Mackenzie puts her mug on the end table before grabbing a blanket and spreading it across both of their laps. “That’s his team, by the way. The one in red. He likes them a lot, even though they lose.”

“Your Grandpa has always cheered for teams like that.” Growing up in Michigan we were almost always cheering for losing teams, it doesn’t mean we loved them any less, just that we worked a little harder to love them. “He loves the teams that are hard to love.”

After mixing up pancake batter using Dad’s recipe, I take some out and put it into a second bowl, dropping in a few bits of food coloring before adding the batter to the hot griddle. What starts out looking like a soccer ball pancake ends up looking a little blob-like and indistinguishable as a soccer ball. At least I tried.

I give the girls each two small pancakes, sausage, and some fruit while I fortify myself with coffee and a few extra pancakes before sending the girls down the hall to get dressed for the day. Once Mackenzie is in her uniform and ready to go I braid her

hair, and Alice's too because she insists she needs braids to cheer for her sister and who am I to argue with that logic?

Once everyone is ready, we're out the door to the soccer field where my family has already gathered. I find my parents, and my brothers' families gathered on the sideline with chairs, blankets, and a cooler of food. After Mackenzie's game today, we're planning on a family lunch before crossing the rec center complex and heading to the baseball field for the last day of Owens' Hardware Baseball.

After quick hugs for everyone, Mackenzie runs to meet up with her team, and I find myself seated on a blanket in the grass with Mom after having relinquished my seat to Alice so she can watch soccer highlights with Dad on his phone.

"Alice got in trouble at school yesterday," I take my glasses off and scrub a hand down my face.

"What did my girl do?" Mom asks, a smile in her voice as she leans back on her elbows beside me.

"Your girl has been sneaking into the library at lunch time. She skipped lunch and recess. Apparently the principal found her hiding in the science section reading and munching on the carrot sticks I packed for her. She didn't eat anything else from her lunch because she didn't want to get the books messy." Mom laughs, and I don't blame her, I wanted to when Elaine told me how she found Alice.

"When I asked her about why she wasn't going to recess, she said that it's 'too much', and Emma – Ms. Mitchell – said that she noticed Alice gets overwhelmed when she's in the library with her class. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried, Mom."

"It sounds like she's getting overwhelmed by sensory input," Mom says thoughtfully. "And with what you've told me about keeping her room clean and the way she hyper

focuses on things, I think you need to seriously consider getting her evaluated for ADHD.”

“But she’s not hyperactive,” I immediately protest, even though I know not to question my mom on this.

“She doesn’t have to be Jax,” the patience I see from Mom right now is the same patience Alice got from Mackenzie this morning, she’s clearly picked it up from spending so much time with Mom over the years. “ADHD presents differently in different people, especially when it comes to young girls and women. The ADHD you’re thinking of is what we most often see portrayed in the media – hyperactive, no impulse control, behavior issues in school – and while those are characteristics of ADHD, there’s more to it. Alice is displaying inattentive ADHD; she has trouble sustaining focus, completing tasks, and staying organized.”

“You just said she hyper focuses, though.”

“It’s a contradiction, I know, but sometimes hyperfocus kicks in and a person with ADHD can block out everything else and focus on a task, sometimes even missing their body’s own cues like hunger and thirst. I think that might also be contributing to her sensitivity to sensory input, but, as always, this is not me offering a diagnosis, just advice as your mother, Alice’s grandmother, and a doctor who wrote her thesis on the differences in how men and women present with ADHD.”

“So what you’re telling me is, you know what you’re talking about?”

“Not in so many words,” Mom laughs, “but yes.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Don’t worry about her. She’s got coping skills Jax, I see them all the time.”

That's news to me, but then again, I don't necessarily know what to look for. I trust that Mom knows what she's talking about, I just hope that I haven't been making things harder on Alice in any way by not knowing what's going on with her or what signs to look for.

"She blocks out distractions by listening to music or television while she reads or works on schoolwork. I know she has trouble keeping her room clean, but have you ever noticed that she does a great job of cleaning it? That's her hyperfocus coming out, it's the inattention that leads to her absentmindedly leaving her clothes on the floor, or not picking up toys and books that she knows are there."

"How have I missed all of this?" It's a punch in the gut knowing that I've missed so many signs, and so much of what's going on in Alice's head. She's an outgoing kid, but easily gets overwhelmed when around a lot of people or a lot of noise – so, our entire family – and I just assumed that she wanted to be near me instead of at the table doing her homework; I never considered that the music or tv was actually helping her block out other distractions.

"Don't go there, Jax. Give yourself some grace, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

"Now, let's separate those two before your dad convinces Alice to start cheering for the wrong team."

After a morning of soccer, the girls come with me to the baseball field for our last game of the year. Alice and Mackenzie sprawl on a quilt in the grass with an assortment of books and Mackenzie's ever present soccer ball, and a picnic lunch, while family and friends start to gather around.

"Alright everybody, bring it in!" I call to the team once everyone has arrived at the

field. “Before we get started today, I want to thank you all for another great season. I look forward to being a part of this team every year, and am grateful for the love and support that you all offer to me and my family, and to each other. Sam, Mr. Owens, so many of us wouldn’t be here without you, without this team. Thank you.”

“Play ball,” Mr. Owens responds, choking back tears, and we follow orders, taking our positions on the field for one last time this season. It’s a beautiful afternoon for baseball – there’s a slight chill in the air, not a cloud in the sky as the first pitch is thrown, and the leaves on the trees nearby are just beginning to change. I take my spot at second base for tonight’s game, with James beside me at shortstop. It’s been a long time since we’ve fielded together, but there’s nobody on this field I trust more than James.

As afternoon fades into early evening, we enter into the ninth inning of a scoreless game, any other night we would have already called it, but this is the last night of the season and no one wants to see it end just yet, so we keep going. I’m up to bat, standing at home plate and staring Sarah down as she steps into her windup.

“Coach Mitchell!” Mackenzie’s voice carries from where she’s camped out on the sideline, I swing at the pitch and in my surprise the bat slips right out of my grip.

“Heads up!” James shouts from the bench as I turn to see the crowd moving away from the flying baseball bat, as James moves to grab it, my attention is drawn to the woman now seated on the blanket with Alice and Mackenzie. Her hair piled haphazardly in a bun, a loose fitting hoodie with a familiar soccer team logo hangs on her long frame. James presses my bat back into my hands with a smug grin no doubt guessing at the reason for my distraction.

It doesn’t matter when I dig in for the next pitch. I take a cut at the ball and launch it into deep left field. I run and I don’t stop running. I vaguely hear the girls cheering for me as I round first, one eye on the left fielder to make sure he doesn’t catch it. He

doesn't. Mr. Owens signals for me to round third and head home, where I'm greeted by my team, celebrating the walk-off. What a way to end the season. The girls give me hugs and high fives and Emma starts to walk away from the field and the people cheering and celebrating. Alice starts to do the same, shutting down and gravitating toward the edges of the fray, her hand going to Emma's.

There's a tightness in my chest as I watch Emma take Alice's hand, crouching down beside her as the two of them talk. Something almost maternal in the gesture. Something my girls have never experienced for themselves. There's only so much I can offer them; their grandmas and aunts love them, but that's all they've ever known. Mackenzie joins them on the edge of the crowd and I have to turn away, focusing instead on packing up my equipment and forcing myself not to think of Emma as anything more than coach and librarian. We hardly even know each other, I shouldn't be crossing that line, but the image of her with my daughters reminds me of what they've never had. What I've always hoped they'd experience.

"Hey," I recognize the voice and the steady pressure of the hand on my shoulder. I turn to find James, his intense gaze meeting mine. "You good?"

"Yeah, just..."

"I know." His gaze flits briefly over my shoulder. "I know."

"They don't know what they're missing out on, but James, I can see how they're drawn to her, the same way they were to Mandy and Penelope as soon as they met them."

"Don't think about that," James says, that sly smile of his creeping in. "Just...take the girls for ice cream tonight. And ask her to join you. Just the four of you."

"I can't date Mackenzie's coach!"



“Who said anything about a date?” James’ smirk turns to a grin as he turns and walks away, planting a kiss on his wife’s lips before wrapping an arm around her and walking off toward the parking lot. Leaving me to figure out what to do next. And then my feet are carrying me toward the girls, and Emma. And my brain is sending a signal to my mouth.

“Emma, would you like to join the girls and I for ice cream tonight?”

“Um...I...” she hesitates, almost curling in on herself in what I recognize as a nervous posture. She’s done this before.

“No pressure. Don’t feel like you have to.”

“I think I’d like to,” tension eases out of her body, shoulders relaxing just a bit.

“Thank you.”

We walk from the rec center to the ice cream shop, Alice and Emma walk hand in hand ahead of Mackenzie and me. A weird sense of longing wraps itself around my heart at the sight of Alice’s little hand enveloped by Emma’s long, slender fingers. She steps up to the counter with Alice and orders for the two of them, stepping aside to find a table while I order for Mackenzie and me.

“Butter Pecan!” The girl calls from the window, holding out a bowl.

“Oh,” I step to the window and accept the dish of ice cream. “I ordered mine in a cone.”

“Um...I didn’t,” a soft voice calls from behind me. “I think that one may be mine.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks as Emma takes her ice cream from my hands, eyes dancing with amusement as her fingers brush against mine. Alice’s ice cream comes

out next, covered in sprinkles, and Emma takes it over to the table with a handful of napkins.

“Butter pecan,” there’s laughter in the girl’s voice as she hands me my cone and Mackenzie’s milkshake. I sheepishly accept my ice cream and sit down in the only open chair left, right next to Emma. Mackenzie chatters away, and I sit and listen as Alice chimes in, asking about the soccer games we watched this morning, and whether or not Emma did too. Turns out my girls and Emma all cheer for the same team.

“Thanks for inviting me,” Emma says softly. “I don’t get out much, at least not since my sister moved and stopped pulling me out of my house to socialize.”

“You’re welcome to join us anytime,” I hear myself saying before thinking about the implication of my words. I would love to spend more time with Emma, but what boundary am I crossing as the dad of two of her students and one of her soccer players?

“I’d like that,” her voice is a near whisper as she responds, eyes meeting mine as color tints her cheeks. The poorly timed ringing of my phone tears my attention away from Emma. I answer a little more forcefully than necessary, and Nate’s voice greets me.

“I know we said no weekends, but we have an emergency and the family is asking for you specifically. An extremely high risk patient was just brought into the hospital.”

“How soon do you need me? I’ll drop the girls with my parents and be there as soon as I can.” I glance up and meet Emma’s gaze, her brows pinched as she watches me.

“I can take them home,” she says. “It would take longer to get back to your car and drive them to your mom and dad. I’ll take them home, feed them dinner, and keep

them occupied for a while. Go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Stop arguing, and go.” There’s a stern edge in her voice as she points at the phone in my hand, a reminder of why we’re having this conversation in the first place.

“Nate. I’ll be there sooner than I thought.” I hang up and pass my phone to Emma. “Add your number and I’ll text you our address.”

Emma takes my phone which gives me a quick moment with the girls. I press kisses to the tops of their heads and squeeze them tight.

“I have to go to work, okay? There are some people who need help, and Daddy’s gotta go help them. Emma’s going to take you home, I expect you to be good,” I level my gaze on my youngest daughter. “Do as you’re told. No shenanigans.”

“Go, Jax. I’ve got this.”

Without thinking, I wrap my arms around Emma, she hesitates for just a moment before returning my embrace and breaking it off just as quickly. I race to my car at the rec center parking lot and head right for the hospital without a look back.

### CHAPTER TEN

#### BABYSITTING

#### EMMA

Watching as Jax runs down the road toward his car, the reality of what I just offered hits me like a ton of bricks. The two pairs of eyes that find mine are filled with the sadness of their dad leaving so quickly, it hurts my heart to see these girls so sad, but they seem pretty used to this. So, I gather them up and we walk back to my car where I add their address to my GPS and turn the volume down.

“Kiddos,” I turn around and face them from the front seat, “want to navigate me to your house?”

“What’s navigate?” Alice asks at the same time that Mackenzie enthusiastically answers yes.

“Navigate means help me find my way,” I tell Alice with a smile, watching her eyes light up as she looks from me to her sister.

“I think I can help,” she says to Mackenzie, who takes her sister’s hand in hers and gives it a squeeze, reminding me again of my sister and me when we were that age.

“I know you can!” Mackenzie tells her.

With my navigational system silently giving directions, I follow Mackenzie and

Alice's guidance and get to the house and none of us thought about a key to the doors, but Mackenzie opens the gate and we hang out in the backyard while I figure out a way into the house, and think about dinner options. Thankfully, Alice has a head full of memorized phone numbers and once we narrow it down to the family members that are actually in town and not in Manhattan or halfway across the country, James arrives with a key to let us into the house.

Before leaving, James gives me the key, insisting that I keep it in case the girls and I need to leave the house for any reason. He says he doesn't want us locked out, but I suspect by the glint in his eye and the upturned corner of his mouth that there's a whole lot he's not saying right now and I appreciate him for that.

"Emma, if there's anything you need, at any time, you can call Mandy and me, we'll be here."

"Thank you, James."

"Thank you, " there's a lot that remains unspoken. A heaviness in the air between us. "The girls need you. And he does too."

"I think," I hesitate, not sure how much to share with Jax's brother, who I don't really know all that well. "I think there's part of me that needs them, too."

I lock the door behind James and turn to find myself alone in Jax's house. We just had ice cream but the girls are going to need dinner, and I suppose I am too. I stand in the space between the kitchen and living room, watching as Mackenzie stretches out in a chair with a book in her hands, and Alice does the same on the floor. Taking a few minutes to myself, I walk around the house and get the lay of the land – finding the bathroom and bedrooms before finding my way back to the kitchen and inspecting the fridge for dinner options.

“What do you girls want for dinner?” I ask, standing in front of the open fridge and surveying our options before stepping over to the pantry to see what else might be available, and what I could make enough of to have leftovers for Jax when he gets home. My eyes snag on some cans of soup right as Mackenzie shouts, “tomato soup!”

“With grilled cheese!” Alice calls from the living room.

“Do you girls want to help me get it ready?”

They agree and join me in the kitchen as we get soup warming on the stove and start assembling grilled cheese sandwiches to cook in a cast iron skillet that Mackenzie informs me is the grilled cheese pan. With bowls of soup and perfectly cooked sandwiches, we sit at the table together and for just a brief moment – in a silence filled only by the sound of spoons in bowls, the rustling of leaves outside the cracked open windows – I find myself wondering what it would be like to sit at this table, with these girls, all the time.

Shaking away the impulsive, inappropriate, thought, I focus on the conversation, and after dinner the girls help me wash dishes before we settle onto the couch with a soccer game on television and a soft, steady rain beginning to fall outside. My phone rings in my pocket and I gently extract myself from the sofa where I’m sandwiched between the girls, and accept the call from my sister.

“Hey Molly!”

“Emma!” For the first time in a long time, the enthusiasm in my little sister’s voice sounds genuine. “I got a job! A new one.”

“I didn’t realize you’d quit the old one,” I muse, wandering around Jax’s house looking for blanket fort supplies and hoping the girls will be on board with the idea of a movie in the fort later on.

“I did. It wasn’t the kind of writing I wanted to do anymore so I put some feelers out and just found out I got the job. I had to call you first!”

“What’s the new gig?” I ask, stunned by the excitement in my sister’s voice. I haven’t heard her this happy to be writing in years.

“Beat writer. For Detroit! Emma, I’m finally a baseball writer!”

“Molly, I am so proud of you!” My voice cracks as my eyes well with tears. She’s been dreaming of being a baseball writer from the time she could understand and talk about the game. “You’re following your dream, it’s the best thing you can do.”

“What about you?” She asks, a pang of sadness lancing through me at the sadness in her words. “How’s your dream coming?”

Coaching is fulfilling, I love being a part of fostering a love for this game. I love watching the joy on the girls’ faces when they score or when they pass the ball and their teammate scores. Being a librarian is something I got thrown into, something I enjoy doing. But, my heart is drawn to the soccer field.

I know plenty of players who returned to the game after an injury like mine, men and women alike, who got healthy again and came back to the game. And that has always been my goal. That’s why I go out every Saturday morning and drill, why I still go to physical therapy to strengthen my knee and tendons and muscles. Why my agent is continually looking for opportunities for me to get back in the game.

“My dream doesn’t feel as reachable as yours, Molly.”

“How’s the knee been?”

“Okay. Gets tight every now and then, but that’s what physical therapy is for. I try to

work it every week, and now that I'm coaching I get to use it even more than before. I haven't told anyone yet, but there's been an offer. Chicago wants me back."

"Emma, that's fantastic. Are you going to go?"

"I have until December to make that decision, but they've invited me to join a friendly in December, in Los Angeles. "

"I'm proud of you for getting out there and coaching, Emma. It's good for you to be around the game, and active. I hope you'll say yes, and give this another shot. I also hope you're getting out and meeting people, too. Now that I'm not there to pull you out of the house."

"I am..." If you can count two trips for ice cream with Jax and his family as 'getting out'.

"You've met someone!" Molly exclaims, and I can almost picture her bouncing up and down.

"I did not say that!" I protest as heat creeps into my cheeks. Jax is the father of one of my players, and two of my students at the school. I shouldn't think about him that way. I can't think about him that way. But, I'm standing here in his house, seeing little touches of him everywhere I look – family pictures with the girls, a sweatshirt of his draped across one of the dining room chairs, a pair of reading glasses on the end table near a leather recliner. I picture him in that chair with Alice on his lap, reading with her or watching baseball with her. Or sitting at the dining room table helping Mackenzie with her homework.

"Em, you still there?" My sister's voice pulls me out of my distracted daydreams.

"Yeah. I'm here."



“So tell me about him.”

“I can’t right now,” I hedge, making my back toward the comfort of the living room. “I’m babysitting his kids.”

I end the call, cutting off Molly’s squeal, and toss my phone on the end table before sinking back into the couch with the girls.

“Miss Emma,” Alice grabs the remote from the nearby end table, “Aunt Nelope and Uncle Jake are going to be on soon, do you think we could watch them?”

“Of course,” I answer, and Alice changes the channel to find the first postseason episode of *On the Field*. “Who are you cheering for in the playoffs?”

“Seattle,” both girls chime. “It’s who Aunt Mandy worked for.”

“And Uncle Max plays for them,” Mackenzie tells me.

“He’s not really our uncle,” Alice sagely clarifies, “but he’s friends with Uncle Jake and comes to Thanksgiving every year.”

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving?” Mackenzie asks since the subject has come up, leaning against my shoulder as she settles in with her book.

“I don’t know yet,” I tell her, trying to keep the sadness and uncertainty out of my voice. The last time Molly and I had a video call with Mom and Dad, they informed us that they will be taking a European river cruise for the stretch of time from Thanksgiving to Christmas. I’ve invited Molly to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas here, with me, and extended the same offer to Mom and Dad. They’re hoping to be here for Christmas. “I might just make dinner for myself at home. It’s still early though, I’ve got time to plan.”

The silence that follows my pathetic admission is overwhelming. Mackenzie leans forward and Alice does the same, the two girls looking at each other and at me. Mackenzie gives her sister a small nod, and Alice smiles, jumping off of the couch and racing to the kitchen. I hear the touchtone keys of the landline phone and then...

“Hi Grandpa, it’s Alice,” and by the time she’s off the phone, I have an invite to the Hutchinson Family Thanksgiving. Saying yes to that was an easier decision to make than the one my agent is still on me about. My phone buzzes on the end table with an incoming call from Scott, and I ignore it, not wanting to talk about the game or my injury, not tonight. Not here.

“Grandpa and Grandma start planning for Thanksgiving as soon as school starts, and now you don’t have to worry about it!” Mackenzie says with just a hint of triumph in her voice.

Well, I guess my plans have been made for me.

After On the Field’s pre-game show, and before the start of the baseball game, I send the girls down the hall to change into their pajamas so that when bedtime rolls around we’ve already taken care of part of the routine. As I listen to the sound of the girls down the hall, I’m reminded of growing up with my own sister; the nights that she would sneak into my room and crawl into bed with me so we could read under the covers at night, or nights that we’d sneak down the stairs and watch whatever baseball game Dad was watching as quietly as we could.

“You have to do pjs too, Ms. Mitchell,” Alice insists.

“I don’t have any with me,” I tell her, lifting her up to put away the mugs we used for our meal. “And when we’re not in school, you can call me Emma.”

“Daddy keeps pajamas here for anyone who needs them,” Alice takes my hand and

leads me down the hall toward the linen closet situated near the bathroom. “He has some for Aunt Jenna and Aunt Nelope ‘cause sometimes when they stay with us they need extras.”

Alice opens the closet door and I find not only a stash of pajamas, but a basket filled with pads tucked onto the bottom shelf of the closet next to a heating pad and electric blanket. If I didn’t already know what a thoughtful man Jax Hutchinson is, this confirms it. It doesn’t take long to find a pair of flannel pants and long sleeve tee shirt to change into before joining the girls back in the living room.

“Hey Al, you know what I’m thinking?” Mackenzie shoots her sister a conspiratorial smile.

“What?” Alice excitedly asks, practically bouncing on her toes.

“A blanket fort!”

“Yes! Blanket fort!” Alice pumps her fists in the air and before I can ask how I can help, they take off down the hall and come back with an overflowing laundry basket, stuffed to bursting with sheets and blankets. The girls start taking things out and separating them into piles before getting to work.

“Ms. Emma,” Alice hands me the corner of a heavy sheet and I notice a grommet attached to it. “Can you put that up there?”

Alice points to the top of the built in bookshelf unit that houses the television in the middle and shelves of books on either side. With the assistance of a small step stool, I give myself a boost and find two removable adhesive hooks on either side of the built-in, and it’s a no-brainer that the grommets on the sheet attach to these hooks. Once I’ve attached both corners of the king sized sheet, Mackenzie stretches it across the room toward the sofa. I’m worried she’s going to run out of fabric, but there’s

more and more unfolding from the original sheet.

“Dad made it for us,” Mackenzie says with a grin. “Isn’t it awesome?”

“It really is something,” I tell her with a laugh and smile of my own as she secures the end of the double king size sheet by tucking it into the couch cushions.

“Time for the walls, Al,” Mackenzie motions to her sister who grabs a few bits of what appears to be a lighter material, and she shakes them out, unfolding and securing them with velcro to the “roof” of the fort. I stand in awe of the blanket fort creation and Alice welcomes me inside as she fills the fort with a mismatched collection of fleece blankets and throw pillows. And I can’t help but admire the stitching on the center seam connecting to the two sheets, the choice of sheer fabric for one side wall, and a dark, star patterned cotton for the other.

So much thought went into the design and making of this fort for these girls, and not one bit of it surprises me. This is the Jax that I know, or at least the Jax I’m getting to know. The Jax that I want to know more about. While the girls settle in for the first inning of the baseball game, I pop popcorn in the microwave and fill up a big bowl of it, before handing the bowl to Mackenzie and crawling into the fort beside the girls who snuggle up beside me.

As the game wears on, the girls grow drowsy, moving closer and closer to me on the pillow and blanket covered floor, before eventually dozing off beside me. When the game ends, I don’t have the heart to wake the girls, so I turn it off and find a soccer game, turning the volume down just enough to hear the game but not loud enough to disturb them. Taking the crocheted blanket from the couch behind me, I carefully pull it down and spread it over the three of us before closing my eyes and letting the lullaby of soccer sing me to sleep.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

#### SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL

#### JAX

Sitting side by side with Nate in the on-call room after a traumatic night for all involved, we fill out all the necessary paperwork and forms and when we're done Nate leaves, giving my shoulder a squeeze as he walks out the door, leaving me in the oppressive silence of the room. I pull myself up from the chair and leave the hospital, knowing that I'm going home to my girls. And Emma.

It's almost one in the morning when I pull in the driveway and notice the light still on in the back of the house, sparking a bit of hope in my chest that Emma is still awake, that I'll have someone, anyone, to talk to tonight. I softly push open the door and kick off my shoes before walking deeper into the house where I find the blanket fort built up in the middle of the living room. The faint sounds of a late soccer game drift out from the fabric walls.

Gently moving one of the blanket walls to the side, I peek in and find Emma sound asleep in between the girls, arms around each of them, and emotion swells in my chest. Longing like I haven't felt in a decade grips me like a vice and I let the wall gently fall back into place before backing away and hitting the creakiest floorboard in my house as I do.

I hear the rustle of blankets and soon Emma's head pokes out through one of the walls and she graces me with a sleepy smile as she crawls out. Offering her a hand

up, she slides her hand into mine and lets me help her to her feet.

“There’s leftover soup in the fridge,” she whispers, “I can heat some up for you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I hold out a hand to stop her as thunder lightly rumbles overhead. “I’m just going to go shower and change, and I’ll get something to eat. Do you mind staying a little longer?”

“Not at all,” she answers, stifling a yawn, eyes drooping just a bit, my own eyes drawn to the clothes she’s wearing – one of my Owens’s hardware baseball shirts and my flannel pants – and several questions pop into my head but I push them away until I have a more clear mind.

It doesn’t take me long to get into the shower and under the steaming hot spray of water, letting it wash away the anger and pain of the last several hours. After changing into sweatpants and a sweatshirt, I take a minute to sit in the silence of my room, the only sound is that of the rain pelted my windows, thinking about everything that’s happened today. Thinking about the woman who slept in the blanket fort with my girls, and what it did to my heart to walk in and see that scene.

The smell of toasting bread draws me like a magnet toward the kitchen where I find Emma at the stove, keeping a close eye on a grilled cheese sandwich and small pot of soup. I can’t help my roaming eyes as she turns toward me, my pants and shirt somewhat baggy on her frame, her hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun. A slight pink blush creeps into her cheeks as she turns back toward the stove and clicks off the burners.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she says, carefully cutting the sandwich in half and arranging it on a small plate before pouring the soup into a bowl. “Alice showed me where you keep pajamas for your sisters and...she insisted.”

“I don’t mind.” I stuff a bite of grilled cheese in my mouth and allow myself a minute to get my thoughts in order as Emma quietly bustles around the kitchen.

“I’ll just go change back into my own clothes and head out. I can throw these in the wash for you, too. I’m sure you’ve got other laundry you need done, if you’ll just point me toward the washer. And then I’ll put the fort away so you don’t...”

“Emma,” gently grabbing her wrist, I pull her toward the empty chair beside me. “You don’t have to do that. You don’t have to clean up or do laundry. And to be honest, I’d prefer it if you didn’t drive home. It’s late and it’s starting to storm. Stay here tonight.”

Emma’s eyes snap to mine, and I know in that instant that I’ve crossed a line. In fact, I probably crossed the line when I agreed to let her watch the girls tonight instead of calling on a member of my family to watch them. I know they would have agreed, but Emma offered and I couldn’t turn her down. Or...maybe I didn’t want to.

“I can’t offer you much, since I don’t have a guest room, but I’d rather know you’re safe here instead of driving in this weather. Even if it is just down the road.” As if to punctuate my point, a rumble of thunder rattles the windows as lightning splits the night sky. I can’t count on the girls to stay asleep much longer though, if this storm keeps up.

“I don’t know, Jax,” she rubs her arms as if cold, shifting on her feet and not meeting my gaze. “I work at their school, I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea about what’s going on. I may not be their teacher, but I don’t know what the line is.”

“I would never want to make you uncomfortable or cross a line, Emma, so if you’d rather not stay, I totally understand.” Thunder shakes the windows once more and a muffled pop comes from somewhere outside as we are plunged into darkness.

“Ms. Emma?” Alice calls from the couch, fear in her voice.

“I’m here,” Emma makes her way back to the fort and I hear the rustle of blankets as lightning illuminates the room. “I’m right here. Your dad is, too.”

My heart squeezes in my chest as Emma makes her way back into the fort and takes my little girl in her arms, holding her tight, whispering reassurances. I have to get out of this room and do something useful, so I make my way out to the generator and get it going, giving myself a minute to collect my thoughts as I work on getting the generator up and running, thankful to have something keeping me busy right now.

Once the generator kicks in, lights flick on inside the house and I don’t have an excuse to stay out here anymore, especially as the storm continues, I know Alice will be looking for me. Neither of my girls are fans of thunderstorms, and usually end up crawling into my bed during the worst of them. I’m thinking that tonight calls for a family campout in the living room. With extra cozy blankets.

Once inside the warm, dry house, I make my way down the hall to my bedroom and grab my bedspread off the bed and one of the many blankets in this house that my mom made. I walk out to find Emma and the girls in the kitchen, and take the chance to cover the floor of the fort with my bedspread and the girls’ blankets and pillows. When another crack of thunder sounds overhead, Alice runs to me and throws her arms around me, burying her head against me in a search for security.

“Wanna camp out in here tonight, Kiddo?”

“Yes please.”

The girls situate themselves back inside the fort while Emma and I turn out the lights in the house, leaving the television on with one of Alice’s many recorded episodes of On the Field playing at a low volume as we settle in with the girls between us. I don’t



want her to be uncomfortable, but she raised a few good points about the girls being a part of her school and her team, and I don't want to jeopardize her job in any way – but having her here, parenting a scared kid through a storm with support like this? I can't say I hate it.

Waking up at dawn, I step outside and survey the damage from the storm – a few limbs down, but not much more than that – and then make my way to the kitchen to start working on some breakfast for the four of us. This morning calls for french toast, so after putting on a pot of coffee, I start getting everything ready to griddle up a whole mess of french toast and bacon.

“Is that coffee I smell?” Emma's voice is a soft whisper. Turning, I find her slowly standing up and working out her tight muscles before stepping into the kitchen to join me. “I hope you made enough to share.”

“Of course I did,” taking down two mugs from the cabinet, I divide the pot between us and point Emma toward the fridge. “Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge if you need milk or cream.”

“Thanks. This is perfect as is.” She takes a sip and closes her eyes, shoulders dropping by a fraction as she settles onto a stool at the kitchen island. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Keep me company until the girls wake up,” I tell her, turning back to the breakfast assembly line. “As soon as they smell the bacon they'll be up, and this blessed quiet will disappear.”

“Tell me about the blanket fort,” Emma says as I dredge bread in the custard mixture before putting it in the griddle. “I've never seen anything like it.”

“Ah, the blanket fort,” I turn to find her watching me, eyes intently focused as I take a

sip of my coffee. “I thrifted some king size sheets, spent way too long wandering around a craft store looking for grommets and the fabric for the walls, before bringing it all home and sewing the sheets together on my machine and figuring out how best to do the grommets and the walls. What?”

Her eyebrows have crept toward her hairline and she graces me with a lopsided smile.

“Sewing machine?”

“Easier than hand sewing.”

She quirks a brow at me again, head tilted as she regards me quizzically.

“Marine. Combat medic. Learned pretty quickly how to sew a button...and a buddy. And then I came home to rambunctious children who were – are – always scraping their knees and getting into messes. The sewing machine is an investment I couldn’t afford not to have.”

“Makes sense.”

“But, to your question, they wanted a blanket fort one day a few years ago, and my brothers and I do nothing by half measures, so James got to sketching while Jake and I worked with what I had at the time. The hooks were Dad’s idea, and mom suggested the velcro for the walls.”

“A family affair,” her smile falls, eyes drifting to her coffee and away from me for just a moment.

“Do you have family in the area?” I ask, just to keep her talking.

“My folks are in Boston. I lived here with my sister until she moved. She was a bit of

a nomad for a while, moving from job to job, mostly freelance writing.”

“Where is she now?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest,” she laughs. “But I talked to her last night, and she’ll be on her way to Detroit soon. She just landed her dream job. She’s Detroit’s newest baseball writer.”

“That’s exciting! What about you,” I ask, careful not to push too far past the line. “What’s your dream job?”

“Would you believe me if I said elementary school librarian and kids soccer coach?”

“Not for a minute.”

“I actually do have a degree in education,” the full force of her smile returns. “History education as a matter of fact. With a minor in library sciences. I played soccer from the time I was Alice’s age and all through college. Never dreamed I could go pro and certainly never imagined that I’d play for the National Team. I came up here to recover after my injury, stayed with my sister instead of my parents in Boston – I knew they’d fuss and I didn’t want to deal with that. Turned out that Molly fussed enough for the both of them.”

“Older siblings have a tendency to do that.” I speak from nearly forty years of experience as the oldest sibling of three trouble making, accident prone siblings that I worry about every single day of my life.

“They do,” She agrees with a nod, the corner of her mouth kicking up into a lopsided smile. “And I should know...since I’m the oldest.”

Speaking of oldest daughters, mine crawls out of the blanket fort, bedhead and all, a

blanket wrapped around her shoulders as she trudges down the hall and out of sight. Emma gives a knowing nod as she watches Mackenzie retreat down the hall and braces herself for the bundle of energy that comes out of the fort next. Alice hops out of the fort and bounds down the hall toward her own room.

“She’s a tornado with pigtails,” I mumble into my coffee as her door slams behind her.

“That’s why I love her,” Emma replies. “And Mackenzie. You have really great kids, Jax.”

“Thank you,” I clear the emotion from my throat and turn away, back to the french toast and bacon, giving myself something to do other than watch Emma drink her coffee. “They are some kind of wonderful.”

After breakfast and the deconstruction of the blanket fort, Emma changes back into her clothes and heads home. The girls and I follow, just to make sure she doesn’t have any major messes to clean up after the storm. She hugs the girls as they run back to the car, leaving us on the deck together. In slightly less awkward silence than the last time.

“I haven’t said it yet, but thank you. I really appreciate you watching them last night. They can be...a lot.”

“I enjoyed every minute of it. I meant what I said earlier, Jax. They’re good kids. I’m close,” she gestures down the road in the direction of my house, “If you ever find yourself needing someone at the last minute, you know how to reach me.”

“Careful,” I tell her, “I just might take you up on that.”

“I hope you do.”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

#### SISTERS

#### EMMA

Four missed calls. Two voicemails. Twenty five text messages.

This is the response from my little sister after telling her that I was watching Jax's kids last night. Frankly, I'm shocked she isn't on her way to Saratoga right now to track me down. I know I owe her a phone call, but I'll take care of that later. For now, I need to shower and change out of yesterday's clothes, and shake loose the image in my head of Jax coming home early this morning with dark circles under his eyes and a weariness in his body as he sat and ate dinner. Or the way he looked at me when I pulled myself out of the blanket fort this morning. Or the way I wish he'd look at me like that again.

My phone rings, and even though I want to continue to ignore my sister, I can't bring myself to do it. I accept the call and hold my phone to my ear, and Molly – true to form – doesn't wait for me to speak before she expresses her displeasure over being ignored.

“You drop a bomb like ‘I'm watching Hot Single Dad's kids’ and then have the audacity to hang up on me? And not only did you hang up on me, but you ignored me for the next...” she pauses, for too short a moment. “Twenty hours!?”

“First of all,” I laugh, making my way to the couch and settling in for what will

probably be a long phone call. “I never said anything about him being hot.”

“You didn’t have to, it was implied.”

“Second of all, it wasn’t twenty hours.”

“I rounded up.” So that’s how it’s going to be. “Seriously Emma. What happened last night?”

I recap the evening for her, starting with ice cream after the baseball game and ending with waking up and spending a few minutes ogling Jax from the privacy of the blanket fort before joining him in the kitchen this morning, enjoying the way his tee shirt hugged the muscles of his shoulders and upper arms. The way his sweatpants sat low on his hips, revealing just an inch of skin when he reached for those mugs from the upper cabinet. I won’t deny that he’s attractive, but I also won’t give my sister the satisfaction of confirming it.

“I’ve never heard of a blanket fort walk of shame, but I like it,” Molly laughs.

“Oh, darling sister, there was no shame.” I can’t stop the smile that spreads across my face. Was it a little weird waking up on the floor of Jax’s house this morning? Yeah. But there was no shame in it. There was definitely no shame in my anxiety finally quieting down enough so that I could sleep knowing he was nearby. There’s no shame in the fact that the last thing I saw when I closed my eyes last night was the soft smile on Jax’s face when his eyes met mine in the glow of the television with the girls between us.

“So are you going to see him again?”

“Yeah, I’ll probably see him at soccer practice this week.”

“You know what I meant, Em.”

“I know, but Molly he’s the dad of one of my players. And both girls go to my school. I see them everyday when their classes come to the library. The youngest one hangs out with me during her recess. I can’t risk them getting caught up in another one of my failed relationships.”

“Okay,” Molly turns serious, “those relationships failed because those men were trash.”

“That’s a little harsh...” I don’t know why I bother trying to defend them.

“One dumped you after your injury because you were a status symbol for him. The one before that cheated on you with your roommate. And do I need to remind you...”

“Nope. No. No more reminders necessary, please and thank you.”

“Okay. But I’m just saying, you deserve a guy that treats you right, and it sounds like he at least manages to do that.”

“He does...”

“What’s the story about the girls’ mom?”

“I have no idea, and I haven’t asked.” And I don’t plan on asking. At least not anytime soon. Though, I did notice that there were no pictures around the house that featured a wife or mom. No wedding pictures, no pictures of the girls with any women other than the ones I’ve already met – their grandma and aunts – and that fact alone piques my curiosity even more.

“Okay. Last question before the sisterly inquisition ends: What’s his name? I’m

wondering if it's anyone I know."

"Jax Hutchinson."

"Nope. I don't know him. But I can't wait to meet him."

Before I can ask what she means by that, Molly hangs up the phone. After last night, I know I deserve it, but now I'm wondering if I need to make up the guest room for her. I do, just in case. As much as we drove each other crazy when we lived together, I love my sister and miss having her around. She was really good about reminding me to eat, or drink water. She made sure I did my exercises for my knee, and took my meds when I needed to. I know how big a burden I was for my little sister, even though she'd tell me not to say that. I was. And I'm glad that she's struck out on her own now, finally following her dreams. But sometimes, I selfishly wish her dream kept her a little closer to home.

"Good morning, Ms. Mitchell," Mrs. Owens regards me with an icy stare as I enter the building on Monday morning. "Did you have a nice weekend?"

She asks like she's fishing for information, or trying to confirm a rumor, but that could just be anxiety talking. I did have a nice weekend. The majority of it was spent babysitting two of my students, and sleeping in a blanket fort a stone's throw from their dad during a thunderstorm, but Mrs. Owens doesn't need to know that.

"I did. It was a great weekend," I answer with as few details as possible. It was a great weekend, I enjoyed every minute of it, but she doesn't need the details of the weekend. I have a feeling if she knew the details of the weekend she'd have an even more sour look on her face than the one she's giving me now.

"Did you enjoy the baseball game?" She asks and a chill runs down my spine.



“I did,” I dance around fully answering her question. “I didn’t see you there.”

“I was there,” she answers, narrowing her gaze at me. “I’m always there to support my husband and the men and women who play on the team.” Her tone softens for a moment and her gaze travels down the hall where two little girls walk hand in hand to their classrooms. “I feel very protective of those baseball players. And their families.”

“So do I, Mrs. Owens.” The younger of the two girls steps into her classroom, her older sister waiting at the door for a moment before walking down to her own classroom, tugging my heart with her as she does, emboldening me in the strangest way. “Ask what you want to ask.”

“I’m concerned,” she takes me by the elbow and leads me into the library. “Those boys are like sons to Lee and me, and those girls are...I don’t want to see them, any of them, get hurt.”

“And you think I’m going to hurt them, Mrs. Owens?”

“No, Emma, I don’t. I think you’re going to get attached to them. And if that ends for whatever reason, you’ll all walk away hurt.” She’s got me there. That’s what I’ve been afraid of in all of this. What if I do get attached to the girls, or to Jax, and we all end up hurt in the end? I can’t do that to those girls. Mrs. Owens gives me a small smile, which is rare for her, before continuing. “However, I’ve never seen Jax as distracted as he was when he realized you showed up to the game. Lee couldn’t stop laughing about it when we got home that night.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks and I busy myself at my desk, sitting down and booting up my computer, stashing my purse and lunch bag in the bottom drawer of my desk, as Mrs. Owens lingers.

“You and Mr. Owens don’t have to worry. I’ll be careful.”

“Good. Well, have a good day, Ms. Mitchell.”

“You too, Mrs. Owens, you old softy,” I joke.

“You take that back.”

“Never,” I laugh as she turns on her heel and walks away, but not before giving me a wide smile. I think, finally, I’ve endeared myself to the woman who terrified me the first time I stepped into her office, and has continued to scare the daylights out of me everyday since. I still wouldn’t want to cross her, but at least I can joke with her now.

When the second graders come in for lunch, Alice passes my desk and leaves a small plastic container near my keyboard before camping out near the science books. She told me one day that she wanted to learn about her uncle Marcus’s rock science, so I helped her find the few geology books we have in the library, and may have ordered a few more to have on hand.

I open the container to find a stack of chocolate chip cookies. Six, perfectly round, beautifully golden brown cookies studded with chocolate chips and dark chocolate chunks, and the smell of butter and brown sugar greets me as I lift the lid. Taking a bite of one of the slightly chewy, a little bit crispy, completely perfect cookies, I sigh and sit back in my chair before going in for another bite. I need this recipe.

I track Alice down, and find her exactly where I thought I would, reading a geology for kids book that I just added to the library. She’s stretched out on the floor, laying on her belly as she reads, feet kicking in the air.

“Hey Alice,” I crouch down beside her and she looks up, her bright blue eyes meeting mine. “Thanks for the cookies.”

“You’re welcome, Ms. Mitchell. Daddy helped us make them last night and he told

me I could bring you and Mrs. Owens some today.”

“That was very nice of you. I tried one already and it was delicious. Do you think your dad would share his recipe with me?”

“I’ll ask him after school!” She replies excitedly.

“Thank you, Alice. That would be great.”

“Can I check this book out?” Alice asks, jumping to the next topic that fires in her brain.

“Of course you can!” I reach out a hand and help her to her feet, watching as she gathers a couple of books and carries them to my desk. After her books are checked out and the lunch bell rings, I send Alice back to class, watching as she disappears down the hall and my next students come in. I have four or five every lunch period that opt to spend time in the library rather than spend recess on the playground, but none are as consistent – or excited – as Alice. I look forward to her company each day. And on Monday nights, at soccer practice, I look forward to seeing her dad.

My computer rings with a video call as I get changed and ready for practice tonight, and as soon as I accept the call Molly starts in as if our previous conversation never ended.

“Gotta say Ems, I’m not loving this look,” Molly grins at me through the screen as I bend to tie my shoes. “Is this a soccer practice night?”

“Sure is.”

“What about you? When do you start practicing again?”

“Molly, we’re not having this conversation now.”

“Emma...”

“Gotta go, Molly. Don’t want to be late for practice.”

Closing my computer, I grab my bag and make my way out the door, my knee twinging a bit as I slide into my car, but all thoughts of my career and future drift away when I pull up to the field and see Jax kicking the ball around with his girls. And suddenly a new picture of what life could be like is at the forefront as I get ready for practice.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#### A WAGER

#### JAX

After shuffling the girls out the door and into the car, we make it to the soccer field with time to spare and Mackenzie immediately offers to help Emma...Coach Mitchell...set up cones and equipment for practice while I set up my chair and Alice situates herself on a quilt next to me with the stack of geology books she checked out from the library today. I watch as Mackenzie runs with the ball, working on her ball control before Emma transitions them into a scrimmage.

“Jax,” She calls from the sideline, “would you like to come out here and help me?”

I look around as if I’m going to find another Jax nearby as Emma’s smile softens.

“I mean you, Dr. Hutchinson,” Emma stands with the girls, divided into two groups, waiting for me to join her at midfield. “I’d like you to coach the blue team, if you would please.”

I look at the faces of the girls in the blue practice vests and notice that Mackenzie is not among them. When I lock eyes with her she grins before taking the tiniest step closer to Emma, and I know it’s game on.

“Who usually covers the goal?” I’m a little concerned that not a single girl answers me, instead they look at each other with fear-filled eyes. One timid little hand raises

and I nod, sending her to the goal opposite Emma's team. Next, I copy Emma's homework, and divide the girls up into position groups and have them take their places on the field while I take up position next to Emma on the sideline.

"How about a friendly wager," I try to play it cool, keeping my voice low so that any parents within earshot can't hear me.

"This is a scrimmage, Jax," she laughs, and the sound is music to my ears.

"I know, that's why it's a friendly wager."

"You got me there," she says with a laugh. "Alright. What's the wager?"

"Have dinner with me Friday night. Just us. No kids. I'll even take you to a restaurant instead of eating at my kitchen island like we did last time."

"And if my team wins?" She asks, eyes glued to the action on the field.

"Have dinner with me Friday night."

Emma turns to face me just as a ball is kicked right toward the goalkeeper in blue. I watch, with bated breath in the split second that the ball is in the air, as the goalkeeper leaps...away from the ball. The ball sails right into the back of the net and the red team huddles together, cheering each other on as Emma pats me on the shoulder, clearly trying to stifle a laugh.

"That's why Kelsey doesn't usually goalkeep. She's afraid of the ball."

"She volunteered!"

"I'm sure she did."

“Saboteur.”

“I did no such thing,” Emma grins, and the full force of her smile warms me through. I’m enjoying this time with her and hope she’ll say yes to my not so thinly veiled question of a date. I’d like the opportunity to spend more time with her and get to know her better...away from my kids and other peoples’ kids. I’d especially like to get to know her without other parents around, or people from the school. Or even worse, my siblings.

“We don’t need a wager,” she says softly, before shifting her attention and shouting at her team, “Mackenzie is open!”

The ball is passed to Mackenzie just past the midfield line and she blazes a trail right toward the goal. She stops, sees a teammate nearby and passes the ball to her instead of taking the shot. Pride surges through me and in my periphery I see Emma nod, beaming with pride herself.

Kelsey allows three more goals before the end of practice, but Emma insists that I leave her in goal so that she can have the experience of goalkeeping, and maybe even learn to play the position. She looks miserable and I can’t help but feeling a little twinge of guilt, but she did volunteer for the position and I needed someone in goal.

“As I was saying,” Emma blows her whistle and calls an end to the practice. “We don’t need a wager. I’d love to have dinner with you.”

The girls gather around Emma as I walk back toward Alice, still stretched out and reading on her blanket. We take our time packing up as Mackenzie helps Emma gather equipment and tuck it into her car, until the girls and I – and Emma – are the last ones left on the field.

“Good game, Coach.” I offer my hand for a handshake and Emma shakes her head,

smiling.

“Good scrimmage. And I’m not calling you coach.”

“Fair enough.” I laugh, shoving my hands in my pockets and feeling like an awkward teenager getting ready for his first date. “So, about Friday, do you like...food?”

“I do, in fact, like food,” Emma’s smile is enough for me to forget the terribly awkward feeling that races through my body. “If I had to pick a favorite kind of food, I’d say Italian.”

“Italian. Sounds good. I’ll uh...I’ll see you on Friday, then.” I turn to walk away, taking the girls’ hands and heading toward the car when Emma calls from behind me.

“Jax,” she’s laughing as I turn back around, heat flooding my cheeks. “What time?”

“I’ll pick you up after school. After you’re out of school. And I’m done with work.” Please, God, put me out of my misery. Take away my power of speech right now so I stop making a fool of myself in front of this woman.

“It’s a date,” her smile goes adorably lopsided as she says those words, a slight blush creeping into her cheeks before she walks toward her own car.

After getting the girls in the car and making sure they’re buckled in, I slide into the driver’s seat and brace myself with my hands on the wheel for just a moment, replaying the last few minutes in my head, and smiling to myself as I start the car. We drive in silence for just a few minutes before my too-observant-for-their-own-good girls pipe up from the backseat.

“Dad,” I meet Mackenzie’s eyes in the rearview mirror, “Why were you being so weird with Coach Mitchell?”



“I wasn’t being weird,” I flatly deny her baseless accusation.

“You were being weird,” Alice, nose still in her book, interjects. Nobody asked her.

“I wasn’t being weird...”

“Are you going on a date?”

“How do you know what dating is?” Good job, Jax. Way to not be defensive with your daughters.

“We do read, Dad.”

“And besides,” Alice, again. “Aunt Mandy and Uncle James went on dates all the time, and then they got married.”

You can hear a pin drop in the car after the M word comes out of Alice’s mouth. It’s not something I’ve ever talked about with the girls, not something they’ve ever brought up with me before. They know that I was married to Angela. To the woman who gave birth to them. They know that I’m not married now, but their aunts and uncles are. They’ve all but grown up watching my siblings fall in love and meet the people they plan to spend the rest of their lives with. They don’t know the pain of those plans falling apart. The silence lingers until I pull to a stop in the garage and turn off the car, turning to look at them both in the dim light.

“Emma, that is, Ms. Mitchell and I are friends. And we made plans to have dinner together on Friday night. As friends.”

“Okay.” Mackenzie unbuckles her seatbelt and climbs out of the car, but Alice stays behind, watching me in that inquisitive way she has.

“I like Ms. Emma,” Alice furrows her brow. “So if you do date her, I think that would be okay.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Showers and jammies?” Alice asks, unbuckling her seatbelt and opening her door.

“Showers and jammies.”

Following Alice into the house, I watch her take off down the hall toward her bedroom, wondering again when my baby girl got so grown up. She’s always been a wealth of childlike wisdom, but in the last few years, I’ve watched her and her sister really grow into their personalities and forge paths for themselves as unique individuals. I’m always amazed at the things they understand and the things that come out of their mouths sometimes. The sass, the snark, the sweetness. The kindness with their friends and thoughtfulness with family. I love these daughters of mine and consider everyday that I get to wake up and be their dad a gift like no other.

But I won’t lie, there are days that I wish I wasn’t doing the parenting thing on my own. I wish I had someone to share the joy and sorrow of parenting with. Someone to come home to at the end of the day. Someone who loves those girls the way I do, and won’t leave them. Won’t leave us.

They may be growing up before my eyes, but they still let me tuck them into bed at night, and once they’re showered and in their pajamas, with teeth brushed and hair tied into braids for Mackenzie and tucked into a curl cap (courtesy of Aunt Nelope) for Alice, they crawl into my bed and wait for me. I take my time locking up the house and making sure that everything is secure for the night before settling onto my bed with the girls and opening the book we’ve been reading together.

“One more chapter,” Alice pleads with sad eyes when I bend to press a kiss to the top

of her head. “Please?”

“Not tonight, kiddo. You’ve got school in the morning and need to get to bed. But we’ll do two on Friday night, how does that sound?”

“Sounds good.” Appeased, Alice wraps her arms around me in a tight hug before pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“Good night, daddy. I love you.”

“I love you, kiddo,” I return her embrace, holding her close for as long as she’ll let me, and then do the same with Mackenzie, who lets me hold on just a bit longer. I add this to the collection of memories that I long to always hang onto; these moments with my daughters fill my heart with hope.

I love my daughters. But they have big mouths.

At our last family dinner they informed the family that I’d be having dinner tonight with my friend, Ms. Emma. Mom and Dad shared a glance. Mandy smirked at James, and James immediately offered to babysit. And now he’s sitting in my living room watching me fret about this date.

The girls aren’t even off the bus from school yet, and James is here, grinning like an idiot while I iron my shirt and make sure my pants fit, and try my best not to convince myself that this dinner is a mistake.

“Go wait for your nieces at the bus stop,” I tersely send my brother out the door, taking a moment to catch my breath once I’m alone in the house again. It’s not like I haven’t dated before, but it’s been eight years since Angela left, ten years since we were married, so probably fifteen years since I’ve seriously dated? Maybe? So I’m approaching this dinner tonight the same way I explained it to the girls: Dinner with a

friend. It's easier for me to think of this as dinner with a friend, than a dinner date with someone that I have to impress.

When I hear the bus rumble down the street, I know I have just a few minutes to finish getting dressed before James returns with the girls in tow. When I hear the door open and shut, I shout down the hall to James, "Nice jeans or dress pants?"

"Dress pants!" Comes the immediate response, followed by James stepping into my room. "And a white shirt. Not plaid, not striped. Crisp white. Consider rolling the sleeves up."

"Go away."

"Don't you dare wear a tie!" James calls as I shut the door behind him.

And then take his advice.

Right down to the rolled up sleeves.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

#### DINNER BETWEEN FRIENDS

##### EMMA

“What about this one?” I model a tea length, swing style dress for my sister over video chat.

“Nope. That one’s too...cartoon teacher with a pet lizard.”

“This is one of my favorites,” I protest.

“That’s fine, but it doesn’t negate my point. That is not a first date dress. Do you have anything that doesn’t have a circle skirt?”

I rifle through my closet and eventually find a charcoal gray sheath dress that I haven’t worn in years. I doubt it’ll fit me, but I humor Molly. Stepping out of the royal blue dress patterned with tiny stars, I step into the gray sheath and slip my arms into the three quarter sleeves. Once it’s zipped, it’s incredibly snug, which would be fine if we weren’t going to my favorite Italian restaurant for dinner.

“This one isn’t me, Molly,” I sigh, shoulders slumping as I look at the stranger reflected in the mirror.

“I agree. Go back to the other one. He likes you for you, right? Don’t be anyone but yourself tonight.”

Relief settles over me as I pull my favorite dress back on and slip into a complimenting cardigan and pair of ballet flats. My hair hangs in loose waves instead of my usual braid or ponytail and as the clock ticks, my anxiety ticks up with it. What if I screw this whole thing up? What if I already screwed this whole thing up by calling tonight a date? Did I read more into it than he meant? Am I setting my expectations too high? What if...

The thought tickles the back of my brain.

What if?

What if I let myself get attached? What if I finally form a lasting connection with someone? I've never been stationary for as long as I've been here, but as much as I want to get into the game again, I run the risk of re-injuring myself. I may never play the same again. What if I get out there and I'm not the midfielder I used to be? What if I get out there and can't play more than one half of a match at any given time? What team is going to want to sign someone that comes with so much unknown?

I've seen it before in baseball and football – aging, previously injured athletes who get trotted out for retirement tours only to have one at bat, or throw one pass and ride the bench for the rest of the game. That's not the return to the game that I want. I don't want to be a glorified mascot for whatever team pities me enough to offer me a contract. I won't do that. If Scott can guarantee that isn't going to happen, that will help my decision making process.

"Stop it," Molly's voice cuts through my intrusive thoughts. "I can tell by the look on your face that you're catastrophizing. Don't. It's going to be fine. You look fantastic, and more importantly than that, Jax is not like the other jerks you've dated."

"You always could read my mind," I smile in spite of myself.

“You’re thinking about more than the date though, aren’t you.” It’s not a question but a statement. And as much as I want to deny it, she’s right.

“How much of your uncertainty is based on fear?” Molly asks, and I can feel her gaze on me even through the screen.

“Fear of what?” I ask, wishing I had something in my hands to occupy me so that I don’t have to engage this line of questioning.

“Failure, inadequacy, getting hurt again. Choose your own adventure.”

“A little bit of this, a little bit of that.”

“Maybe a little bit afraid that you’re going to be used to make money? A comeback season, and all that.”

Taking my computer off of my dresser, I sink down into the armchair in the corner of my room and balance it on my lap, letting the comfort of the chair surround me, wishing Molly was here instead of across the country.

“That’s what scares me the most. If I’m going to get back in the game, I want to play. I don’t want to ride the bench or sell tickets. I’m worried that I’m too much of a risk to be put in a lineup, but enough of a commodity to be used to sell tickets and raise television ratings.”

“Have you shared this with anyone? Your agent, maybe? You know, the person who helps negotiate your contract?”

“No. The last time I did that, it was leaked to the press.” Knowing that my sister is new to the world of sports media, I’m careful with what I say here, but she needs to know the reality of being a woman in sports. “I was painted as a diva, and difficult to

work with. Too assertive, too bossy, too outspoken. So I signed the contract, put my head down and led the team to a cup championship.”

I’ve always been too much for some people; too loud, too disruptive, too...everything. When that article came out, it reminded me of every report card that said I had potential but talked too much. Against everyone’s advice, I issued an apology and went back to work. I avoided the media as much as I could after that. And found myself a new agent. Scott encouraged me to speak up for myself, to ask any questions I may have, and also understands my hesitation to do so most of the time. He’d be understanding now, I’m sure, but my nervousness won’t let me ask the questions that need asking. And he’s gotten pushy lately, to the point that I would rather avoid his calls than talk to him.

“I remember,” Molly looks uneasy. For a while after that article came out, I was very cautious about conversations with my sister. Even though I know she’d never write or publish anything about me or my career, I can’t be blamed for being a little anxious. “But hey, enough about that! You’ve got a date tonight. Enjoy your time with him and don’t think about your agent or going back to soccer at all. Go and stuff your face with pasta.”

“And garlic bread,” I smile, feeling a smidge of my anxiety melting away.

“Only if he does,” Molly waggles her eyebrows and I close out the video chat to the sound of her laughter. Grabbing my purse and checking to be sure I have my phone, wallet, and keys, I head out to the living room and sit nervously on the couch until I hear tires crunch in my driveway. Resisting the urge to walk to the door and open it before he’s out of his car, I make myself wait until the doorbell rings and when I see him on the threshold, I’m glad I waited.

He stands there in dark blue dress pants with a crisp white shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, and my mouth is suddenly dry. His dark hair is slightly windswept, and



there's a dusting of stubble on his chin and cheeks. Every word I've ever known is gone as my eyes take in the man standing before me and my brain, like my old hand me down laptop in college, buffers with a spinning beach ball of death.

"Wow," he breathes out the word as his eyes travel from my head to my toes. When his eyes meet mine again, his hand finds its way to the back of his neck in what I now know to be a nervous gesture, something he does when his own brain is buffering. When he smiles at me, my stomach ties itself in knots. "You look..."

"So do you," I fill in when he doesn't finish his thought. I step outside and shut the door behind me, Jax still standing there in silence, watching me. "Shall we?"

"What?"

"Go to dinner?"

"Right. Dinner. Yes, let's do that."

He's nervous. I am too, but I'm beginning to wonder if I'll have to carry the conversation tonight, or if we'll just eat in silence. Jax opens the passenger door for me and carefully shuts the door once I'm inside. Jax drives for a few minutes in silence, and while normally I wouldn't mind comfortable silence, this is...tense. Loaded.

Coming to a stop at a red light, Jax plugs his phone into the car and pulls up directions to an Italian restaurant about thirty minutes away, and the soundtrack from the latest hit animated movie pours through the speakers. Jax fumbles with the dial, turning the music down with slightly shaking fingers.

"Jax," without thinking, I rest a hand on his knee, hoping to ease some of his nervous energy, by forgetting my own. "This is okay, you know? Us dating? Or at least going

on this date. If that's what this is."

"Do you want it to be? A date?" His eyes slide to mine for a split second, his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel loosening.

"Yes, I think I'd like it to be. And I know that there are factors we need to consider if we decide that we want to do it again."

"You mean, my daughters," his jaw clenches and I'm worried he's misunderstood me. "Because they aren't just factors in this equation, they are..."

"Jax," I squeeze his knee, hoping he'll stop before he says something he'll regret. "I know. I didn't mean it like that. I only meant..."

I wish we weren't having this conversation in the car, but rather somewhere more comfortable, less claustrophobic. Less...stifling. But the last place I want to have this conversation is in the restaurant, and we apparently have some time left in the car together. Steadying myself with a deep breath

"I only meant that I understand how important they are to you, and that any kind of relationship you have would affect them as well. And I want you to know how much I adore your daughters. I would never want to do anything that would hurt them."

"I know that," taking one hand off the wheel and settling it overtop of mine in a gesture that I wasn't expecting, Jax blows out a frustrated breath. "And I'm sorry I was so defensive just now. I'd planned on us having this conversation, or at least a similar one, at some point. I didn't want it to happen like this."

"If we get it out of the way now, we can enjoy the date without this discussion looming over us," I try to lighten the mood in the car, but I can't read Jax and I'm worried I've said the wrong thing. Again. So, I do what I've always done, I back off.

I fold my hands in my lap and watch the road go by as we drive.

Have him turn the car around. Call it off now. He's angry and doesn't want to continue with the plan. I'm no stranger to intrusive thoughts, playing out worst case scenarios in my mind, and I'd rather call this off than go through with it thinking that I've ruined things. Or even worse, that when this is all over, I'd just be rejected.

"Emma?" The car is stopped, the music is gone, and Jax's hand envelopes mine. "Hey? You alright?"

"If you're having second thoughts about tonight, I understand." My voice is tight, almost unrecognizable to my own ears. "It wouldn't be the first time I've had a first date called off before it began."

"That's definitely not happening," Jax's brow furrows in a scowl that flashes quickly across his features and is soon replaced with a look of confusion. "We'll unpack that whole statement another time, but for now, we're having dinner. Don't move."

I do as I'm told, unbuckling, but staying put as Jax walks around the car, and opens my door, offering me a hand as I climb out of the car. When he offers me his arm to escort me into the restaurant, I'm happy to loop my arm through his and walk close to his side as we enter the restaurant. Walking through the door that Jax holds open for me I'm hit with the smell of bread baking in a wood oven as my eyes adjust to the dim light of the restaurant. We're led to a booth near the back of the dining room, and when Jax sits down across from me, he gives me a small, lopsided smile that causes my heart to flip flop in my chest.

I occupy my hands with the menu, knowing full well that I'm ordering lasagna, but needing a way to keep my hands busy and my mind from straying away from being here on this date with Jax. When my phone starts buzzing in my purse, heat floods my cheeks and I want to slink under the table.

“You can answer it if you need to,” Jax isn’t put out or annoyed, but understanding.

“It’s probably my agent,” I answer while reaching into my bag and checking the screen, confirming my suspicions. “And he’s no stranger to my voicemail.”

“He’s persistent,” Jax chuckles as my phone buzzes again, immediately after I silenced it the first time. This time setting my phone to do not disturb . “I really don’t mind if you take the call.”

“I don’t have an answer for him yet, so there’s no reason to take the call.”

“An answer for what? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Whether or not I’m going to play again.”

Our waitress chooses that moment to step up to our table and take our drink orders, and Jax orders an appetizer plate of bruschetta for us to share. When she walks away we’re left with quite possibly the heaviest of first date topics hanging between us.

“Do you want to play again?”

“So this is a get all the big questions out of the way right now kind of first date?” I ask and Jax barks out a laugh, truly relaxing for the first time all night.

“Yeah, I suppose it is.”

“When I first signed with Chicago, all I was concerned about was doing my job. Whether I was a starter or a sub, it didn’t matter. If I put in the work and did my job, I was happy at the end of the day. My time with the National Team was really the highlight of my career, and I always hoped that my career would end on my terms, you know? Not because of something outside of my control.”

“Like a torn ACL.”

“Exactly. And the doctors and physical therapists all tell me that I can play again, but I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a little bit of fear there.”

“Fear of getting hurt again?”

“That’s part of it. And I’m a little worried that I’m nothing more than a marketing ploy. But there’s a part of me that would love to play again. Not that I don’t love my job now, but I’d love to be on a team again. Have the chance to go out on my own terms.”

The waitress drops off our drinks and a plate of bruschetta that we dive right into after ordering our entrees, and I’m thankful for the reprieve from the conversation, and for the delicious appetizer Jax ordered. The crostini are perfectly toasted, and the bruschetta is balanced nicely with fresh tomatoes and basil. I would be happy to make this my meal, but I’m looking forward to the lasagna-for-two that we ordered. And I’m also looking forward to getting to know Jax.

Finally.

“I’m glad you chose me to help with the scrimmage the other night,” Jax smiles as he takes a bite of lasagna. “Especially if it means finally having dinner with you.”

“Finally?” I try not to smile, but can’t help it, as his words echo my thoughts.

“I could try to spin that, but I’m choosing to own it; yes, finally .”

“Since when?” I ask, against my better judgment. “Because I know it wasn’t the day you almost killed me with a baseball.”

“Ah,” Jax lays his fork on his plate, eyeing me intensely from across the table. “That wasn’t a great day for me, and I took out a lot of frustration...and anger...on the baseballs that day. And on you. I apologize for the way I spoke to you that day. And for waiting so long to actually apologize.”

“It’s okay, Jax. Really. We all have off days.”

“It was more than an off day. In the spirit of tough conversations on the first date...it was my ex.”

This first date is turning out to have more dramatic conversations than a soap opera, but he’s right, what better time to drop off all the emotional baggage than now? And there’s a bit of emotional baggage between us.

“That day would have been our anniversary. It doesn’t usually affect me, but that morning I’d been filling out school paperwork and it was right there in front of me, in black and white. I’ve been a single dad for eight years but sometimes...it’s still a punch in the gut that there’s this missing piece. Even if they’ve never seen it that way.”

“My dad raised Molly and me on his own until I was about thirteen years old,” I tell him, my eyes on the plate in front of me until I hear Jax blow out a breath. “The woman who gave birth to us left when I was six and Molly was three. Molly has no memories of her. I have a few not so great ones. It’s different when you know the piece isn’t just missing, it chose to leave. But eventually, you come to realize it wasn’t the right piece to begin with. My Mom, Maureen Mitchell, is the woman who chose to love me. Chose to love my dad and my sister. She was there for my first heartbreak, she was there for birthdays and holidays, and that’s what I choose to hang onto. Believe me when I tell you, Jax, your girls are going to remember the things that you are there for.”

“Do you know where she is?” He asks quietly.

“She reached out to me when I made the National Team.” And ghosted me after I was injured and out of the game. Then I got word that she passed. That’s a whole other kind of pain. Add to that, she never once reached out to Dad or Molly? She was clearly trying to capitalize on me and my name. My perceived fame. And once that was gone, so was she. Again. And then she was gone for good. “As far as I’m concerned, Maureen is my mom. And my dad is my hero.”

Jax watches me for a long, charged moment, silence hanging between us as every sound in the restaurant is amplified. The sound of silverware on plates, ice clinking in glasses, wait staff in and out of the kitchen, shoes squeaking on the floors. I hear it all as my pulse races and pounds in my ears. Until...

“Thank you,” his voice quakes with emotion. “I needed that more than you could know.”

As we continue to eat, we ask mundane questions like favorite food and favorite color. Lasagna and purple for me, carnitas and dark green for Jax. A discussion of holiday traditions leads to talk of Halloween coming up, the Thanksgiving invitation that Alice managed to snag for me, and a debate over Christmas cookie preferences.

“I will not listen to gingerbread slander,” Jax laughs as our coffee and tiramisu are delivered to the table. “It’s a classic for a reason.”

“But sugar cookies can be cut into fun shapes and decorated as more than just men and women with gumdrop eyes!”

“No one builds sugar cookie houses, Emma.”

“Maybe they just haven’t tried, Jax.”

The drive home is much better than the drive to the restaurant as we sing along to music that Jax insists he doesn't know the words to and only listens to for the benefit of his daughters. And when the playlist ends, we switch to a soccer game on the radio.

"Do you want to watch the end of this one with me?" Jax asks. "The girls are at James and Mandy's. I could make popcorn..."

"Sure. I'd like that."

Following Jax into the house, I leave my shoes by the front door and trail him into the kitchen where he sets to work on stovetop popcorn and points me toward the fridge for drinks.

"Jax, you have like six different kinds of iced tea in here." I laugh as I take in the multiple plastic pitchers filled with different kinds of tea. Jax steps up behind me, one hand coming to my waist as the other rests on the open door.

"I like the ginger peach best." Jax reaches in and selects a pitcher of white tea, his body heat surrounding me and making me quite thankful for the open refrigerator.

With our popcorn and iced tea in hand, we make our way to the couch and turn on the soccer game. I sit down beside Jax and shift a bit on the lumpy couch cushion. Reaching behind me, I extract a ball of yellow yarn from the couch and hold it out to Jax with a questioning look as he takes the puff ball from my outstretched hand.

"You sat on Walter." His tone is grave but his eyes dance with laughter.

"Who... what ...is Walter?"

"Walter is my mom's attempt at teaching the girls to crochet. Mackenzie picked it up



pretty quickly, but Alice found the pom-pom maker and went to town.” The pom-pom in question has scraggly, uneven lengths of variegated yellow yarn and googly eyes buried in its mass. It really is very cute. And very Alice. “Walter is beloved in this house.”

“I can see why. He’s adorable.”

“Mackenzie has given him an entire backstory, too,” Jax stretches an arm across the back of the couch and I shift toward him ever so slightly, hoping he’ll take the hint and drop that hand to my shoulder. “Apparently he can fly. And according to Alice he’s the reason that curveballs curve.”

“Excuse me?” I laugh.

“I don’t know,” Jax’s laughter fills the room as his arm finally comes around my shoulders, pulling me closer to his side. “But I’m begging them to write it down.”

At halftime, I find myself dozing against Jax’s shoulder, thankful for his warmth surrounding me as he draws a blanket over our laps, and the security that his proximity provides – enough for my brain to quiet and let me sleep knowing that he’s holding me close. He presses a soft kiss to the top of my head, and I sink deeper into his arms and into a sound sleep.

“Children incoming!” a voice shouts through the fog of sleep and I jolt awake, to find myself stretched out on the couch in Jax’s living room with a blanket spread over me. Looking around, I find Jax in the kitchen making coffee and the girls running through the front door toward him. I’d like to throw the blanket over my head and hide when James catches my eye from the front door and throws me a wink. Heat floods my cheeks as I stand up from the couch, and watch as the girls race down the hall toward their rooms, paying me no mind.

Jax hands me a coffee mug that I gratefully accept, inhaling the dark, bitter roast before fortifying myself with my first sip.

“Let me run you home,” Jax says, distractingly attractive with bed head and his low slung flannel pajama pants. And a tee shirt that may as well be painted on for all that it hugs his body.

“What about the girls?”

“Oh, I’m fairly certain my brother is still here,” Jax walks to the front door and opens it, James falling inside as he does. “He can stay with the trouble makers while I run you home.”

The short drive to my house is silent until we’re stopped in my driveway and Jax starts to laugh. “In case you’re wondering, I tried to wake you up last night, but you were sound asleep and when I got up off the couch, you didn’t budge.”

“I don’t usually sleep well at home. My anxiety likes to keep me awake, my brain won’t shut up most of the time,” Jax watches me, listening intently as I explain myself. “Last night, my brain was quiet enough to let me sleep.”

“I’m glad you felt safe. With me.” His hand moves to the back of his neck as a small smile creeps across his face. “Let me walk you to your door?”

“Sure.”

I use the ten seconds it takes him to walk from his side of the car to mine and open my door to still my racing thoughts. Jax offers me his hand and helps me from the car, walking with me to my front door where I fumble and drop my keys. Fitting my key into the lock I open my door and cross the threshold, Jax a step behind me when I turn around nearly bumping into him.

“Emma,” his voice a hoarse whisper. “Can I kiss you?”

We shouldn’t, my brain screams at me. Think of the kids. Think of Mrs. Owens. Don’t kiss him!

“Yes,” I hear myself whisper as I close the short distance between us, and press my lips softly to his. Jax’s warmth envelopes me as his lips meet mine and his arms wrap softly around me. I sigh and lean into him, my hands settling against his chest as I tentatively return his kiss. When Jax breaks off the kiss, I walk inside in a daze, the ghost of his kiss against my lips, and the phantom feeling of his arms around me. Now I have to get ready for today’s soccer game, knowing that I’ll see him again soon, and wanting to do that again.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

#### CHOICES

#### EMMA

After changing into clothing that I can coach soccer in, I eat a quick breakfast and head to the field where some of the girls and their families have already started to gather. I'm surprised to find Mr. and Mrs. Owens setting up chairs on the sidelines and saving space for what appears to be several others.

"Coach Mitchell," Mrs. Owens greets me with a wide smile, "a beautiful morning for soccer, isn't it?"

"Yes ma'am, it sure is." She's come to every game I've coached and always sits with the Hutchinson family. I mask my confusion as best I can, hoping she'll fill in the gaps and explain her presence on her own.

"I told you," she says in a soft tone like I've never heard from her before, eyes straying to the parking lot where Jax is helping his girls out of the car. "They're family."

"Care to fill me in?" I ask, curiosity getting the better of me. When Mrs. Owens turns her gaze back to me, she's not the hardened principal whose word is law, but someone with years of hurt and emotion in her eyes.

"I know you know a thing or two about burned bridges, Ms. Mitchell."

“Yes ma’am, I do,” Mrs. Owens and I have talked on more than one occasion about my own family history; my biological mother’s attempt to use my name and relative fame to her own advantage, the boundaries I’ve established to protect myself and my sister...and our dad. “It’s hard when you don’t have a say about the bridge burning.”

“Yes it is. When my daughter left, I asked myself over and over again what I could have done differently, but sometimes there are no answers to those questions.” Mrs. Owens’ eyes stray behind me and she holds a hand up, calling out, “Claire! Ben! We have room for you.”

The Hutchinsons greet Mrs. Owens with hugs before setting up their own chairs along the sidelines. I stand for a moment feeling out of place and looking for a good chance to slip away when Mrs. Owens stops me with a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I’m glad my girls have you.”

“Your girls, ma’am?”

“So am I,” Mrs. Hutchison sidles up and slips an arm around my shoulders, putting an end to the conversation with Mrs. Owens, but leaving me with more than a few questions, “and I’m delighted that you’re joining us for Thanksgiving. If she doesn’t already have plans, please feel free to invite your sister to join us, as well. I’d hate to think she’ll be spending the day alone.”

“I’ll let her know. Thank you Mrs. Hutchinson.”

“Oh honey, please, call me Claire. Now, do you have a favorite dish? Or maybe a recipe you’d like to make and share? It’s not a requirement, but I thought I’d ask.”

“I make a mean green bean casserole,” I reply.

“Is that the one you made for our last school potluck?” Mrs. Owens asks, smiling

more than I've ever seen from her as I nod. "Then you must bring it. Claire, you've never had anything like it..." The two women leave me standing dumbfounded as Jax approaches with the girls who both greet me with warm hugs as their dad watches on, some lingering awkwardness between us from this morning. He looks side to side, seeming to assess our surroundings before leaning in and pressing a soft, quick kiss to my cheek.

"Okay girls," I move toward the field in a daze. "Let's get ready for kiss off. Kick. Kick off."

Our last game of the season is an absolute blast. To my surprise, Kelsey walks away with a clean sheet, not allowing a single goal. Ever since our scrimmage when Jax put her in goal, she's been working on covering the position and is no longer afraid of the ball coming toward her. Mackenzie has one goal and two assists to her name, and we walk away with three wins on the year, which is more than I could have hoped for when I stepped in to coach.

The girls gather around with their snacks and sports drinks, celebrating the end of the season and parents snap pictures of the team. I'm a little wary to stand for pictures, not knowing where they might show up on the internet later today, but I stand for pictures, proudly, with my team.

"Congratulations, coach." Jax approaches as the rest of the parents gather their kids and leave the field. He offers me a handshake, that I return with a laugh. Once the other parents and kids are gone and I'm left standing with the Hutchinsons, Jax snakes an arm around my waist, and I wrap my own arms around him, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "And, you're welcome."

"For what?!" I laugh as we walk toward his gathered family.

"For putting Kelsey in goal during the scrimmage and giving her the confidence she

needed to try again.”

“Fine,” I kiss his cheek again. “You can have the credit for that.”

“Coach!” The Hutchinsons exclaim, almost in unison as Jax and I approach their gathering. “What a game!”

“Join us for lunch?” Mrs. Hutchinson – Claire – asks.

“Or,” Jax, arm still around my waist, whispers in my ear. “Join me for lunch.”

“That’s a tempting offer Jax, but I have a book fair coming up at school and need to get things ready for that. I have books that need to be ordered for the library, and...”

“You can do that Monday,” heat floods my cheeks when I look up and realize that the sing-song voice those words came from is that of my – usually hard as nails – principal.

“Thanks Mrs. O,” Jax turns his face into my neck with a laugh before addressing me again. “But if you’d rather not, I understand.”

“Why don’t you, and the girls, come to my place for lunch? Usually I body double with Molly while I’m working, but if you and the girls come, maybe bring books to read or homework, or whatever, I could...” I stop mid-thought, noticing that Jax’s expression has changed to one of...amusement. “Never mind. I’ll go with you to lunch.”

“Emma,” Jax pulls away, eyebrows furrowed as he watches me. “I’d love to come have lunch with you and help you with whatever you need.”

“That’s the thing, Jax, I just sort of...need you to be there.”

“Okay.” He smiles. All traces of amusement are gone now. “I’ll come and – what did you call it?”

“Body doubling.”

“Let’s do it.”

My doorbell rings and I open the door to Jax and his girls, arms laden with bags from the nearby deli.

“What’s all this?”

“Lunch!” Alice exclaims as they come inside and I point them toward the kitchen. I take out plates and silverware while Jax unpacks the bags of deli sandwiches, salads, and fruit.

“I hope iced tea is okay?” There are six different bottles of various iced teas on my counter, and I shouldn’t be surprised based on the state of this man’s fridge. “Sweet, unsweet, green, black, flavored and unflavored. Take your pick.”

“Green, please.”

“As you wish,” he passes me the green tea, fingers briefly brushing mine. “And I wasn’t sure about sandwiches so I got ham, turkey, veggie, roast beef, and this greek thing with hummus.”

“Greek thing, please.” One bite tells me I made a fantastic choice as bright kalamata olives burst in my mouth, and garlicky hummus holds all the veggies in the wrap in place. The girls chose a bag of sour cream and onion potato chips that we share, and then gather around my table. Jax sits across from me at the small round table, with the girls between us. It’s been a while since I’ve had a full table, and while it makes me



miss my own family, I do love having them here.

“So, tell me about this body doubling thing,” Jax says between bites of his sandwich.

“Basically it just means having someone work alongside you, not always on the same thing but sometimes. It helps motivate me to get a task done. Most of the time I’ll do a video call with my sister. Basically it’s a way to find motivation and establish some accountability.”

“So you’re okay if I’m helping Alice with her homework?”

“I am. More than anything I just need you here. Someone. Anyone really. But you’re here...” And there goes my mouth, faster than my brain can process the heat in my cheeks or the smile on Jax’s face.”

“In that case, I’m glad to be here.”

Once we’ve cleaned up from lunch, I gather my computer and folders for work and set up shop on the floor in front of my couch. Usually I would turn on music and something on tv, but with other people in the house I opt for silence. Jax sits at the kitchen table with Alice, working on homework, while Mackenzie sits in the nearby armchair with a book.

“My brain is too loud,” Alice says after a while, frustration in her voice as she drops her pencil on the table.

“What do you mean, kiddo?” I hear Jax ask.

“It’s so quiet in here and my brain is so loud. I can’t do it, Dad.”

“Hey Alice,” I turn around and get her attention. “Why don’t you come sit with me?”

She reminds me so much of myself at that age, before I knew or understood what ADHD was and how I cope with it. Makes me wonder...

“Alice, when you do homework at home, where do you like to sit?”

“Usually on the floor. Daddy sits on the couch behind me.”

“Is the TV usually on?”

“Sometimes. I watch Aunt Nelope and Uncle Jake.”

“Let’s try something.”

I turn on the television and put on American Sports Network and the post game show that Jake and Penelope are doing for the playoffs happens to be on. Then, with my phone on the floor between us, and Jax now on the couch behind us, I turn on some music, keeping the volume low. She puts her books and worksheet on the floor and lays on her belly, stretching her legs out behind her, and puts pen to paper and buckles down on her homework, a smile on her face as she breezes through one worksheet before moving on to the next.

Alice’s brain is too loud. Just like mine was. Just like mine is.

With Jax and Mackenzie behind us, reading their books, Alice and I make quick work of our tasks and before we know it her homework is done and ready to go back to school on Monday, and I’ve got new books ordered for the library, the Christmas book giveaway, and the book fair inventory spreadsheet organized and ready to go, along with a handout designed and ready to send home with all the kids on Monday.

“So, what are you,” Jax joins me in the kitchen to grab another of the many teas that he stocked my fridge with, a smile tugging at his lips. “Some kind of secret child

psychologist?”

“Nope,” I shake my head ruefully. “Just an elementary school librarian who spent her childhood thinking there was something wrong with her. Turns out, it was undiagnosed ADHD.”

His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline as he looks at me, and then something shifts in his gaze and he’s really looking at me. And the space I’m in. The organized clutter on my desk. The soft music playing from my phone, ambient noise from my computer. Alice was right, this room was too quiet. Which is why I produce my own noise in an attempt to quiet my brain. It’s a trick I learned in middle school when I couldn’t sit at the dining room table to do my homework. I worked better in the living room, surrounded by my family and whatever baseball or soccer game happened to be on TV at the time.

It helped.

It took me twenty more years for a diagnosis, but at least now I understand that there was nothing wrong with me. It’s just the way my brain is wired.

“You’re not just anything, Emma...” Jax’s voice is pitched low as he takes a step closer to me. “Don’t minimize the impact that you have on the lives of the people lucky enough to know you.”

“Thank you.” I don’t know what else to say beyond those two small words, which barely scratch the surface of the emotions swirling in my head. I don’t know what to do with compliments. Or kind words. They land in my brain and my brain tells me that the words are nothing but empty platitudes, even though I know that’s not true, the anxiety and sensitivity to rejection are a potent combination in my brain.

“What do you think about the rumors of a return for Emma Mitchell?” Alice’s

episode of On the Field has ended, and American Sports Network's Goaltending show is on next. "Will she or won't she?"

A highlight reel of my career plays on the screen and Jax steps into the living room, reaching for the remote, but I stop him, morbid curiosity getting the better of me. Highlights from cup championships and international games lead to my last appearance with the National Team; I watch, detached, as I take a bad foul before getting up and playing again. And then I crumple to the field; the pain I experienced that night is unlike anything I've felt before or since.

"I don't know if that's the right question, Alison. The question is should she come back? At her age, with her history of injury..." the television clicks off and neither Jax or I have moved, but Mackenzie stands in the living room with the remote in her hand.

"What do they know?" She asks, watching her dad and I with an arched eyebrow and hand on her hip. "It's not like they can choose for you."

"She's right, you know," Jax sits down on the couch and pulls me down to join him after sending the girls into the backyard where my net is set up. "Only you can decide what comes next. Have you thought more about it?"

Only every night while I lay awake in bed and replay every goal I've ever scored. Every bad tackle I've ever made, every yellow card received. A few reds in my career, too. I think of every away game that took me away from home. And the thrill of walking into a sold out stadium, buzzing with energy. Chanting and singing and cheering from crowds that spur you on to win. The faces of every little girl reaching for a handshake or high five.

"I want to try again. My physical therapist says I'm ready and I'm choosing to believe my body is ready, even if my mind isn't. Do it scared, right?"

“Right.” Jax is thoughtful for a moment, looking from me to the window and into the yard where the girls are playing. His hand at the back of his neck alerts me to what’s coming next. “As long as we’re doing things scared...would you like to go out with me again?”

“Yes.” I don’t hesitate with my answer. Nothing scares me about Jax, or a relationship with Jax, because unlike the other men I’ve dated, I trust Jax. And I know that he would never enter into any kind of relationship lightly. “I’d love to go out with you again.”

“My girls have expectations of what dating leads to,” Jax’s laugh lacks any trace of humor, “thanks to my siblings and their relationships. If we’re going to do this, Emma...”

“Jax, we can take things as slowly as you need to.”

Especially if I’m going to be playing again, how do I possibly go on the road knowing I’m leaving Jax behind. If I’m going to enter into a serious relationship with a man who has two children, what is my role in their life going to look like? What is the expectation for me with Alice and Mackenzie? What kind of expectations does Jax have?

And what happens if I sign that contract?

“Jax, I don’t have any expectations. I’ve been burned before. Previous relationships weren’t based on affection but proximity to a moderately ‘famous’” that word leaves a bad taste in my mouth when I say it, “name. Once I didn’t serve their purposes any longer, I was cast aside.”

By more than just the romantic partners in my life, but that’s a conversation for another time.

“I do have a question, though...” I fortify myself with a deep breath, not entirely sure how to approach this, and maybe I should have talked to Mom first, gotten some advice but I’ve come this far, so I plow ahead. “What am I? To you. To them. How do I fit?”

“I haven’t done this in a while, but I think that makes you my girlfriend. And as far as the girls are concerned, I’m okay with them knowing that. If you are. Emma, I don’t chase fame. I don’t care that you played for the national team, that you were pro, that doesn’t matter to me. I care about who you are as a person. I hope that I have made that clear, but if I haven’t, there you go.”

“Thanks Jax,” I chuckle, feeling slightly more relaxed than when this conversation started. “I knew that. But hearing it helps.”

“So we’re agreed? You’re my girlfriend?” Jax laughs as he asks the question. “I don’t think I’ve asked anyone that since high school.”

“Do you have a varsity jacket you could give me?” I ask, his laughter easing the tension in my shoulders. “Because if not, that might be a deal breaker.”

Jax and the girls spend the rest of the afternoon at my house, and once they’ve left I find myself deeply missing their company, and wondering what my life would look like if I gave this up.

On Monday morning, two things happen: first, I call Scott.

“Practices will start after Thanksgiving and will be at a practice facility in New Jersey at first and then move to LA the week before the match. ”

“And when do they need an answer from me?”

“January first. If you are going to play again, they need you to sign the contract by January first.”

After hanging up with Scott, and immediately adding those dates to the calendar in my kitchen and the calendar – with alerts – in my phone, I gather my things and drive to school for a meeting with Mrs. Owens.

I do it scared, laying it all out there for Mrs. Owens – from the start of practice, to the possibility of not coming back.

“That’s all of Christmas break,” Mrs. Owens replies, thoughtfully. “So that won’t be a problem, since we won’t be in school. And if you need to be gone for the other practices, we can find subs for the library.”

“I don’t want to leave you hanging, Mrs. Owens, but I haven’t made my final decision yet. If I don’t come back...Mrs. O, I don’t want to leave these kids hanging.”

“You won’t, Emma. I’ll make sure that we keep doing Lunch with the Librarian, and all of the other wonderful things that you do for the kids here. Don’t you worry about that.”

“And if I sign the contract?”

“We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it.”

“Don’t you mean cross that bridge?”

“I said what I said,” if not for the small smile tugging at her lips, I’d be worried she’s angry with me. “Emma, you’re a smart woman, you know what’s best for you. Don’t let anyone try and make this decision for you, okay?”

“Yes ma’am.” Making my way down the hall as children come in to start their school day, I’m stopped for hugs by Alice and Mackenzie who promise to stop by at lunchtime to inspect the book fair, and when they do, they make lists to take home to Jax. And when I pull into his driveway after school, and walk up the sidewalk to his front door, he opens it and greets me with a hug and my mind wanders to what it would be like to come home to him more often.



### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

#### DATE NIGHT

#### JAX

Flowers are probably too much, especially since I'm picking the girls up from school, but I couldn't resist the bouquet of small sunflowers when I saw them at the grocery store. I have to make some changes to our date night, so I'm hoping that these begin to make up for it.

Emma had some work to get done in the library after school, and offered to keep the girls with her for a bit while I ran some errands after work. After being buzzed into the school, I lift a hand in greeting to Mrs. Owens, who smirks at me from behind her desk, her voice calling from behind me. "Your girls are in the library."

They sure are.

All three of them.

Alice sees me first, meeting me at the door with a hug.

"Hey kiddo," I ruffle her hair and press a kiss to the top of her head. "Where's Ms. Mitchell?"

"Putting books away," Alice leads me over to the table she's sharing with Mackenzie, who waves in greeting, fully engrossed by the work in front of her. Before popping

her headphones back on, Alice tells me, “Check science.”

With flowers in hand, I wander toward the back set of shelves and find Emma with her shoes kicked off, hair piled in a bun at the top of her head, and a cart full of books nearby. I hang back and watch as she picks a book from the cart and carefully reshelves it, the skirt of her dress – same style as the star patterned one from our date, only this one is covered in pumpkins and fall leaves – swishes as she moves along the shelves.

With a quick scan of my surroundings to make sure no children or principals are around, I step closer to her, the cellophane on the flowers alerting her to my presence, a smile tugging at her lips as I close the distance between us. Slipping a hand around the nape of her neck, I pull her toward me for a kiss. She’s soft and warm against me, sinking one hand into the hair at the back of my neck and deepening the kiss.

“It’s good to see you.” Emma breaks the kiss, and settles her hands against my chest, a light blush creeping into her cheeks.

“You too,” I grin, soaking in her warmth. “I’m here for my girls, but I also need to ask about our date tonight?”

“I understand if you need to cancel...” her face falls and my heart sinks. I reach out and tilt her chin up to face me, meeting her gaze and giving her a soft smile, but I can feel the tension radiating off of her.

“I’m not canceling, Emma. Just asking if we can change plans. Mom and Dad are spending the weekend at Jake and Penelope’s while they’re home for a stretch in between playoff rounds, and Mandy has a cold that she doesn’t want to expose the girls to.” My other option is Lee and Elaine, but they’ve already got plans for the night. So, instead I’m hoping that she’ll be up for a date with me and the girls.

“What are you thinking?” Her smile is encouraging.

“I was thinking the four of us go for mini golf and tacos? And then once the girls are in bed we could do a movie? Or baseball game, or...I honestly don’t care, I’m just a little greedy for time alone with you.”

Emma laughs, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “Sounds like a great plan. I’ll run home and change and meet you at your place?”

“Perfect.” She points at the flowers, all but forgotten in my hand. “Are those for me?”

“They are,” after passing Emma the flowers, she presses a kiss to my cheek and slips her shoes on before making her way toward her desk at the front of the library where Mrs. Owens stands with the girls. Mrs. Owens quirks a brow at me but doesn’t say a word as Emma and I emerge from the rows of books, her smirk says more than enough and if her fidgeting is any indication, Emma sees it as well. She dashes behind her desk and busies herself on the computer as I help the girls pack up to leave for the day.

“Goodnight girls,” Elaine hugs the girls before stopping at Emma’s desk, a soft smile quirking her lips in the face of Emma’s panic. “Goodnight, Ms. Mitchell.”

The girls make quick work of packing their backpacks and shrugging on their jackets. I hang around until Emma is packed and ready, holding out her coat for her to slip her arms into. We walk side by side down the hall and into the parking lot, the girls a few steps ahead of us. Emma stops at her car, reaching out to squeeze my hand as I continue on to my own car and help the girls get situated inside.

“Dad,” Alice chirps from the backseat, and I meet her gaze in the rearview, “Did you bring those flowers to Ms. Emma?”

“I did.”

“Okay,” she nods and throws a look at her sister as I force my attention back to the road.

“Dad,” Mackenzie, this time. “Are you and Ms. Emma dating now? Or still just having dinner as friends?”

Oh boy.

“Uncle Jake gave Aunt Nelope flowers before they were married.”

“And Uncle Marcus picked wildflowers for Auntie Jay,” Mackenzie muses.

“Yeah, and we all know how that turned out,” I laugh.

“He wasn’t following the rules!” Alice exclaims.

“Leave it better than you found it!” I chorus with the girls. Among Jenna’s many trail rules, including not eating things you can’t identify, petting wildlife, and leaving the trail, we have also been reminded to leave the trail better than we found it; don’t leave anything behind, and don’t take anything with you. The day that Marcus picked some wildflowers from along the trail, we all got a lecture on the way back to our cars. And then Jenna dried the flowers and replanted the seeds later. Marcus learned an important lesson that day: Don’t do something stupid on the trail if you don’t want a lecture later.

The question forgotten, I drive home listening to the girls reminisce about family hikes, their first time meeting Penelope, which feels like a lifetime ago, and their excitement over participating in three family weddings.

“Dad?” A tentative voice calls up to me from the backseat and I meet Alice’s earnest gaze in the rearview mirror. “If you marry Ms. Emma, would Mackenzie and I get to be in your wedding?”

“Ms. Emma and I are dating,” I panic and answer the safest of the two questions. “In fact, I was supposed to take her on a date tonight while you were at your aunt and uncle’s.”

“Aunt Mandy is sick, though.” There’s a note of disappointment in Mackenzie’s voice. “So what are you going to do?”

“I have a plan,” I assure them, and that settles the issue for now. For the rest of the drive, they discuss their school day, and their excitement for Halloween next weekend. After arriving home, I send the girls to their rooms with instructions to drop off their backpacks and change into clothes for playing mini golf, while I try to do the same.

It may be a casual date, but I can still dress to impress, right?

After finding my nicest pair of jeans, I reach for a flannel shirt, and with my brother’s voice in my head, I roll up the sleeves just to my elbows, and unbutton the top two buttons. I think James would approve, and judging by Emma’s roving eyes when I open the door to her twenty minutes later, she definitely approves.

“Hi,” her eyes stray to the open collar of my shirt while I do my best to pick my jaw up from the floor at the sight of her in skinny jeans that hug her legs, and a deep purple sweater that drapes off one shoulder. She lifts a canvas grocery bag, “I brought snacks for later.”

Emma unloads her bag into the fridge and once the girls are ready, we’re on our way to the mini golf course.

There's a slight chill in the air as we set up on the first hole, with Alice taking the first shot. Emma keeps score for me and Alice, while I keep track of scores for her and Mackenzie; Emma hovers over my shoulder, making sure that I mark the correct number of shots as we move along the course.

"What would I have to do to convince you to forget about that last hole?" Emma asks, wrapping her arms around my waist from behind as I mark down her six, yes six, shots on what is likely the easiest hole out here. I would change her score right now if it meant she'd keep holding onto me like this, but what kind of example would that set for the children?

"I'm not changing your score," I laugh as she fakes a pout and sets up to start the next hole, with plenty of encouragement from Alice and Mackenzie who offer tips for how best to navigate the obstacles in our way. As Emma sets up for her swing, I position myself behind her, helping to adjust her stance and grip on the putter. "Don't swing back quite as far," I whisper in her ear, "and gently tap the ball."

The ball rolls slowly toward the hole, stopping just short enough for her to tap it in, giving Emma her lowest score of the night, and earning me a celebratory high five. After eighteen holes, with Mackenzie as our winner, we pile into the car and make our way to the best little hole in the wall restaurant in town. As soon as I open the door, I can smell the fryer oil from the kitchen, cumin and chiles perfume the air, and my shoes stick a bit to the tiles in the entryway, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

It's late when we arrive home and I send the girls to their rooms to get ready for bed. Emma kicks off her shoes and heads to the kitchen, making herself at home in a way that is strangely endearing and kind of wonderful. She pulls two bottles of iced tea from the fridge and cracks them open, passing one to me. I use the time it takes to take a sip of the crisp, slightly bitter tea to gather my thoughts so that I don't accidentally ask her to stay the night.

We agreed we'd go slow. And that certainly wouldn't be slow.

I'm saved from the slightly awkward silence that hangs between us, by Alice coming into the kitchen with a book in her hands, ready to be tucked into bed. But she passes me by and makes a beeline to Emma, holding out the book to her.

"Ms. Emma, will you read to us tonight?"

Emma's eyes meet mine as if asking for permission. Alice can be persistent, but if Emma isn't comfortable doing the bedtime thing, I totally understand, and I'm not going to push the issue. Emma accepts the book from Alice's outstretched hand and follows her down the hall to Mackenzie's room, where she's waiting, a wary expression on her face.

"Dad's not tucking us in?" She asks, eyes flickering between me and Emma.

"I don't have to," Emma says softly. "I don't want to intrude."

A mix of emotion plays out on Mackenzie's face as she deliberates. This is a lot different than the night that Emma watched the girls, and after the conversation in the car after school, I can only imagine what Mackenzie must be thinking right now about Emma and her place in our lives. But soon, she softens and slides over in bed, making a place for her sister, and leaving enough room at the edge of the mattress for Emma to sit down and stretch out her legs.

Emma opens the book to where I left off last night and begins to read to the girls. I don't know my place in the scene that unfolds in front of me; I'd love to climb in on Mackenzie's other side, and bookend the girls between Emma and me, but that feels too...intimate isn't the right word with my girls in the room, but it's the only way to describe it. Too intimate. Too...familial.

As Emma reads, my mind drifts to the possibility of more nights like this. And of nights that could have been. I do my best not to dwell on the past, not to live in what we lost when Angela left, but as I watch the girls with Emma, my heart squeezes with longing for something they've never had. It's almost overwhelming to watch as Emma closes the book and climbs off of the bed, helping Mackenzie get situated under the covers and bidding her goodnight. Emma follows Alice to her room, and Mackenzie lays in her bed watching me.

"You good, Kiddo?" I ask, stepping into her room and kneeling at the side of her bed, smoothing her hair away from her face.

"I'm good," Mackenzie yawns and sinks into her pillow. "It's nice having her here."

It sure is.

"I love you, Mackenzie."

"Love you, Dad."

I kiss Mackenzie goodnight and turn out her light before stepping down the hall to Alice's door, where I find Emma tucking Alice into bed with her favorite stuffed animal and blanket. That's a rite of passage in this house; no one outside of the family has had a smooth tuck in with Alice. Emma steps past me into the hall with a soft smile and a squeeze of her hand on my shoulder as I trade places with her.

"I love you, Dad," Alice sits up and hugs my neck, pressing a kiss to my cheek. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, baby girl. I love you, too."

I find my way back to Emma and note a look of unease on her face. She's back in the



kitchen, leaning against the island clutching her bottle of iced tea to her chest.

“I hope you didn’t feel pressured to do that...”

“No,” she straightens, a panicked look on her face. “That’s...that’s not it at all. I was just thinking about my mom, and all the nights that she’d read to me and Molly.”

Silence hangs between us, long and heavy and charged.

“I had a really great time tonight,” she whispers, tears shimmering in her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” I draw her into my embrace and she sighs into my arms. “Having you here tonight has been wonderful.”

I press a kiss to her forehead, the corner of her mouth as her lips pull into a smile, and soft skin just behind her ear. I could spend the rest of the night like this, wrapped up in her sweetness. Her arms tighten around me as she tilts her face toward mine and I claim her lips in a kiss. Her fingers twist in the hair at the back of my neck and she presses closer, deepening the kiss.

Emma breaks the kiss, eyes dancing as we catch our breath. I put a little bit of distance between us so that I can’t grab her and kiss her again. Not tonight. Not while we’re still just getting to know each other.

“I promised you snacks,” Emma says, throwing a wink in my direction as she opens the freezer and grabs out two pints of ice cream. She passes me a spoon and a pint of butter pecan ice cream. “And I keep my promises.”

With ice cream in hand and baseball on television, we settle into the couch, and Emma leans against my side, fitting against me perfectly, like the final piece of a

puzzle.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

#### brEAKING ROUTINE

#### EMMA

L ate Friday night (or early Saturday morning according to the clock), I disentangle myself from Jax's arms and drive home, where I immediately collapse in bed, still wrapped up in his warm and spicy scent that was so calming earlier tonight. I fall asleep with the phantom feeling of his arms wrapped around me, and the whisper of his kiss on my lips. I dream of a night like tonight, one where I don't leave and sleep in my own bed. One where I wake up in the morning and make breakfast and watch soccer with the girls.

When I actually wake up in the morning, after just a few hours of sleep, I need to clear my head, but the soccer field isn't calling my name today. No. Today my heart is called further east.

Home.

After a quick bite to eat, I climb in my car and drive out of town, chasing the sunrise as I make my way east toward Boston. Toward my family. Turning on my usual Saturday morning, pre-soccer playlist, I lower the windows just enough to let in a blast of late autumn air, and I drive. As I drive, the sun lightens the sky, casting a golden glow over the nearly empty stretch of highway in front of me, but my mood doesn't reflect that glow as my music is interrupted by the ringing of my cell phone.

Scott's name fills the small display in the car and I reluctantly answer.

"Scott, isn't it awfully early for you?"

"Good morning to you, too. As a matter of fact, I'm on your coast for the weekend, Superstar."

I stifle a groan, not giving him the satisfaction of knowing how much that nickname bothers me.

"What do you need Scott?" I pray he doesn't want to meet face to face, that's the last thing I need right now. I'm still riding the high of last night's date with Jax, and I'm not going to let Scott ruin that feeling.

"Wanted to check in with you about the contract offer, see if you've made up your mind yet." And there it is.

"After the match, Scott. I'll have an answer for you then."

"Alright," Scott huffs out a resigned sigh. "I'll stop bugging you about it then."

"Thank you." I don't believe him. But I don't tell him that. "I'll talk to you later Scott."

Without a word, he disconnects the call and my music picks up right where it left off when I was so rudely interrupted. Rolling the windows down a little more, I drop my sunglasses over my eyes and lift my voice with the music, trying to reclaim some of the magic that Scott's call stole from me. If I do go back, it may be time to finally cut ties with Scott. Find a new agent. Again.

Scott helped me through the media debacle a few years ago, in ways my last agent

didn't, but over the years he's gotten pushier, harder to work with, but I'm less afraid to fight for what I want now. More inclined to stand up for myself when I need to. If I accept the contract offer, it'll come with a new agent, that I know for sure. I shake my head, clearing away the thoughts as I turn the music up a little louder before exiting the highway and finding myself a place for coffee and a baked good.

With fuel in the form of copious amounts of caffeine and buttery, jelly filled pastry, I make my way out of the state of New York and into Massachusetts, and now it's a straight shot home. Growing up just outside of Boston was a wild experience; we lived in the suburbs, but were never far from the hustle of the city. I spent so many Saturday mornings wandering around the city with my dad and my sister, reading every plaque and historical marker, and as a high school student on summer breaks, I was one of the youngest tour guides on the Freedom Trail thanks to my extensive knowledge of the landmarks and the city.

As the city rises in the distance, I pull off the highway and drive into the cozy, tree lined neighborhood from my childhood, and right up into the driveway of the house we moved into after Elizabeth left us. Dad didn't want to stay where we were, in a house filled with painful memories, so we moved out of the city and into the suburbs, to the only home that I have any clear memories of.

I sit in the driveway of the old brick ranch style house, taking in the fall flowers that line the steps to the front porch, and the chipping paint on the shutters. A curtain flutters in the front window and soon the front door is thrown open, revealing my dad in faded jeans and a sweatshirt that has seen better days but he can't be convinced to get rid of it. The heather gray sweatshirt is threadbare, the logo fading, and the collar is frayed but, Dad insists that he keeps it for Molly and me. We gave it to him on the first Father's Day we celebrated with just the three of us. I'm glad he still has it.

Dad runs down the steps, paying no mind to his bare feet or the chill in the air, and opens my door, offering me a hand out of the car and once I rise to my full height, I

wrap my arms around him and burrow against his chest. It's been too long since I've had a Dad hug, and I've missed him.

"Emma!" Dad holds me close, one hand cradling my head the way he's always done. "What are you doing here?"

"Daniel? Is everything okay?" Mom stands at the top of the porch, holding the door open with her shoulder, clutching her sweater tight around her shoulders. "Is that Emma?"

"Hi mom," Dad's shoulder muffles my response, but I do lift a hand in greeting. "How's it going?"

Oof.

Dad and I lurch forward as Mom rushes down and joins the hug.

Yeah. I'm glad I came home.

"Well, don't just stand there," Mom laughs, "let's go inside. We just made a pot of coffee."

Dad releases me, and Mom takes his place, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and leading me into the house.

"What brings you by?" Mom asks, leading me into the kitchen. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." I just wanted to see my mom. Talk to my dad face to face. I've been longing for the comforts of home, so I got in the car and drove. After last night, with Jax and the girls, there's a storm of emotions swirling in my brain as I think about my place in their lives. If I even have a place in their lives. "I just missed you,

is all.”

A look passes between Mom and Dad, and my sweet dad presses a kiss to the top of Mom’s head before putting his coffee mug in the fridge for later and grabbing a stack of canvas bags from the pantry.

“Come on Kid. We’re going to the Farmer’s Market.”

Unlike my father, I pour my coffee into a travel mug and bring it along. I have a feeling I’m going to need it.

We drive to the market with nothing but the sound of soccer pundits on the radio. As we approach the city, Dad lowers the volume on the radio, and casts me a quick glance before returning his attention to the road...and then we hit Saturday morning Boston traffic, leaving us nothing but time to talk.

“Three hours is a long way to drive for your mom’s mediocre coffee, Kid. What’s really going on?”

What’s really going on is that I’m falling in love with an incredibly kind, very attractive, single dad of two girls, and I don’t know how to make sense of our relationship. I don’t know where I fit, but I know that I want to fit.

That’s what I should tell my dad.

What do I actually tell him?

Nothing. And everything.

“What was it like for you, dating Mom? Bringing her into our lives?”

Dad is quiet for a while as he navigates us down the small side street, inching closer and closer to the market.

“Honestly, Em? It was pretty easy. Maureen just sort of dropped into my life, and she was great with you girls, connected with you right away. I don’t know what to tell you Emma, other than it just felt right. Like she was the piece of us that was missing.”

Last night, being in the room with the girls, reading to them, being a part of something so personal, it felt...right...just like Dad said. It felt like fitting into the puzzle of Jax’s family; that they would even welcome me into that space is so meaningful. Last night reminded me of nights at home with Dad and Maureen, before Maureen was Mom. She’d help me with my homework, read to us at night, and was always there to tuck us in at night.

Maureen – Mom – never made me feel bad about myself, never made me feel like I didn’t fit or that there was anything wrong with me. She showed me, in so many ways, that I was deserving of the love of a mother. Molly, too. And while I may have only been a child, I saw the way she loved my dad, the way she continues to love my dad. And my sister.

“I’ve been...sort of dating someone. He’s got two daughters. And I’m afraid that I’m not...Dad, what if I mess everything up?”

“You won’t.” We’ve parked at the market, finally, and Dad turns to face me in his seat, eyes meeting mine with an intensity I haven’t seen in a long, long time.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because you’ve been on the other side, Emma. And you know that pain. If you love them, the way I suspect you do, you will do everything in your power to avoid



causing them pain. But let me tell you this, because it's a mistake I made, don't avoid attachment because you are afraid of getting hurt again."

That was the hardest part of letting Mom into our lives, for me at least. I was always afraid that I'd do or say the wrong thing to her and she'd leave. She spent a lot of time reassuring me that she was here to stay, and perhaps even more important, she showed me with her actions that she wasn't going anywhere. It took a long time for me to feel like I was worthy or deserving of her love, and I'm so thankful that she was patient and persistent with me.

"How old are they?" Dad asks as we get out of the car, grabbing up his market bags.

"Eight and ten."

"So right about the same age you and Molly were when Maureen and I started dating."

"Yeah. That's not lost on me," I throw dad a wry smile.

"Have you talked to him about any of this?"

"I'm planning to..."

"You need to." Dad gives me a very pointed look. "But, for now, let's go to the market."

We start with a coffee stand – local roasters who sell their coffee on site, and also have a limited selection of brewed coffee for purchase – Dad refuses to buy from the coffee chains on every corner in the city. With coffees in hand, and several bags of beans to take home to Mom, we move slowly and methodically through the market as Dad crosses items off his list of seasonal fruits and vegetables.

“Want to make chili and grilled cheese when we get home?” Dad asks as we approach the butcher shop and cheesemonger near the end of the market. “Divide and conquer?”

“Divide and conquer.” I give Dad a quick nod and a two finger salute that elicits a laugh and a dismissive wave of his hand as I wander toward the cheese counter. I get an aged english cheddar, a smoked gouda that I’ve been getting from this seller since I was thirteen years old, and a ghost pepper pepper jack on impulse. Once I’ve procured the cheese, I grab a loaf of homemade, crusty white bread from my favorite bakery stall and meet up with Dad.

“Got the goods?” Dad asks as if I’ve just purchased contraband.

“Sure did,” I open my bag so he can peek inside at the bread and cheese. “What about you?”

Dad opens his bag and grins before looping our arms together and leading the way back to the car for the drive home where we begin the process of making a giant pot of chili. The chili needs to simmer on the stove all day long, and Dad takes a nap to the sounds of college football while Mom and I find our way out to the garden where I roll up my sleeves and help pull weeds.

“So what’s his name?” Mom asks while I’m digging out a particularly stubborn weed.

“Jax,” I grunt, trying to loosen the weeds with the small spade, stripping off my gloves as if that’s going to help.

“And what does he do?”

“He’s a doctor,” I finally free the weed and fall onto my backside as it comes free from the ground. “Obstetrician.”

Mom hums a response, a small smile tugging at her lips.

“What’s that hmmm ?” I ask, wiping my forehead with the sleeve of my sweatshirt.

“I’m just happy for you, Emma. That’s all. Tell me about his kids.”

“Mackenzie is ten and Alice is eight,” I get back to pulling weeds, finding it easier to talk about this while doing something with my hands. “Alice is a voracious reader, in fact she’s the reason I started my library lunch groups. And Mackenzie plays soccer, and she’s fantastic; she was on the team I coached through the end of the season.”

“Is that all?”

“No.” I rock back on my heels and gather up my small pile of weeds to toss in the bin nearby, giving myself a moment to think. “No, that’s not all. They are kind and smart and funny. They make me laugh everytime we’re together, and they love their dad so, so much. And he’s a joy to be around. He never makes me feel bad about myself or my ADHD. He’s patient and kind and understanding.”

“Interesting,” Mom stands and holds out a hand to help me up from the ground. “I didn’t ask you about Jax.”

I groan and wrap an arm around Mom’s waist as she drapes an arm over my shoulder and plants a kiss on my temple. She’s right, she didn’t ask me about Jax, but that’s right where my mind went. It’s still so early in our relationship though, if it can even be called that. I don’t know what we are, but I do know we need to talk about it. One more thing to add to that list.

“I’m happy for you, Emma,” Mom stops on the porch and kicks off her muddy gardening shoes. “Even happier for them that they get to know you the way I do.”

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

#### ALL TREATS, NO TRICKS

##### JAX

“Y ou can’t go as a doctor again, Dad!” Mackenzie shouts down the hall from her bedroom while I grab a clean pair of scrubs. I’ve been a doctor every year since the girls were old enough to trick or treat because I usually join them back at Mom and Dad’s after getting out of work. But this year is different. This year, we’re getting ready at home, and I actually get to take them trick or treating.

“Then what should I be?” I poke my head out my bedroom door and wait for one of my girls to respond.

“Baseball player!” Alice yells as she steps into the hallway in her little pantsuit and sneakers. For the second year in a row, she insisted on being “Aunt Nelope” for Halloween, and I can’t argue with her. Her hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail that makes her look much older than her eight years, and the costume glasses perched on her nose seal the deal.

“Or a soccer player,” Mackenzie steps into the hallway in her shorts and National Team jersey, looking ready to take on the world, and I can’t stop the emotion that squeezes in my chest at the sight of my girls standing here looking so grown up. I remember my first Halloween with both girls. We were living with my parents at the time, and Mom picked their costumes. Alice was a pumpkin and Mackenzie was a black cat; they were adorable, and so small. We didn’t trick or treat that year, but

seeing them in their costumes brought some much needed joy.

“Both good options,” I nod, thoughtfully. I know my girls, and while I’d love to take either suggestion, I don’t want either one to think that I’m playing favorites, so I step back into my room and shut the door behind me. Pulling on a pair of jeans and a Teddy Roosevelt Elementary sweatshirt, I dig out an old pair of sneakers from the back of my closet, and decide that I’m going to just be Dad this year. I don’t care that it’s not a costume. It’s the role of a lifetime, and one that I’m honored to fill every single day. And if anyone has a problem with that, too bad.

The eye roll that my ten year old gives me when I walk out of my room is all the encouragement I need that I nailed the costume this year. After piling into the car, we make the short trip to Mom and Dad’s for dinner and our first two trick or treat stops at their house and James and Amanda’s. Mom and Dad are in their yearly firefighter and dalmatian costumes, and James and Mandy are in Victorian era costumes that no one understands but them. Apparently they are the characters in a book that James has been desperately trying to get Jake and me to read. I have the book that James forced on me, and I’ve started it, but I can’t stay awake to read at night like I used to.

Jake and Penelope are here by way of the television screen in the background as they broadcast a special postseason edition of On the Field from the stadium where the first game of the championship series is being played. Leigh and Junie are staying with Mom and Dad until their parents are back in New York, and I know how hard it was for Penelope and Jake to leave their girls and fly across the country for the start of the series.

With Junie on my lap and Charlie Gehringer, mom’s therapy dog in training, at our feet waiting for crumbs, the family gathers around Mom and Dad’s table for dinner together. The girls chatter excitedly about school and the soccer games we watched together this morning, Leigh eats and babbles as she sees her parents on the television screen in the living room, and the rest of us prepare ourselves for trick or treating

with four children.

James and Mandy take Leigh and Junie to a few houses before calling it a night, and taking the girls back to Mom and Dad's while I load my own girls into the car and drive back to our neighborhood. After a quick stop at home to empty out the haul from Mom and Dad's street, we take off down the sidewalk to the neighbors' houses. I hang back and watch as the girls approach the houses together, with a reminder every now and then to say thank you and not just run off.

My girls avoid any house that's decorated with scary decorations, not wanting to risk what may meet them on the porch or the other side of the door. When we come to a house with a skeleton in a soccer goal, the girls determine it's not overly scary, and with a nudge from me, they approach the familiar house, and this time, I follow them to the door.

"Trick-or-treat!" They call out, waiting for the door to open, and when it does, I'm not disappointed. Emma stands in the threshold of her door with bare feet, jeans that hug her legs, and the same crewneck sweatshirt that I'm wearing. Her mahogany hair hangs in loose waves past her shoulders, and as she dumps the last bits of candy into my daughters' bags she turns off her porch light and invites us all inside.

The girls race in ahead of me and disappear into Emma's kitchen while I pull her into my arms and kick the front door shut behind us, greeting her with a kiss.

"Hi there, Beautiful."

"Hi."

Twining her arms around my neck, Emma presses her body against mine and deepens the kiss, breaking it only when we're interrupted by Mackenzie coming around the corner into the entryway.

“Coach – NEVER MIND,” she yells, heading back the way she came.

Emma buries her face in my neck, body shaking with laughter as we make our way to the kitchen where the girls are waiting for us. Emma has popcorn and apple cider for the girls, which they dig into as Emma turns on the first game of the World Championship in the living room. It’s wild to watch Jake and Penelope on the pregame show, baseball’s biggest stage behind them, and my girls watch with rapt attention.

“So,” I join Emma on the couch, draping an arm around her shoulders as she leans into me, keeping my voice low. “Have you talked with Mrs. Owens yet?”

Emma exhales a sigh, dropping her head to my shoulder.

“Yes,” she grumbles. “And she was frustratingly understanding about it all.”

“Why was that frustrating?” I chuckle, pulling her closer to me.

“Because I went in there expecting her to be upset. To yell. Maybe even fire me. But no, she had to be nice to me. It’s your fault.”

“How is this my fault?”

“She likes you.”

“She scares me.”

“That’s because she loves you, Jax. And the girls. I can’t tell you how many times she’s told me that you’re like family to her and Mr. Owens.”

“When I met them, we’d just moved to Saratoga, and I hated it here. I was an angry

teenager and Mrs. Owens was the long suffering English teacher who had to deal with me. She suggested I visit the hardware store one weekend, and I met Mr. Owens. He gave me a job, a purpose, and taught me healthy ways to channel my anger. Then I started bringing my brothers around to the hardware store with me, and Mr. Owens would talk about baseball with Jake, taught James woodworking, and by then I was his weekend manager.”

“What about Jenna?” Emma asks, a hint of indignance in her voice. “Wasn’t she allowed at the hardware store?”

“No,” I laugh, “And not for the reason you’d think. Jenna wasn’t with us because she was usually spending her Saturdays at the library tutoring middle school students who needed help with science.”

“That tracks.” Emma and Jenna haven’t met yet, but I’m hoping that they will on Thanksgiving, if Jenna and Marcus can make it home. My sister is one of the most important people in my life, and Emma has heard all kinds of Jenna stories from me and the girls, so I can’t wait for them to meet.

“Mom started inviting them for holidays, and holidays became Sunday dinners, and when the girls got old enough for recitals and concerts and school events they were invited to those as well.”

“Like an extra set of grandparents,” Emma muses. I need to tell her. She’s giving me an opening.

“Made it feel a little less like my girls were missing out without a mother around.”

This is getting dangerously close to a discussion that I know Emma and I need to have if this thing between us is as serious as I hope it is. I can’t have the girls getting attached to someone who may not stick around. Emma has that contract offer



looming over her head, and I can't stand the thought of not having her in my life. I can't stand the thought of her not being here.

I know we need to have that conversation at some point, and figure out if we're on just as much of a ticking clock as Emma's career. But right now? With her in my arms, the girls sitting nearby, nothing else matters. Right now I just want to hold Emma in my arms, watch baseball, and then tuck my girls into bed and know that they are safe and sound.

"I know it's early," Emma says, grabbing a blanket and covering most of her lower body and mine with the soft fleece, "but tell me everything I need to know about a Hutchinson Family Thanksgiving."

"There's going to be a lot of food, and a lot of noise." I know that Emma gets overwhelmed when a lot of people are around, or when everyone is trying to speak at once, and a Hutchinson Holiday Table is guaranteed to have everyone trying to talk at once. "Mom and Dad have a habit of adopting people who don't have family around, and the majority of them end up at our table for Thanksgiving. Speaking of which, have you invited your sister? She's more than welcome."

"I have," Emma answers with a bit of wistful longing in her voice. "I'm excited to see her, usually she's traveling around but, She'll be staying at Mom and Dad's while they're on their cruise, so she'll drive in from Boston in the morning and probably drive back the same night."

"In that case, now might be a good time to let you know that your invitation is for more than just Thursday."

Emma sits up and turns to me, confusion wrinkling her brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean – and you don't have to say yes, you are under no obligation to do any of

this. At all – but, Mom wanted me to let you know that you’re welcome to come over Wednesday morning for prep day and stay through to Saturday morning. As a part of the family.”

Emma’s eyes are wide as dinner plates and panic colors her features. If I could reel this one back in, I could. It’s clearly too much, too soon, and as much as I’d love to have her as a part of our family in that way, I can tell by her reaction that we’re not in that place yet. I shouldn’t have asked. I shouldn’t have put the pressure on her to do any part of this.

“When you say stay through Saturday ...?”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have even asked. I should have told Mom that we’re not there, we’re taking things slow. This , Thanksgiving, staying the night, all of it, it’s not slow. I’m sorry Emma. I thought we were...”

“Jax,” a slow smile spreads across Emma’s face, “I think maybe, we could speed things up a bit. If you wanted to.”

I want to.

I wish I could tell her how much I want to.

But all I can think about is that contract offer, that decision that she has to make. Right now though, as she looks at me, arms coming around my neck in an embrace, I push all thoughts of that decision to the very back of my mind, and kiss her as if my daughters aren’t in the room.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

#### PART OF THE FAMILY

##### EMMA

“I texted you their address, and Mrs. Hutchinson insists that you don’t have to bring anything,” I take off my sweater and try on another option while video chatting with Molly who is clearly in our parents’ kitchen rooting through the pantry while talking with me. “I can’t wait to see you. And hug you!”

“I’ll be leaving first thing tomorrow morning,” she takes a canister from the pantry and sets it on the counter before peering at me through the screen. “Wear one of your dresses tomorrow. Jeans and sweaters for the rest of the time.”

“What would I do without you?”

“That’s a good question. Good thing we never have to find out the answer.”

“Okay,” I drop a sweatshirt and a pair of slippers into my bag with my pajamas and clothes for tomorrow and the rest of the weekend. “I love you, Molly. See you tomorrow.”

Jax picks me up around nine-thirty in the morning, and Thanksgiving is already in full swing when I get to the Hutchinson house. Wednesday, Claire says, is prep day. Jake and Penelope are in charge of the turkey and Jake is getting a brine ready for it to sit in overnight. James and Mandy are down the road at their own house using their

oven and stove space to make Mandy's secret family stuffing recipe. Alice and Mackenzie are each handed a vegetable peeler and pile of potatoes, and the two get to work on peeling sweet potatoes and russets to get ready for tomorrow. The family dog, Charlie Gehringer, greeted me at the door and hasn't left my side since.

I drop off my ingredients for casserole in the kitchen before Jax takes me on a tour of the house, starting with dropping off my bags in an upstairs guest room. Jax opens the door to a room that feels like a woodland fairytale; the wooden four-poster bed has a gauzy canopy draped from the posts, light pours in from the sliding balcony door across the room, and the plush rug beneath my feet is like walking on a cloud. Access to my own ensuite bathroom really seals the deal.

"Mom gave you the best room in the house," Jax says, stepping into the room behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist. "I'm next door in The Bunkbed Room."

"Sounds fun."

"So fun. Especially since I'm bunking with the girls." Jax presses his forehead to mine before claiming my lips in a kiss. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I'm glad to be here," I kiss him again, sinking deeper into the comfort and strength of his body, interrupted by a commotion from downstairs.

"Ignore it," Jax whispers against my lips, and as much as I'd like to shout of "Dad! Get down here!" are too much to ignore. Jax reluctantly breaks the kiss and gently takes my hand in his, leading me out of the room and back down the stairs where a young woman that I recognize from family pictures stands at the foot of the stairs, and a man with arms laden with bags stands beside her grinning.

"Brother!" She shouts, launching herself at Jax the minute his feet hit the landing. Letting go of my hand, he throws his arms around her and lifts her off the ground,

pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Sister!” After setting her feet on the ground, he pitches his voice low, “I’ve got someone I want you to meet.”

No pressure, I tell myself, she’s just Jax’s sister. That’s all. No pressure. Except...all the pressure. She’s Jax’s sister. She helped him with the girls when their mom left, she’s his best friend, and as pathetic as I know it sounds, I really want her to like me.

“Emma?” Jenna asks, not so gently shoving her brother to the side as he laughs. “I’m so excited to finally meet you. Jax and the girls have told me all about you!”

Jenna enfolds me in a hug and the tension and nervousness melts right out of my body as I return her embrace. “Come with me,” she says, pulling away, “I know where all the photo albums are.”

“Oh, yes please,” I respond with a laugh as Jax grumbles behind me and Jenna grabs my hand.

“Marcus, my husband, he’s on pie duty so you and I have plenty of time to get to know each other before I replace him in the kitchen.”

I follow Jenna downstairs to the basement living area where she points me to the couch and proceeds to gather up a bunch of family photo albums, spreading them out on the ottoman in front of us. The first album is pictures of Jax and his siblings when they were kids; school pictures, baseball pictures, and a wealth of baby pictures of all four kids. Jenna makes it a point to show me the pictures of Jax during his first two years of life, before she was born. Then a third baby appears in the photos, and finally a fourth, Jake.

“Jax was the best big brother,” Jenna tells me as she flips through the pages of the

album. “I love all my brothers, but Jax has always been someone special.”

Jenna grabs another album, this one starts out with James and Jax, each in uniform – James in Air Force dress blues, and Jax in his own Marine Corps regalia. The pride in Jax’s gaze as he looks at his little brother, straightening his lapels and ribbons, is unmistakable. It’s the same look I see when he watches his daughters, the same look on his face when he walked down the stairs earlier and saw his sister standing at the door. It’s a look that I’m coming to realize is Jax’s default when he looks at the people that he loves.

It’s the look on his face right now when my eyes meet his as he walks down the stairs. My heart stutters as he takes a step forward, his eyes never leaving mine, even as he addresses his sister.

“Jay, Mom needs you upstairs.”

Jenna presses a kiss to Jax’s cheek as she passes him, whispering something in his ear before she bounds up the stairs and I hear the faint click of the door shutting behind her. The album in front of me now is filled with pictures of Alice and Mackenzie, my breath catches on a picture of Jax with both girls in his arms; infant Alice in one arm, cradled close to his body, and two year old Mackenzie in the other, looking adoringly at her sister.

“We’d just moved in with Mom and Dad,” he says, sitting down next to me and wrapping an arm around my shoulders, pressing us closer together as he turns the page to a picture of the girls in snowsuits with a snowman and their uncles behind them. “We wouldn’t have made it without family.”

“You and the girls are very lucky to have your family.” I choke back the emotion that clogs my throat as I think about the years after my mom left. Dad didn’t have support from family like that, it was just the three of us against the world until Maureen blew

into our lives like a whirlwind.

“We are,” Jax nods, as I lean into his chest, “I know there are things the girls are missing by not having a mom around, but my mom and Jenna, Amanda and Penelope, they’ve stepped in and helped fill that void for them. But I can’t help thinking that there’s still something missing.”

I flip the page with shaking hands, and watch as the girls grow up surrounded by family, as I listen to the muffled sounds of the Hutchinsons upstairs, and I think of all the quiet holidays I celebrated with Dad and Molly. A stray tear rolls down my cheek and Jax wipes it away with his thumb, gently turning my face toward his, concern etched in the lines of his face.

“Emma,” he breathes my name on a rough exhale, as he slides his hand to cup my cheek. “Have you thought about this? About us?”

“I have, Jax, and it’s not fair to you and the girls if we...if I get attached to them, to you, and then I leave.”

“So we do what Mrs. Owens said,” he sighs, “we cross that bridge when we get to it. What do you say?”

I want so badly to say yes. I want so badly to be a part of his life, and Alice and Mackenzie’s lives, in a deeper, more meaningful way. But everyday the calendar moves closer and closer to the unknown. Maybe I can lean into the known, like Jax said, cross that bridge when I get to it.

“I say, let’s take the scenic route to that bridge.” I slide my hand around to the back of his neck, threading my fingers into his hair as I draw him toward me for a kiss. Jax wraps his arms around me, enveloping me in his warmth as he presses me into the couch and deepens the kiss.

“Emma!” A voice calls down the stairs, “you’re up!”

Jax and I pull apart, breathless, and he stands, offering me a hand up from the couch. I gratefully slide my hand into his and don’t let go until I make it to the kitchen. Jenna raises a glass and gives me a knowing look as Jax presses a kiss to my cheek before going off in search of his daughters. With shaking hands and the memory of Jax’s kiss on my lips, I start the prep work for my green bean casserole, allowing it time to rest in the fridge before finishing it off in the oven tomorrow.

“Need any help?” Jake sidles up next to me at the counter with a hopeful gleam in his eye. He’s so earnest that he gives me no choice but to say yes, so I pass him the cartons of button mushrooms and set him to the task of dicing them while I work on the onion on my own cutting board. Mackenzie and Alice station themselves at the kitchen island with the green beans and work on getting the stems off and snapping them into more bite-sized pieces.

“There’s talk,” Jake says, thoughtfully, “that you’re thinking of going back. How are you feeling about that?”

“Honestly? It scares me.”

“Jax has probably told you this, but he reminded me on more than one occasion to –”

“Do it scared,” Jake and I say in unison.

“Yeah,” I laugh. “He’s told me.”

“He can be a persistent pain in the–”

“Yes he can,” I can’t help but laugh again. “But it’s cute. And I know it comes from a place of caring.”



“Seriously though,” Jake stops mid dice and looks at me, waiting for me to meet his now serious gaze. “It’s not a decision to take lightly. If I hadn’t gone back the second time, I might have just faded into baseball’s memory, moved up here on my own, and not put myself out there again. I wouldn’t have met Penelope.”

Jake’s gaze strays to his wife, on the living room floor with Juniper and Leigh, as my own eyes land on Jax. He’s seated himself between Alice and Mackenzie and has started helping them snap green beans. As if he can sense my eyes on him, he looks up and rewards me with a warm smile and small tilt of his head.

“I want to give myself a chance to decide,” Mackenzie’s words from the other night fill my mind. It’s not like they can choose for you. Only I can decide for myself what comes next. “I want to be able to go out on my own terms instead of being forced out by my circumstances.”

“I get that,” Jake nods, thoughtfully. “I thought I was giving myself that chance. But sometimes life throws us a curveball.”

“It’s how you swing at it that’s important.”

“Whatever you decide, Emma – soccer...or this...” he inclines his head toward Jax and the girls, his message clear. “Do it scared.”

Jake adds his diced mushrooms to the cast iron pan on the stove and steps aside so that I can make my own homemade version of the canned mushroom soup used in green bean casserole. Once everything is in my baking dish and ready to be baked off tomorrow, someone runs it down the road to James and Mandy’s to be stored in the fridge overnight.

As I watch the family gather in the living room and around the dining room table, a pang of longing squeezes deep in my chest and a sudden need for my own family

overwhelms me. I slip out of the kitchen and up the stairs to my room. Mom and Dad don't fly out until tomorrow morning, and sometimes a girl just needs to talk to her mom.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

#### MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

##### EMMA

Once I'm in my room, I grab one of the many blankets available to me and step through the sliding door onto the balcony, allowing the chilly November air to wash over me. It's jarring, but it feels so good against my skin. I sink into one side of the outdoor loveseat and curl my legs under my body as I dial up my mom.

"Hi kiddo!" I hear the smile in Mom's voice when she answers the phone. "What's up?"

"Not much, just...missing you extra, today, with it being Thanksgiving and all. Even more than that, I was thinking about how thankful I am for you."

"Oh sweet girl, you know I'm thankful for you too, and always love when I get to talk to you...but I get the feeling there's more to it than that."

Mom and Molly are the two people in the world that I've never been able to hide anything from. They see right through every front that I try to put up, every wall I use to defend myself. It's a blessing and a curse, but it also helps me face the things that I need to face, it means I can't hide or shy away. Mom gives me the push I need to address the real reason I called.

"What was it like for you, with Molly and me?"

“I was scared,” she answers honestly, “I was really scared. You had a mom and you knew that she’d left, and I was afraid that you’d worry I would do the same to you. Molly was so young, that I don’t know if she understood what was going on, but you? You’d grown up a lot more than a six year old ever should. You knew, even if you didn’t necessarily understand, that I wasn’t your mom but that I loved you like a mom should.”

“You’re the only mom who ever loved me,” I whisper, my voice thick with tears. “You’re the one who stuck around.”

“You weren’t hard to love, Emma.” Mom’s voice is soft, yet forceful. “You were dealing with unprocessed trauma from her leaving. You didn’t understand – and honestly we didn’t know – that you had ADHD and anxiety. You were a kid who was feeling big feelings and didn’t know what to do with them. But it was not your fault.”

The number of times over the last twenty-seven years that Mom has had to remind me that I did not drive my biological mother away is a number I’ve lost track of. The rational part of my brain knows that she’s right, but the small dark corner of my brain, where six year old Emma sits with her coloring book and crayons, sometimes needs to be reminded.

“I know, Mom. Thank you.” My words are barely a whisper as I choke back the tears that threaten. Still after all these years, many of them spent in therapy working through the childhood trauma, I’m afraid to display emotion with the fear of driving away the people I love always, always lingering at the back of my mind. “Am I making a mistake?”

“Of what? Getting involved with a man who has kids?” Mom is incredulous. “I know you know how ridiculous that is.”

“I meant...getting involved, and then possibly going back on the road.”

“You don’t remember when I left?”

“You did?” There’s a good chance I blocked out the memory of her leaving.

“It was pretty early on in my relationship with your dad. I had an opportunity to do one semester of my master’s degree abroad and your dad encouraged me to take it. I was terrified that I’d leave and come back and he’d have moved on from me, but even more than that I was afraid to leave you and Molly.”

“I know that feeling. I love Alice and Mackenzie and I don’t want them getting hurt if I leave.”

“And what about Jax?” Mom asks.

“What about him?” I deflect her question like heading a soccer ball away from my own goal. Too bad Mom rebounds.

“You know what I’m asking, Emma.”

I do know what she’s asking.

“I love him, too. Mom, there’s no question. He sees me. In a way no one else ever has. I don’t want to lose him.”

“You need to talk to him, Kid. I know you’re scared, but talk to him. Do it scared.”

“What did you just say?” Jax’s repeated wisdom in Mom’s voice throws me for a loop. All but confirming that she’s right. I need to tell him.

“Do it scared. Talk to him. Don’t put it off for a better time, because a better time may never come. Do it scared. I know you can.”

“Thanks mom. Travel safely tomorrow. I love you.”

“I love you, Emma. Never forget it.”

Clicking off my phone, I take a deep, filling breath, letting the cold air sting my lungs. A hand lands on my shoulder sending a jolt of awareness through my body. Jax steps around in front of me, regarding me with a small smile.

“Sorry,” his smile goes lopsided, “I thought you heard me come outside.”

“I didn’t.” My breathing is still a little ragged after being startled. Jax sits down on the loveseat with me and I offer him a portion of the blanket spread across my lap and rather than cover his own lap, Jax takes my hand and pulls me toward him, holding the blanket while I turn to sit against his chest, and then spreading the blanket over us both.

“You disappeared,” he whispers, the stubble on his cheeks and chin scrapes against my skin as he presses a soft kiss behind my ear. “I missed you.”

“I was feeling a little homesick,” I tell him, my eyes trained on the lake, shimmering in the late afternoon sun. It’s true, I was homesick, but more than that, I needed my Mom. I needed the comfort of her voice, and the wisdom that comes with her life experiences.

“Is that all?” He asks, not unkindly but in a way that suggests he sees me, just like I said to Mom. Like Mom and Molly, he sees past my defenses to the woman underneath. Do it scared, Emma. Just like mom said.

“I don’t want to take her place Jax,” it’s somehow easier to say when I can’t see his face. “I know that there’s a void there that I can’t fill.”

“You can’t take something she never wanted.” His voice is gruff, his body rigid behind me.

“What do you mean?” I curse my impulsive brain, starting to pull away from him to turn and apologize but he holds me closer. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that.”

“We got married just before my first deployment. I came home to a pregnant wife. And soon we had an infant daughter. A tiny, perfect little girl. A head full of dark hair like mine, and her mom’s eyes. Angela never bonded with Mackenzie. But I did. I did the diaper changes and the feedings. My mom gave me some advice and even helped me find a counselor for Angela, but Angela was convinced that it was Mackenzie, that she’d bonded with me and that was that. So we decided to try again. By then, I was separated from the Marine Corps and in my residency. I didn’t think my heart had the capacity to love another human as much as I loved Mackenzie, but then Alice came along. The spitting image of her mother.”

I turn ever so slightly within his arms, laying my head against his chest. I remember so well the day that Elizabeth left us, and the pain in Jax’s voice, the hurt he feels for his daughters, brings me back to that night. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to ground myself in the moment, but I hear the slam of the front screen door, the crunch of her tires on the driveway, and the sting of her words in my ears. Words I’ve worked for years to heal from. Why couldn’t I just behave? Why couldn’t I just stop crying? Why couldn’t I have been a good girl for my mom? Dad slept in my bed that night, his arms wrapped tightly around me as I curled into his strong chest.

The shudder in Jax’s breath brings me back to the moment and I sit up, turning to face him and seeing for the first time the tears that glimmer in his eyes.

Before I can think it through and stop myself, I reach out and gently wipe away his tears with my thumb, my hand coming down to cup his cheek. He wraps his fingers

around my wrist and leans into my touch. His breath evening out as he does.

“I’m sorry. I’m not meant for this life.” He turns his gaze away from the lake, and meets mine. The sadness in his eyes overwhelms me and threatens to shatter my heart. “That’s what the note said. With the note, I found papers terminating her parental rights and initiating divorce proceedings. I suppose the one saving grace is that we didn’t have to go through a lengthy custody battle. At least she gave them that.”

“Jax, I...”

“She planned it, Emma.” There’s a deep, dark sadness in his voice. “She knew she was leaving. She hired a lawyer and had the papers drawn up. She abandoned her daughters.”

“I know that pain, Jax. I know what it’s like to watch your mother walk out of your life and I won’t make excuses for what Angela did to you, or those darling girls, but Jax, they have you. You talk about a saving grace. Those girls, they have a dad who loves them more than life itself. A dad who picks their clothes out for them and does their hair and packs their lunches. A dad who provides for them. Who reads to them at night and tucks them into bed. A dad who loves them exactly as they are. For exactly who they are.” Tears threaten and I do my best to blink them back, but this time they spill over. “They are the luckiest girls in the world to have you as their dad.”

“Emma,” Jax thumbs away my tears, eyes searching mine for answers to a question that he hasn’t yet asked. A question that I don’t know if I can answer. “What happened?”

“She left.” My therapist would be very proud of me for answering his question and not deflecting. “I was six, Molly was three. Mom was verbally abusive and



emotionally neglectful, mostly to me. When she'd set her sights on Molly, I'd distract her, take one for the team, in a way, which meant that I'd act out. I understand now what I was doing, I was protecting my sister, but that meant I became the only target. And then Dad would come home from work, and she became a different person with him. There came a day that she couldn't hide it anymore. She snapped. Dad put us both in our room, told me to play with Molly, and I could hear them yelling. I heard her tell him that I was the reason, she just couldn't handle me anymore and she couldn't believe that..." this is the part where I always choke up. Always. But I never cry. "She couldn't believe he'd choose me over her."

At Jax's sharp intake of breath, the dam bursts. He wraps his arms around me and cradles me against his chest, pressing a soft kiss to the top of my head. It's been a very long time since I've allowed myself to cry around another person, to let another person in. To let them see the big emotions. Because for so long, big emotions only brought me big trouble.

Jax holds me in his arms, and just lets me cry. He doesn't say a word, doesn't try to fix anything, just holds me. There is safety and security in his arms. I start to worry about how much he heard of my conversation with Mom, but the steadiness of his heartbeat, the warmth of his body, keeps me grounded in the moment. Grounded in the here and now and not in the anxiety that threatens to tear me away from him.

"I love you, too Emma." He whispers. "You're not going to lose me."

"You heard that, did you?" My anxiety, for once, doesn't rear its ugly head. Instead of wanting to pull away, I want to stay here with him. I want to disappear into a world for just the two of us.

"I did. And I want you to know that I will support you in whatever you choose. If that means you play your match in December and come home, great. If you play and decide you want to go back to the game, that's great too. I support you. I wasn't

going to let another day go by without telling you that.”

I turn around, shucking the blanket that covers us and frame Jax’s face with my hand, his stubble scraping my palms as I crush my lips to his. Jax brings a hand to the back of my neck as he deepens the kiss, and wraps his other arm around my waist. Breathless, he breaks the kiss and presses his forehead to mine.

“You know what I want for Christmas?” He asks, breath ghosting against my lips.

“What?”

“A babysitter,” he laughs. “And a door that locks.”

I bury my head against his neck, both of us shaking with laughter. Though, I wouldn’t mind some more time alone with him.

“Seriously though,” He softly kisses my forehead, “I say we make the most of our time before you head to LA. What do you say?”

“Yes. Let’s do that.”

“What do you say we start with dinner? Just us. I can sneak us out of here and no one will know.”

“As good as that sounds, I really want to have dinner with your family tonight. Sneak me out of here some other time.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” he grins.

“I expect you to.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

#### GIVE THANKS

##### JAX

After a long and rowdy night of snacks and board games, I kiss Emma goodnight outside her bedroom door and reluctantly join my daughters in The Bunk Bed Room. They are sound asleep next to each other on the bottom bunk, legs tangled and arms slung over each other. I cover them with a blanket before changing into pajamas and climbing into the top bunk, where I fall asleep and dream of Emma and more nights like this one.

Waking with the memory of her kiss on my lips, I get dressed quickly in the hopes of seeing her at the table for breakfast. Except that everyone is still asleep and the house is quiet in the early morning. I start a pot of coffee and preheat the oven for the pan of cinnamon rolls that Dad stashed in the fridge. Once the oven is heated, I put the pan of cinnamon rolls in and pour myself a cup of coffee.

“I thought I smelled coffee,” a soft voice calls from the hall and I turn to find Emma walking into the kitchen in a sweatshirt that hangs loosely on her frame, and flannel shorts that highlight the long, strong lines of her legs. She greets me with a soft kiss, arms wrapping around my waist...and reaching for the mug behind me.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’re more excited about the coffee than you are about a few quiet moments with me” I chuckle as she lets me go, cradling the mug in both hands and inhaling the steam. “I can pour you your own, you know?”

“I’d rather have you,” she says with a smile and quickly corrects herself. “Yours! I’d rather have....you know what, I meant what I said.”

Setting the mug down, Emma presses me against the kitchen counter and draws me in for a soft, tender kiss. My arms snake around her waist and she steps between my feet, deepening the kiss, and suddenly I’m so thankful for the late night we had and the fact that the entire house is still asleep.

“Don’t mind me, just getting some coffee.” Jenna .

Emma breaks the kiss and buries her head against my chest. I turn us so that her back is against the counter in a lousy attempt to shield her. It’s not like Jenna didn’t see us. She obviously did, based on the smirk she’s throwing my direction.

“Morning Jenna,” Emma’s muffled voice rumbles against my chest, and I instinctively tighten my hold on her.

“Hi Emma. Brother, I’m taking my coffee back to my room now. Marcus won’t be up for at least ten minutes, Mom and Dad might be sooner, now that the cinnamon rolls are baking. Carry on. With caution.” Jenna laughs all the way back up the stairs.

“Sorry about that,” I whisper, kissing the top of Emma’s head.

“Sorry about what?” She asks, incredulous. “Your sister already knows about us. Unless you’re trying to hide me from your family, in which case, you shouldn’t have brought me to Thanksgiving.”

“I would never try to hide you,” I pull back and meet her gaze, her eyes dancing with laughter, her smile wide and brilliant. “I love you too much to do that.”

It feels good to say those words out loud.

Finally.

When I heard her on the phone last night, those words nearly brought me to my knees. My heart has been so guarded for so long, but Emma in her own quiet, gentle way, has helped me see that I can love again. I just hadn't met the right person yet. And as much as I wish I hadn't nearly knocked her out with a baseball that day, I'm also kind of glad that I did.

The pounding of feet on the stairs gets my attention and I know the girls will be in the kitchen soon, and if I had to guess the rest of the family won't be far behind. As much as I don't want to, I unwrap myself from Emma and she reaches for her coffee once more, giving me a soft, knowing smile as Alice and Mackenzie come into the room.

"Looks like we're having breakfast with a blanket monster today," Emma smirks at me as Mackenzie wanders in with her blanket over her head. Emma crouches down in front of blanket-wrapped Mackenzie and pulls her into a bear hug. "There's only one cure for morning monsters."

"What's that?" Mackenzie's response is slightly muffled, but I can hear the laughter in her voice.

"Hot chocolate!" Emma exclaims. "And it just so happens that your grandpa gave me his recipe last night. Want to help me make it?"

My instinct is to warn Emma, tell her to temper her expectations with Morning-Mackenzie, but to my utter surprise, Mackenzie takes her blanket off of her head and lets it drape over her shoulders, leaving her with staticy hair sticking in all directions. A slow smile spreads across her face as she nods at Emma, who asks if Mackenzie can help her find the necessary ingredients for Dad's homemade hot chocolate. Alice has already staked her claim on a stool at the kitchen island where she waits with a plate in front of her, gaze intent on the oven timer. I take a seat next to her and watch

Emma and Mackenzie working together in the kitchen.

Mackenzie and Emma look like they own this kitchen; Emma measures milk while Mackenzie measures out the chocolate chips, and sneaks a few, even slipping a couple to Emma who pops them in her mouth with a conspiratorial smile, as if she and Mackenzie are the only ones in the room.

“Whipped cream?” Emma asks as she keeps an eye on the mixture in the pot on the stove.

“Of course!” Mackenzie responds, stepping to the fridge and pulling out a can of spray whipped cream. She also walks to the pantry and after a bit of searching, comes back with a bottle of sprinkles that she sets in front of her sister with a smile. It’s not long before the rest of the house starts to stir; Mom and Dad wander out of their room, greeting the girls with hugs as Charlie Gehringer settles himself at Emma’s feet. Leigh runs up from the basement and stakes her claim on my lap almost immediately, while her dad makes a beeline to the coffee pot. I remember the days of having little ones like Leigh and Junie, and can certainly sympathize with my brother. It’s not long before the whole house is awake and gathering in the kitchen for breakfast.

“Emma,” Dad takes a sip of his hot chocolate, brow furrowing as he looks at her over the rim of his mug. “Did you do something different to the hot chocolate? This is better than mine!”

“My assistant,” Emma chuckles and wraps an arm around Mackenzie’s shoulders, pulling her close and pressing a kiss to the top of her head, a gesture that makes my heart stutter, “had a heavy hand with the chocolate chips.”

Mackenzie giggles as Emma continues to hold her close, and I excuse myself from the table, taking my coffee and silently slipping out the front door and into the chilly

November air. Sitting down on the front steps, I sip my coffee and try to ignore the pang of longing in my chest. Longing for a mother for my girls. A partner to spend the rest of my life with. I know, I know, that Emma is leaving soon for Los Angeles and whatever comes next in her career. I can't bear the thought of her leaving me, but it's even harder to think about her leaving the girls.

She's leaving, yes, but this isn't the same. I have to remind myself that Emma isn't Angela. Emma isn't my wife, she isn't their mother, but watching her this morning with Mackenzie makes me wish...

No.

I can't go there.

I can't put those expectations on Emma, or on our relationship. It's not fair to either of us, or the girls, if I start making this out to be more than it is. More than it can be. Watching her with Mackenzie this morning was like something out of a dream, and Mackenzie doesn't warm up to people that easily, but she's taken to Emma in a way I never would have expected. Alice, on the other hand, has never met a stranger, but deeper connections like the one I see forming with Emma are more rare.

An unfamiliar car pulls into my parents' driveway, pulling my attention away from my thoughts – thankfully – and to the young woman climbing out of the car. Her hair is the same shade as Emma's but instead of being long and wavy like Emma's, it's pin straight and cut short, hanging just to her shoulders. She steps out of the car and surveys the house and surroundings with a smile and a shake of her head before her eyes land on me with a quirked brow. She opens the back door of the car and comes out with a covered dish.

"Are you a Hutchinson?" She asks, her voice lilting and melodic, and not unlike Emma's.

“I am,” I call with a small chuckle. “If you’re looking for Thanksgiving dinner, you’re in the right place.”

“Actually, I’m looking for my sister.”

“You must be Molly,” I stand and meet her at the bottom of the steps, holding out my hand for a handshake which she immediately returns. “I’m Jax.”

Her eyes snap to mine and a smirk tilts her lips, and I briefly wonder what Emma’s told her about me, but I’m not going to worry about that. I know that Emma has been looking forward to seeing her sister, and I’m glad that we’re able to give them both a place to spend the holiday while their parents are traveling.

“So you’re the hot doctor,” her eyes dance as she looks me up and down, giving me a small nod of approval. “Nice to finally meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too” I laugh as we walk up the steps, opening the front door and ushering her in, taking the dish from her hands while she removes her coat. “Your sister has been looking forward to seeing you. Go straight down this hallway to the dining room.”

I hang back as Molly slips out of her shoes before heading toward the dining room where I can hear Emma’s laughter mingled with the sound of my family. I follow Molly at a distance, yet Emma’s gaze finds me first and for a brief second she looks like she wants to ask me a question and then realization dawns.

“Sister!” Emma jumps out of her seat and rushes around the table, arms open wide as she collides with Molly.

“Sister!” Molly squeals, returning Emma’s embrace. “I’ve missed you so much.”



“I’ve missed you too,” Emma’s eyes glitter with tears as she breaks the hug and holds her sister at arms length, looking her over from head to toe. “I’m so glad you came. Let me introduce you to everyone.”

Emma takes her sister’s hand and tugs her closer to the table, taking the time to introduce each member of my family by name.

“And this is Jax,” Emma turns to me, her soft smile just for me. “I’ve been excited for you two to meet.”

“I’m excited to be here,” Molly says, still clutching the dish in her hand. “It’s nice to finally meet the people I’ve been hearing so much about.”

“What did you bring?” I ask, nodding at the dish in my hands.

“Oh! That is our mom’s homemade macaroni and cheese. It needs to be baked, I wasn’t sure if you had the oven space or not, so I can run it over to Emma’s if I need to.”

“No need,” Mom stands up from the table and greets Molly with a warm hug. “We can run it right down the road to James and Mandy.”

“And by we, she means me.” I laugh, “I can take a hint.”

“I’ll go with you,” Molly insists, giving me a look that tells me not to bother arguing with her, so I don’t. Molly follows me out of the house and down the road to James and Mandy’s; she’s quiet the whole way which isn’t what I expected. I expected an inquisition or stories about her sister. I expected a question about intentions, but instead she walks quietly beside me.

We walk up the deck at James and Mandy’s where I quickly knock on the door before

letting myself and Molly in. I introduce Molly who gives Mandy baking instructions for the Mac and Cheese and then the two quickly fall into a discussion about trades and free agent signings that are taking place in the baseball world. Mandy sends us back with a relish tray and a bowl of cranberry sauce, and once we're back on the road to Mom and Dad's Molly starts talking.

"I want her to know that I'll be okay with whatever she chooses," Molly says without preamble. "There's a part of me that thinks she sticks around so that if I fail I'll have a safety net."

"Emma doesn't think you're going to fail," I tell her honestly. "Molly, your sister is incredibly proud of you, I know that she wants you to succeed, and I know that if you set your mind to it, you will."

"You don't even know me yet, Doc," Molly quips.

"You're right, I don't. At least not for myself. But I do know you through the eyes of your sister. And I know that your sister thinks the world of you, but beyond that, your sister believes in you. If you fail – and that's a big if, coming from someone who doesn't know you yet but has lots of experience as an older sibling – your sister will be here for you. She will be wherever you need her to be and I can almost guarantee that she'd support you no matter what."

"I know she would," Molly's voice is thick with emotion. "She's been protecting me my whole life, Jax, I don't want her to feel like she has to give up on her dream because of me."

"Funny thing about dreams," I try my best to keep the bitterness at bay, but sometimes old wounds open up again. "Sometimes life forces us to find a new one."

"Seems we all know a little something about that, don't we?"

“Sure do.”

“I worry about her, that’s all. It’s my job, as her little sister.”

“What do you worry about?” I ask, my big brother instincts kicking in.

“Who’s protecting her while she’s protecting everyone else?”

A picture of six year old Emma pops into my brain. Six year old Emma with hair in braids, and enough energy to power a city. Six year old Emma with a little soccer ball at her feet and a book in her hand, misunderstood because of a diagnosis that’s still years away. Six year old Emma putting herself between her sister and their biological mother. Six year old Emma protecting her sister, even then.

Grown-up Emma would say that she doesn’t need protecting; she’d insist that no one needs to worry about her, in fact she’d hate hearing that Molly is worried about her; little sisters aren’t supposed to worry.

“I guess that’s up to you and me then, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Molly is thoughtful for a moment, her eyes searching mine. “I guess it is. But how do you protect someone who doesn’t think she needs it?”

“I have experience with a stubborn sister,” I laugh, and Molly seems to loosen up a bit. “You just love her. Sometimes that’s all the protection they need, someone to love them as they are. For who they are.”

“You realize you just told me you love my sister right? And part of my job as her younger sister is to vet you to make sure you’re good enough for her.”

“So...” I stuff my hands in my pockets and scuff my foot along the road. “Do I

pass?”

“The jury’s still out,” Molly’s eyes glitter with laughter and I bark out a laugh as we approach the house. Holding the door open for Molly, she steps past me with a smile that speaks volumes. I watch as Molly and Emma wrap their arms around each other, my gaze flicking to my own daughters still at the table sipping more hot cocoa, and I’m thankful. Thankful for Maureen Mitchell taking care of Emma and Molly as if they were her own. And even more thankful for Emma sweeping into our lives and loving my girls the way that she does.

“Miss Emma,” Mackenzie calls from her perch at the table, her arm slung around her sister, the pair looking an awful lot like Emma and Molly. “Could you and Miss Molly help us get dressed up today?”

Emma’s gaze meets mine with a silent question. She’s always cautious with the girls, never wanting to overstep. I give her a small, encouraging nod – it’s my way of saying that I’m okay with her doing these kinds of... maternal ...things with my girls.

“We’d love to!” Emma replies to Mackenzie and my girls take off up the stairs with Emma and Molly in tow and Charlie on their heels, leaving me in a room filled with family members all grinning at me from their various seats around the lower level of the house.

“Doesn’t someone around here have a turkey to cook?” I ask, trying to shift attention away from the scene that just unfolded.

“Yes.” Mom stands and begins to read from the checklist in her hand. “Jake, you’re on turkey duty, please try not to set anything on fire. Jenna, supervise your brother. Once James and Mandy are here, I’ll send him out to help as well.”

Jake, who only just learned how to cook a few years ago, has decided that he is going

to deep fry the turkey this year. According to Penelope, he's been practicing, and as far as we're all aware there's been no trips to the ER. And we're hoping it stays that way.

"Marcus, how are the pies?"

"Done. Baked them all yesterday." Mom nods and crosses out an item on her list.

"Potatoes?"

"Ready to be mashed," Penelope answers. "Sweet and russets."

"Perfect. Casserole?"

"Being baked at James and Mandy's" I inform Mom, "along with the mac and cheese that Molly brought. And, Mandy sent us back with cranberry sauce and the relish tray."

"Good," Mom crosses a few more items off her list. "The rest of the dishes can go in the ovens here and we'll be all set. Kick-off is at twelve thirty, we eat at one."

"Why do you bother letting us have the game on at dinner?" I ask, not even trying to hide my sass. "They're just going to lose again."

"Tradition," Mom says with a smile, and she's right – it is a Hutchinson tradition, from as far back as our days in Michigan. Detroit's football team plays on Thanksgiving Day, and we watch while we eat our meal. More often than not, they lose, but like I told Alice not too long ago, we love our losing teams, and no one loves them more than Claire Hutchinson. "Have faith in her, Jax. She just might surprise you."

She's swept out of the room before I have a chance to address what she just said, because suddenly we're not talking about football anymore.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

#### WITH A GRATEFUL HEART

##### EMMA

The turkey – and Jake – survived the frying, and is now the centerpiece of the Hutchinson’s dining table, surrounded by side dishes, family, and a few extra guests looking for family to spend the holiday with; Max Harrison – who the girls called uncle Max, and I didn’t realize they meant Max Harrison, star pitcher and all around grumpy heartthrob – and his sister Elise. And Sutton Davis, a friend of Amanda’s and the first woman to coach in professional baseball, is not far behind him. Molly is beside herself with glee over the prospect of meeting Max and Sutton. She’s been chatting with Penelope all morning and is angling for a seat at the table next to Sutton.

Mr. and Mrs. Owens, who insisted that I call them Lee and Elaine, arrive just before dinner, adding some desserts to the mix before greeting everyone – even me – with warm hugs. Mrs. Owens, Elaine, holds me a little longer, giving me a squeeze as she lets me go.

“Glad you could be here,” she says. “It’s nice to have you as a part of the family.”

“Alice and Mackenzie made place cards,” Claire says, calling us all to attention from our various places around the house. “Grab your name and then find a seat at the table; no assigned seats!”

Molly gently elbows me out of the way to win a seat between Sutton and Penelope. I shake my head when she throws me a wide-eyed, excited grin. I sit down beside Jax, with Mackenzie on his other side and Alice on mine as the rest of the family fills in around the pushed together tables. Jax's arm snakes around my back, his hand landing on my shoulder and giving a light squeeze as I lean ever so slightly closer to him. Ben stands at the head of the table and says grace, giving thanks for the family gathered at the table, and the family some of us are missing this year.

We make quick work of Jake's amazing turkey, and Molly's mac and cheese tastes so much like Mom's I could cry. Mandy's secret family stuffing recipe is so delicious that I'm trying to figure out a recipe heist for later tonight, but what gets me is the laughter. The laughter and love around this table is heartwarming and overwhelming.

"Molly, Emma," Claire asks from her end of the table, "what did a Mitchell Family Thanksgiving look like for you girls?"

"Growing up, Thanksgiving dinner was a quiet affair, just the four of us," I answer, meeting my sister's gaze across the table, and she gives me a small, encouraging smile. "Sometimes we'd visit Mom's family in Texas, but most of the time it was the Mitchell Four around the table."

"Mom and Dad always cooked a turkey with stuffing and mashed potatoes," Molly chimes in, "and as Emma and I got older, we'd help with whatever we could. Then, we'd have ice cream for dessert, always ice cream, and set up the Christmas tree as soon as we cleared the dishes from the table and got them washed. Thanksgiving night, once football was over for the day, was spent snuggled on the couch with the glow of Christmas lights, and a favorite Christmas movie on TV."

"Do you remember the year Dad took us on a walk of The Freedom Trail after dinner?" I grin at Molly, memories flooding back to me.



“In costume!” She explodes with laughter at the memory of the two of us in our eighteenth century style dresses and tennis shoes.

“What’s the story there?” Jax asks, leaning closer to me until we’re almost in each other’s space.

“Our dad was a history teacher,” I explain to everyone at the table, “and he’d been waiting years to take us on a walking tour of The Freedom Trail in Boston, figuring that on Thanksgiving Day there wouldn’t be very many people taking tours, and he was right of course, so he dressed us up...was Mom there yet?”

“Not yet,” Molly shakes her head with a laugh. “Remember, after Mom came along, the costumes got way better.”

“Anyway, Dad took us on a walking tour in our costumes and winter coats, and by the end we had probably four or five random people walking with us listening to Dad explain everything.”

“And now Mom and Dad are both retired from teaching, and lead tours themselves. Emma even tags along and helps sometimes. Don’t you, Sis?” Molly’s eyes glitter with mischief as she looks from me to Jax. “Sometimes even in costume.”

My cheeks heat as Jax whispers close to my ear, “I’d love to see that costume, Ms. Mitchell.”

“You really wouldn’t,” I laugh, wishing I could slink right under the table to hide my embarrassment. Finally, blessedly, the topic moves away from me in colonial dress. I’m not used to rowdy family gatherings like this, and it gets overwhelming pretty quickly. Trying to shrink into my chair, I sit back and slowly eat my meal, doing my best to stay engaged in conversation but having trouble paying attention to one thing at a time. But the thought that keeps nagging at me is whether or not I can walk away

from this.

“You okay?” Jax leans close, his words a rough whisper in my ear. I tilt my head to face him and his eyes search mine, assessing and concerned. Charlie nudges himself between us, resting a paw on my thigh and nuzzling into me.

“I’ll be okay,” I answer, trying to convince myself as much as I am Jax, but my voice shakes, and so do my hands. Anxiety is bubbling up and I don’t want to deal with it now. I especially don’t want to deal with it here. “I’m fine.”

“Emma, if you need to, you can get out of here. I can cover for you.”

“You’re very sweet,” I pat his leg under the table, feeling a little calmer already as he presses a hand to my back. “But I promise, I’ll be okay.”

“You’d tell me if you weren’t, right?”

“Yes,” I answer, and truly mean it. With so many others, my instinct is to hide my anxiety, but I trust Jax with that part of me. With every part of me.

When we’re done eating the main meal, everyone chips in to help clear the table, and I find myself rinsing dishes and passing them to Max Harrison to load into the dishwasher.

“It’s really cool to meet you,” he says, a sheepish smile cracking through his usually gruff facade. “I’m a big fan.”

“It’s pretty cool to meet you, too,” I tell him, passing him a serving dish to load and trying really hard to play it cool while standing next to one of my favorite baseball players. “I watched a lot of baseball when I was recovering from my surgery and your playoff run was spectacular.”

“Thank you. It was truly a team effort. But enough about that, what’s next for you?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m meeting up with a team on Saturday for practice. We’ve got a friendly just before Christmas.”

“That’s great, Emma!”

“It is. I’m looking forward to being with a team again.”

“And after that?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“That’s fair,” he nods thoughtfully, loading the last of the dishes into the dishwasher. Once our task is done, we gather around the dining table once more, this time surveying the array of pies and desserts laid out. A stack of paper plates and plastic silverwares sits nearby and we begin to help ourselves to Marcus’s pies and settle in for the end of the football game.

With Marcus’ signature lemon meringue pie on my plate, I settle into a cozy corner on the floor in front of the sectional sofa with Alice and Jax behind me, and Mackenzie perched beside me with her nose in a book, everyone else’s attention is glued to the football game on the screen as the clock ticks into the final minutes of the fourth quarter and Detroit has a tenuous lead. Now is not the time to tell this family that I’m a New England girl who’s used to her team taking a lead and running with it, so Molly and I sit silently, eating our pie and throwing occasional smirks at each other as our team breaks through Detroit’s defense or holds their offense back.

James is pacing.

Penelope has changed into a “lucky jersey” but refuses to call it that because she

insists she's only superstitious about baseball.

Jax is fidgeting nervously behind me, occasionally grumbling to himself, "we're gonna lose this game."

"Don't say that, dad!" Alice admonishes her dad to everyone's delight. "We have to believe in them."

"Alice," Jax hooks an arm around his daughter and pulls her close. "I've been disappointed by this team lots of times, baby girl. It's best not to get your hopes too high."

"Well, someone has to believe in them, so it's going to be me."

"Me too, Kiddo," Ben calls from across the room.

"And me," Lee adds, raising a silent toast with his coffee mug.

"I've seen too much," Jax mumbles, scooting off the couch until he's on the floor by me, arm around my shoulders. "But it would be great if we could take your team down."

"Shh!" I elbow him in the side (gently. For the most part). "Your family doesn't know this is my team, I don't want them to banish me!"

"If they banish you, they lose me too." He plants a kiss on my cheek before whispering in my ear, "besides, they already know. They're just too nice to say anything."

"We're really not," James stops his pacing and throws a glare in my direction, before adding a playful wink. "We just have so little experience beating your team that we

don't know how to trash talk."

Detroit pulls off the win, to the surprise of everyone in the room. Except for Alice, who drops a kiss on her dad's cheek with a joyful, "told you so!" before running off to help her grandpa in the kitchen.

Molly glances at her watch and her face falls as she meets my gaze across the room; she's got to get back on the road soon, and as sad as I am that she has to leave, it was so wonderful to spend the day with her. I join her in the kitchen where Ben and Claire are loading up a bag with leftovers for her to take home, along with a disposable travel mug with coffee for the drive.

I walk Molly out to her car and wrap her in a hug, hesitant to let her go.

"I'm so glad you came. I've missed you so much."

"I'm glad I came too," she smiles as she pulls away from me. "I'm glad I got to see you, and I'm glad I got to meet Jax. Hold onto that one, Em."

"I'm working on it."

"Good. Good. I love you, Emma."

"I love you, Molly."

After one last hug, Molly climbs into her car and I watch her drive away, until I can't see her tail lights anymore. I'm so grateful we were able to spend time together, and especially grateful to introduce her to the Hutchinsons.

"I know you probably want to get ready for Saturday," Jax meets me on the porch as I return to the house, "so don't feel like you need to stick around for the rest of the

night. It's about to get even crazier around here."

"You're not getting rid of me yet, Doctor Hutchinson." I pull him in for a kiss before making my way back into the house and finding a flurry of activity, with Claire in the center of it all, directing traffic as Max, Elise, and Sutton bid their farewell.

James snags Jax, and the pair head outside with a tub of outdoor lights. Jake and Ben go upstairs with a similar tote to work on the balcony lights, as I join Penelope and Mandy in the living room to work on the tree. The fireplace is glowing and Charlie is snoozing nearby while Alice and Mackenzie take off for the basement tree with Leigh on their heels. Christmas music pours from various speakers around the house and with all of us chipping in, the house transforms from a fall fantasy to a winter wonderland in no time.

"Christmas traditions!" Jenna calls from underneath the tree as she scoots it this way and that in an attempt to get it just right.

"What about them?" Penelope asks, untangling a string of lights nearby.

"Do you have a favorite?"

"Peter and I always decorated Christmas cookies," Penelope answers with a fond smile on her face when she mentions her brother. "Mom would bake them and he and I would have a decorating competition that only the two of us knew about. What about you?"

"Caroling," Jenna answers with a laugh. "The boys were pretty terrible at it, except for Jax, but we loved to visit friends and neighbors and sing for them. How about you, Emma?"

I think for a moment, my mind going back to that window of Christmases after and

before; after the woman who gave birth to us left, and before Mom came into our lives. Those were the years that Dad wanted to make memories, sort of trying to override the memories of Christmases with her in our lives. We visited Santa and made gingerbread houses. Dad would stay up late grading assignments, and let us stay awake to watch Christmas movies, but we always fell asleep early. But my favorite tradition is one that we still uphold, no matter where we are in the world, together or apart.

“Dad always took us out shopping on Christmas Eve. We always stopped for coffee – hot chocolate for Molly and me when we were kids – and then we’d go to the mall. There was lots of people-watching, lots of laughter and so many stressed shoppers. And then we’d go to the bookstore and Dad would let us loose! Molly and I each got to pick a book for ourselves and books for dad. Then as a family we’d pick a new board game...and then we’d act surprised the next morning when it was all under the tree.”

“I love that,” Jax walks into the room, cheeks reddened from his time spent outside in the cold. “It reminds me that the girls and I also have a Christmas Eve tradition; there’s a Christmas Eve party that Lee and Elaine host every year for the baseball team and the local veterans group. This year it’s a formal event, dress uniforms, the whole nine yards. I know it’s the day after the match, and I don’t want you to feel obligated to say yes, or to commit to it...”

“The best I can tell you is that I’ll try, Jax.”

“That’s all I need,” he cups my cheek with a cold hand, pressing a quick kiss to my lips. “Besides, I’ve already got two standing dates for the night.”

After a few hours of work, trees are decorated, stockings are hung, the house is covered in multicolored lights, and even though we’re just a few hours removed from a literal feast, all the work of decorating requires snacks. Mackenzie and I step into

the kitchen to work on another batch of hot chocolate while Ben and Claire set out an array of leftovers from earlier. Familiar strains of music flow from the living room, glancing up I find Jax on the couch with Alice snuggled beside him, watching a classic Christmas musical. The same one my family watched every Thanksgiving night.

A lump of unshed tears forms in my throat as I watch the opening number, remembering singing and dancing along with my sister; all those quiet Thanksgivings with our dad, the silence broken by his voice crooning along with Bing Crosby. And when Maureen came along, her harmonies filled the house. Leaving Mackenzie to watch the pot so it doesn't boil over, I pull my phone from my pocket and step into a quiet corner of the house to make a quick call that goes to voicemail as I expected.

"Hi Dad," I swallow back the emotion in my throat. "Just wanted to wish you and Mom a Happy Thanksgiving. I love you, Dad. I don't tell you that enough, and I certainly don't tell you thank you enough. For everything. For all those years of Thanksgiving giving way to Christmas, and the joy that you always brought into our house...even on the darkest days. I love you so much, Dad. and I'm so thankful for you. Enjoy your trip, and tell Mom I love her."

I slip up the stairs to my room, ducking inside and quietly shutting the door behind me. The room is illuminated by the warm glow of Christmas lights from the balcony, and it's still just warm enough, even in late November, that I can sit outside with just a blanket keeping me warm. Soon that blanket is joined by Jax's warm arms around my shoulders and solid chest against my back.

"I hope you had a good Thanksgiving," his breath warms the back of my neck as he pushes my hair over one shoulder and presses a soft kiss to the back of my neck.

"It was wonderful. Being here with you has been wonderful."



“What time do I need to have you home tomorrow?” He asks, his voice taking on a quiet sadness.

“I need to leave around noon. We have a team meeting tomorrow night before training on Saturday.”

“Home on Sunday?”

“Sunday night.”

“Come over,” he whispers, kisses migrating from my neck down to my collarbone. “If you’re feeling up to it.”

“I’ll be there,” I turn and pull him in for a proper kiss, as the blanket falls away and leaves us exposed to the cold air, but it doesn’t matter, because Jax wraps me in his arms and his kisses warm me from the inside out.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

#### LIKE RIDING A BIKE

##### EMMA

When I wake up in a hotel in New Jersey two days after Thanksgiving, I want nothing more than to luxuriate in my bed. I stretch languorously in bed before pulling the covers up over my head and burrowing even further into my pillow, but then my alarm so rudely goes off. After peeling myself out of bed and getting ready for the day, I eat a quick breakfast at the hotel and drive over to the training facility where I sit for a long, silent moment in my car.

The facility looms in front of me, dark and imposing. My phone pings, drawing my attention away from the coaching and training staff that make their way into the building. Opening my texts, I see a picture from Jax – he and the girls are decked out in red soccer gear from head to toe, smiling for the camera – captioned: WE BELIEVE IN YOU.

I snap a quick selfie, making sure that I'm not visibly teary-eyed when I do, and send it back with a simple thank you, and a heart. I take one last look at their picture before clicking off my phone and finally climbing out of my car and making my way inside the training facility. My footsteps echo down the brightly lit hallway as I pass physical therapy rooms, weight rooms, and finally make my way into the locker room. Pushing the door open I breathe in the familiar scent of leather and grass and detergent from the nearby laundry room.

Conversations pause when I walk in the door, lots of young eyes look my way, and then a familiar voice calls my name.

“Emma!” Lara Estep races across the room and throws her arms around me. “You’re here!”

Dropping my bags, I wrap my arms around Lara and hug her tight. She visited once after my surgery, but it’s been a long time since I’ve seen my old friend, and I can’t wait to take to the field with her again soon. After finding my locker, I sink into the chair in front of it and slip off my street shoes and change into my cleats. After last night’s team meeting, I know that I’m fighting for a starting spot in December and only have a few weeks to prove to my coaches, teammates, and myself that I deserve to be here.

Someone tosses a mesh practice vest in my lap, and I throw it on without complaint. This is my first practice in over a year and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous, but I can’t let anyone in this room know that I am, so I put on the vest, I throw my hair in a quick ponytail, and then I tape my knee and ignore the eyes that watch me as I do. Everyone here knows my history, some were on the field with me when it happened, and more than a few I’m sure were watching it on television that night. Some of these girls are just kids, no older it seems than the girls that I coached through the end of their season.

Once I’m suited up, I test my knee for flexibility before following the girls out onto the field where our coaches are waiting for us. It’s cold, but not unbearably so, and the sun shines bright as we take our places on the field and start warming up. I stretch, I run, I jump...and I feel good. The cold air in my lungs, the sun on my skin, the familiar movements and drills recalled by muscle memory, it feels good to be on the field again and I realize I’ve missed this more than I thought.

We run passing drills and shooting drills, and halfway through practice a familiar

pain pulses in my knee, but I do my best to block it out, push it away. I put my head down and I get right back to the drills. This is the first of just a few practices before the match in December, and if I can't get through this I don't know what hope I have of making it through the match.

WE BELIEVE IN YOU.

I'm glad someone does. Because I certainly don't believe in myself at the moment. In fact, I'm questioning why I agreed to do this. Why I'd be willing to subject myself to the pain again, to the long days of training, and having to fight for a spot on the team. But that text from Jax and the girls is seared into my brain, so I'm choosing to borrow their belief in me, if only for today. Knowing that they are behind me, that Jax is supporting me, is all the motivation that I need to keep moving. So I keep moving. I keep running and passing and shooting until I collapse in the grass at the end of the morning session, grateful for cold water and the promise of lunch.

Lara reaches out a hand and pulls me to my feet, slipping an arm around my shoulders in what looks like a friendly gesture to anyone watching, but she's helping me walk off the field under my own power. For the most part. But it hurts.

"Alright grandma," Lara laughs as we stagger into the lunchroom together, "let's get you into a comfy chair."

"Shut up. You're three months older than me," I laugh, slugging her in the shoulder as she lowers me into a chair and offers to fix me a plate of food. "I can fix my own plate, thank you very much. "

Pushing myself out of the chair, I take a slow lap around the room under the pretense of catching up with teammates, when really I'm using the time to stretch out my knee and keep my body moving; too much time in that chair and I won't make it out for the second half of training. What I wouldn't give for one of Ben Hutchinson's pastries

and a cup of coffee right now as I walk through the lunch line and build myself a salad with mixed greens, roasted chicken for protein, and a mix of veggies and feta cheese that reminds me of the ‘greek thing’ Jax brought me for our body doubling lunch just a few weeks ago.

When I sit down, Lara is holding court at our table, telling a handful of the younger players about what she calls our glory days, but to me feels like a distant memory; she tells stories of our college days with an air of fairytale, and spares no detail as she tells them of our National Team triumph three years ago.

“I watched that tournament with my dad,” Lorena MacArthur, the young goalkeeper, reminisces from across the table, waving a french fry between me and Lara, “you two were an amazing duo on the field. What I wouldn't give to see you in action in person .”

Lara plays center forward and when I’ve got the ball at my feet, she’s the one I’m looking for. I’ve played midfield my entire career, as far back as high school soccer, and I’ve never had a center forward – or teammate, for that matter – that I trust more than I trust Lara. I’d love to play with her again. If I keep working, and fighting for a starting spot, that just might happen.

“That could be arranged,” coach Sasha Torres intones as she approaches the table. “I was going to wait to tell you this Mitchell – I want you on first team tomorrow. You too, Estep.”

“Thanks coach,” I tamp down my enthusiasm and resist the urge to throw my arms around my coach. When Coach walks away, Lara squeals with delight and pulls me into a bone crushing hug. It’s been a while since Lara and I have shared the field, but if today has been any indication it should be just like riding a bike.

When training ends for the day, I head back to my hotel room for the night. My first

order of business is filling the little plastic bag in the ice bucket as full as I can, tying off the top and resting it on a hand towel draped over my knee. My next order of business is calling Jax; the phone barely rings before his voice filters into my ears and all the tension and anxiety drains right out of my body at the sound of his voice.

“Hey Beautiful. How’d it go today?”

“Everything hurts and I’m dying,” I laugh with a dramatic groan.

“Ice. Elevation. Comfort food. And those are Doctor’s orders,” I can hear his smile through the phone.

“Ice and elevation is taken care of,” I tell him as I tuck a pillow under my knee. “And comfort food is being ordered soon.”

“How’d it feel to be out there again?”

“I don’t quite know yet, to be honest. The true test will be tomorrow during the scrimmage. Coach has me on First Team tomorrow, which is promising, but also might be for show just so the infants on the team can see Lara and me in action.”

“Infants?” Jax laughs. “Because you’re so old, Grandma?”

“Alright, Old Man,” my laughter joins his, as I settle deeper into the pillows behind me. “A couple of these girls are fifteen years younger than me. One told me that she and her dad watched my last world cup appearance together. When she was in middle school.”

“So, you and Lara are back together again tomorrow. Are you ready?”

Mentally, I’m ready. Physically, I’m not sure how long I’ll make it through the first

half. This will be my first time back on the field in a game setting – even if it is only a scrimmage – since my injury. There’s a little bit of anxiety in the back of my mind that I attribute to pre-game jitters, which is nothing new for me. But the pain in my knee? That’s new, or at least it’s the new normal.

“I’m ready.” There’s no doubt in my mind that I’m ready to get back on the pitch tomorrow. “Just like riding a bike. How hard can it be?”

“Emma,” the laughter in Jax’s voice is music to my ears, “I’ve got some children here who are about to turn feral and rip this phone out of my hands, can I pass you off for a minute?”

“Of course you can.”

“Miss Emma!” Alice and Mackenzie start talking over each other but the gist of the conversation comes through; they went Christmas shopping today and got to pick out gifts for each other.

“Where did you go?” I ask, swallowing back the unexpected lump of emotion in my throat.

“The bookstore,” Mackenzie is very matter of fact in her answer. “It’s our favorite place to shop.”

As I listen to the girls tell me about spending the day with their dad, I close my eyes and longing squeezes at my chest. I wish I could have gone with them. Wander the aisles of the bookstore with Jax’s warm hand enveloping mine, stealing a kiss between towering bookshelves, maybe even conspiring with the girls on a gift for their dad.

“Bye Miss Emma! We love you,” the girls chorus before passing the phone back to

Jax and the tears that were threatening finally spill over.

“And in case you didn’t know it,” Jax’s voice is a low rumble through my phone. “ I love you.”

“Oh Jax, I love you too. I miss you three, but I’ll be home tomorrow and I’m still planning on stopping by if you’ll have me.”

“Yes, please do, but please be careful coming home, there’s a winter storm in the forecast.”

“I will, Jax. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.”

I haven’t ridden a bike in probably ten years. And ninety minutes on the field is nothing at all like riding a bike. In fact as we take the field for kickoff, forty-five minutes is looking more and more daunting. I’m going to be doing more continuous running today than I have in a very long time, and even with my knee taped and trustworthy medical staff standing by, my body vibrates with nervous energy that I try my best to put out of my mind.

Taking a few deep breaths, I stretch once, twice, three times.

The whistle blows.

And we’re off.

I stumble almost immediately but regain my footing as I race down the outside edge of the field toward the penalty box on my team’s attack and as the ball is passed to me, my goal is to get the ball to Lara and prevent a counterattack. I spy an opening,



but the problem with teammates who are so young, who've watched Lara and I play, is that they know what's coming. They know that if Lara has an opening I'll pass it to her. They know that I'm more likely to pass than shoot.

Not today, kids.

Once I'm in the box and Lorena is in my sights, I find my opening and shoot for the far post. The ball sails over Lorena's hands, right into the back corner of the net. It may be a scrimmage, but my team celebrates as if I just scored a game winning penalty. I'm mobbed, briefly, before we put the ball in play and get back to work as the clock ticks its way toward forty-five minutes.

I'm thankful it's a scrimmage and Coach wants everyone to get playing time. I'm subbed out for the second half, yet I remain on the bench and cheer on the first team, watching as they attack and defend, observing how the younger players interact with each other on the field. I can't help but think of Mackenzie as I watch them, thinking about being in the stands with Jax, cheering her on the same way Mom and Dad always did for me. As the clock ticks toward ninety minutes, soft snowflakes start to fall and my mind travels away from the pitch, three hours north on I-87 toward Saratoga Springs.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

#### SICK DAY

#### JAX

S unday morning is rough.

I wake up early in the morning, overcome by nausea that my usual breathing exercises do nothing to combat. This sucks.

Reaching for my phone, I see a few texts from Emma, sent late last night before she went to bed, and I tap out a quick message wishing her luck in today's scrimmage, and then I call the one person I'm sure is up at this hour.

"Jax," Dad answers my call with a note of concern in his voice. "What's up?"

"Would you mind coming to get the girls for the day? I think I've got food poisoning or a stomach bug," my guess is the latter, "and I can't be at my best for them today."

"Sure. Do you want me to come get them now, or wait?"

"They wake up around seven, so you could wait until then. I don't know if I'm contagious or not, so I'll keep my distance. Let yourself in and I'll mask up."

"Understandable. Do you need anything?"

“I’ll be fine, Dad. Thank you.”

I think I underestimated how “fine” I’d be. After getting off the phone with Dad, I just make it to the bathroom in time, and when Dad comes to get the girls, I’m thankful that they are able to get up and ready on their own, pack their overnight bag, and Dad grabs their backpacks just in case. There’s a snowstorm in the forecast, but we’re hopeful it will pass us.

The girls will be in good hands for the day, which is good because as Dad’s car pulls out of my driveway I’m hit with a wave of nausea that has me racing for my bathroom again, where I stay for a while on the cool tile floor. When I finally scrape myself off of the floor I change into gym shorts and a tee shirt before raiding my kitchen for whatever I can find that might – hopefully – be gentle on my stomach. There isn’t much. The best I can find is a handful of oyster crackers and a bottle of electrolyte water from the back of my fridge. It’s better than nothing.

I stretch out on the couch covered with a blanket from the basket nearby, and close my eyes, only opening them again when my doorbell rings. A quick glance at the clock tells me I’ve been asleep for a few hours, and as I sit up my world spins just a bit and nausea washes over me but I drag myself to the door anyway, opening it to find Emma on my doorstep, but she doesn’t look happy to see me.

“Jax?” She drops her bags just inside the door and reaches for me, steadying me with her hand on my shoulder, the other pressed to my forehead. “Oh Jax, are you alright?”

Emma shuts the door before guiding me to the couch and making me sit down before she surveys the house, a worried wrinkle furrowing her brow.

“Where are the girls?”

“Dad got them this morning,” I tell her, leaning my head back against the couch and closing my eyes to stop everything from spinning.

“Good. Have you eaten anything today? Hydrated?”

“Crackers. Water...but it’s been a few hours.”

“Okay,” her gaze softens as she crouches down on the floor in front of me, I sit up and look at her, taking in her slightly damp hair, the joggers that hug her quads when she leans down, and the tee shirt that clings to her frame, vaguely recalling that her scrimmage was this morning. She looks gorgeous. She looks like a soccer player – strong lines and powerful muscle. She worries her bottom lip between her teeth and I want to lean in and kiss her but I shouldn’t. I can’t. “Will you be okay for about fifteen more minutes on your own?”

“Emma, I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Shut up,” she says with a smile. “From what I can tell, you’ve slept most of the day, which is great, but you need hydration. And sustenance. So I’m going to run to a store. Can I leave you on your own?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she stands up and makes her way back toward the front door and the bags that she dropped there, and I hear the jingle of the car keys in her hand. She comes back to me and presses a soft kiss to my forehead, “I’ll be right back.”

“It’s snowing,” I grab her hand and give it a squeeze. “Be careful on the roads.”

“I will.”

When Emma comes back, I join her in the kitchen as she carries in a couple armloads of bags and begins to unload their contents onto the counter and into the fridge. There's electrolyte drinks, ginger ale and lemon lime sodas, packages of chicken and boxes of noodles, fresh vegetables, a knob of ginger root, and various flavors of popsicles. Someone means business.

"The shelves were pretty bare with everyone prepping for the storm, but I managed to get a few sick day essentials." I watch as she takes a sleeve of crackers out of the box, handing it to me before twisting off the lid of an electrolyte drink. "Go sit on the couch with these. If you can keep it down, we'll try soup later."

"Emma..."

"Jax," she comes around the kitchen island and gently steers me toward the couch, "let someone take care of you for a change. Let me take care of you. Okay?"

I do as she says and start nibbling on the crackers, taking a few cautious sips of the sports drink while she starts clanging pots and pans in my kitchen. Resisting the urge to turn and figure out what she's doing, I reach for the remote and start scanning the channels before landing on a football game. Soon the smell of onions and garlic and ginger fills the house and my stomach rumbles, not with a feeling of sickness but hunger. Suddenly I want more than these crackers, but I eat a couple more anyway, knowing that Emma's right, I need to eat. And hydrate.

It's been close to a half hour that Emma's been here, and so far the crackers and sports drink haven't come back up, which I consider a good sign, but the chills have come back and a headache is building just behind my eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Emma reaches over the back of the couch and presses a soft – cold! – hand to my forehead. "You're still hot."

“Why, thank you.” My attempt at humor clearly doesn’t amuse her if the look on her face when she steps into view is any indication. “I’ve kept the crackers down.”

She cracks a small smile but the worry that mars her face isn’t going away.

“Do you want to try some soup?”

“I’d like to. Make sure you eat too, I know it’s been a long day.”

Emma returns with two bowls of chicken noodle soup, handing one to me before curling up on the other end of the couch with her bowl cradled in her hands. It could be the fever talking, or the fact that I haven’t eaten anything but dry saltine crackers all day, but this is the best soup I’ve ever had. The sharp bite of ginger in the broth adds a layer of flavor that I wasn’t expecting but is surprisingly soothing.

We eat in comfortable silence, and when we’ve finished our meal, Emma takes our bowls to the kitchen where I insist that she loads them into the dishwasher rather than washing everything by hand. I listen to her load and start the dishwasher and then she starts turning off lights around the house and plugging in the Christmas tree lights instead.

A soft, golden glow fills the room, and when she returns to the couch, I have to laugh at the blue, disposable mask on her face, but it makes sense when she lifts the corner of the blanket and sinks onto the couch right next to me. She wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me toward her, and for the first time all day, I feel truly relaxed as I settle against her.

Emma’s fingers twist into the hair at the back of my neck, and before I know it my eyelids are drooping shut, but I still want to hear about her weekend, how training went and the scrimmage today. Reaching for the remote, I turn the volume down on the television, and lean closer to Emma, seeking her warmth. Seeking the comfort of

having her here.

It's been a long time since I've been sick. The last time I found myself under the weather I guzzled cough medicine, popped cough drops, and life went on. I had daughters to take care of, and people who depended on me, and I'd already leaned so much on my family that it never felt right to ask them to step in. They say doctors and medical professionals are the worst patients, and I'd add to that sentiment, when they ask for help. It's not easy to ask for help, but here I am, not asking, instead being told that I'm going to be taken care of. And being taken care of by the woman I love – the woman who loves me – isn't so bad.

"Tell me how the scrimmage went," I barely suppress a yawn.

"Surprisingly well," her hand drops to my back, nails lightly scratching up and down and across my shoulders. "I told you Coach Torres put me on First Team, which was unexpected, but not unearned, I hope. This odd sense of calm came over me when the whistle blew, and it's been a while but I found my footing pretty quick and Lara and I never missed a beat."

"Em, that's fantastic."

"Forty-five minutes was rough, but I knew I had this to look forward to at the end of the night."

"I meant to text you this morning, to let you know I was sick and tell you not to come."

"That wouldn't have kept me away. The only thing that would have done is ensure that I wouldn't have shown up empty handed. If I'd have known, I could have come prepared."

“Just being here is enough for me, but thank you for the soup and everything else. Your company is pretty great, too.”

“How are you feeling?” She asks.

“The best I have all day. Apparently eating and hydrating helps.”

“It does,” she chuckles, “I’m glad I could help with that. But you need rest, too.”

“Is this not resting?” I sweep my hand across my body stretched out beside her on the couch.

“This isn’t sleep,” her response is gentle yet stern. “You need actual sleep. You should go to bed.”

“Come with me.”

“That’s the fever talking,” she laughs as she pushes up off of the couch and offers me a hand. “Seriously Jax. Go to bed. I can take care of things here.”

Emma presses her mask covered lips to my forehead and sends me down the hall to my room. It’s still early, but she’s right, rest is always beneficial, and since the chills and shaking have all but disappeared, I’m hoping for a restful night’s sleep.

“I love you,” she says from the end of the hall just as I duck into my room.

“I love you, too.”

Before going to bed, a shower is in order; I let the hot water stream over my aching body, relieving the tension in my muscles. Slipping into bed in nothing but my boxer shorts, I pull the blankets up to my chin and burrow into my bed, relishing the cool



fabric of the pillowcase against my cheek. In the silence of my room, I listen for the sound of the front door opening, and Emma's car engine starting, but before long my eyelids grow heavy and I slip off to sleep.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

#### LITTLE WOMEN

##### EMMA

I stand at the end of the hall until I hear the faint click of Jax's bedroom door before walking back to the kitchen where I finish cleaning up, and find containers to store the leftover soup. Once everything is cleaned out, I walk out to my car and grab my overnight bag from the trunk. The snow has picked up in intensity, covering the ground and sticking to the roads now. If the storm is as bad as they say it's going to be, there's a chance schools could close tomorrow, and while I know Alice and Mackenzie are with their grandparents, part of me wants to check on them and make sure they're okay for the night.

Once I'm back in the house, I lock the door behind me and find my phone. I sent Jax to bed early enough that the girls might still be awake, so I call over to the Hutchinsons to check in on them.

"Hello?" Claire answers the phone and I start to worry that I'm doing the wrong thing, but that anxiety fades when I hear the girls laughing in the background.

"Hi Claire, it's Emma. I'm here with Jax and just wanted to check and see how the girls are. I know they're with you and it isn't really my business, but I just..."

"Emma," Claire's voice is reassuring, "you don't have to explain yourself. I'm glad you called. And I'm really glad you're there with Jax. You know they say that

doctors make terrible patients, and Jax doesn't ever stop and let himself be taken care of. I hope he's not causing you too much trouble."

"He's sleeping now, but you're right, he was hesitant to let me step in at first. I thought I'd stick around and make sure that he takes it easy tomorrow as well, which is part of why I called. If you'd like to bring the girls back home, I'm more than willing to stay with them."

"Are you sure?" Claire asks, surprise coloring her voice. "We could have a snow day tomorrow, you'd be stuck with them the whole day."

"To be honest, that's kind of what I'm hoping for."

I'm met with silence on the other end of the call and for a moment I worry that the call has been dropped. Then I hear a snuffle and when Claire's voice reaches me once more it's thick with emotion.

"I'll have Ben drop them off." Silence stretches out between us again, and finally, "thank you for loving them. All three of them."

"It's an honor to love and be loved by them, believe me."

After ending the call I take a few minutes to step into the bathroom and change into the pajamas that I packed for the weekend, thankful for the soft, warm flannel of the pants and my well-worn Roosevelt Elementary sweatshirt. In the living room, my attention is drawn to the Christmas tree in the corner near the windows, its white lights casting a warm glow in the darkness of the rest of the house. The ornaments are a mixture of princesses and cartoon characters, homemade creations, and enough baseball players to make up at least two full teams. This tree is a reflection of the home it stands in, of the family that decorated it.

Before long I hear the crunch of tires in the snow on the driveway, and I meet the girls, and their grandparents, at the front door. Alice and Mackenzie offer hugs on their way inside before dropping their bags off in their rooms, and Claire steps over the threshold, wrapping her arms around me in a crushing hug, taking me by surprise.

“Thank you,” she chokes out the words, “thank you for choosing them.”

You can’t take something she never wanted. Jax’s words from that night on the balcony come back to me in a rush that threatens to steal my breath and knock me off my feet.

She never chose them.

Not the girls, not him.

I never considered the impact that had on his family, watching as she walked away. Watching as Jax stepped into the role she left behind, grieving the end of his marriage and navigating the unknown expanse in front of him. No one outside of their family has chosen them. Prioritized them. Taken care of him. Them. Not like this.

My arms, no longer limp at my sides, wrap around Claire, returning her embrace. She hugs like my mom, there’s comfort and warmth and acceptance in her arms. “I’ll take good care of them.”

“I know you will,” emotion unmistakable in her voice. “Thank you, again.”

Shutting and locking the door behind Claire and Ben, I turn to find the girls in the living room, already changed into their pajamas.

“How’s Dad?” Mackenzie asks, eyebrows furrowed with worry.

“Better.” I kiss the top of her head before pulling her into my arms for a hug. “No need to worry, okay?”

“Okay.” Mackenzie lets me go and joins her sister in the kitchen where they fix themselves a snack of apple slices and peanut butter. They catch me up on the day spent with their grandparents, uncles and aunts, and then they want to know how the scrimmage went today. I tell them about the match, and about being with my teammates again, leaving out the part about the throbbing pain in my knee at present. I know I need to elevate and ice, but I’ll wait until I get them in bed to take care of that.

When their snack is gone, Mackenzie washes and dries the plate, before carefully putting it away before both girls head down the hall to brush their teeth and get ready for bed. I don’t fully know my role right now, I don’t know if I can – or should – step in and be a part of their bedtime routine, or if I should strictly remain an outside observer.

“Dad usually reads to us at night,” Mackenzie says as she exits the bathroom, a question in her eyes. “You don’t have to, but...”

“I’d love to,” I interrupt her train of thought, not wanting to hear the end of that sentence. I’ve been in her shoes. I know what it’s like to be the oldest sibling, to know what the routine is and not wanting a disruption of that. She could read aloud for Alice and still enjoy the chapter of their book, but it’s not the same as having one of the grown-ups in your life read to you as you fall asleep.

“I can do it,” she says, taking on the air of Responsible Eldest Daughter, “but if you want to, that’s okay too.”

I follow the girls into Alice’s room, where they both climb into her bed and snuggle close, leaving a spot for me to join them, and once I do, Mackenzie passes me the

book they've been reading as a family. I open the, clearly well loved, copy of *Little Women*, and pick up where Jax left off the last time they read together; it's still early in the book, as Jo and Laurie are only just now meeting, as Jo scorches her dress by standing too close to the fire.

"But Laurie didn't laugh..." I read the words, remembering the day that I saw Jax at the hardware store, and every day that I've known him since, that he hasn't judged me, or made fun of me, or told me that I was too much for him. That I was too much in general. I lose my train of thought, I hyperfocus and get lost in other things, I'm impulsive, and get excited about things I love, and sometimes I withdraw from the world – a lot like Jo standing in front of the fireplace – and yet Jax has never laughed. He sees me. Understands me. He loves me. And that's where the similarities end, because I can't see Jax running off to Paris and marrying my sister.

When we end the chapter, Mackenzie quickly hugs her sister and bids her goodnight before making her way to her own bedroom. I carefully climb off the bed, and tuck Alice in, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"Goodnight Alice," I smooth her hair away from her eyes, and pass her the stuffed animal that falls out of her bed as she adjusts her blanket. "If you need anything during the night, I'll be right out there on the couch, okay."

"Okay," she yawns, sinking deeper into her pillow. "Goodnight, Miss Emma."

"G'night."

I step down the hall and see that Mackenzie still has her bedroom light on, and she takes her time turning down her bed, removing decorative pillows and spreading out a quilt before carefully climbing into bed. When she sees me at the door, she smiles for a quick second before schooling her features once more. I remember those early days with Maureen, days that I wanted to be tucked in and kissed goodnight, but didn't

want to ask – or rather, didn't know how to ask.

Walking into her room, I wait until she's in her bed before kneeling down beside her. "I'm new to this," I tell her. "Thanks for letting me help with bedtime tonight."

"I'm glad you're here," she whispers, arms wrapping around my neck and holding on tight. "We've never had a mom before, and I know you're not her, but you take care of us like she should have."

"I didn't have a mom when I was your age either," I tell her and her eyes go wide. She slides over in bed and gives me a place to sit. Climbing up beside her and stretching out my legs, she snuggles close. "She left when I was really young. And like you, it was just me and my sister and our dad. He took really good care of us. But sometimes it felt like something was missing."

"Miss Emma?"

"Yeah kiddo?"

"Is it okay to be mad at her?"

"I think so," I answer honestly, fully prepared to apologize to Jax if I overstep. "As long as you don't let yourself be mad all the time."

"I'm not. Only sometimes. Like when we make Mother's Day cards at school. Or when my teachers ask if my mom will volunteer in class. Grandma makes sure they know that Alice and I don't have a mom, but sometimes they still ask. It's hard."

"Oh sweetheart, I know. I think you should tell them that your uncles will volunteer and see what they say." This elicits a laugh, followed by a yawn. "When I was a little older, my dad met a very nice woman named Maureen. She loved my sister and me

the way that a mom should love her kids, and it didn't make things easier. It didn't take my anger away, at least not right away, but I knew that I had someone that loved me like I was her own."

"Like you love me and Alice..." it's not a question but a statement. A statement that fills my chest with warmth and my eyes with tears that threaten to spill over.

"Exactly like I love you and Alice."

Mackenzie lets me go and lays her head on her pillow, pulling the covers up under her chin. I press a gentle kiss to her forehead and tell her the same thing I told Alice; if they need anything in the night, I'll be right out on the couch where they can find me.

"G'night, sweet girl," I click off her bedroom light and hear a soft response as I close the door behind me. Once the girls are tucked in, I find a spare pillow in the linen closet and toss it on the couch before grabbing a blanket from the basket and closing the curtains on the living room windows. Snow continues to fall softly outside, and seems to be piling up on the deck railings. Before laying down on the couch, I dig my charger out of my bag and plug in my phone nearby, check the door locks one more time, and finally stretch out on the couch.

I find reruns of an old sitcom playing on television, and set the sleep timer for a half hour, hoping that the comforting sounds of my favorite sitcom family will lull me to sleep. I drift in and out, eyelids heavy as I finally relax into the couch, covered with the weight of the blanket. My eyes snap open to near complete darkness and a rustling sound from nearby. Disoriented, I sit up, blinking as my eyes adjust to the dim light and when I turn toward the kitchen, a man's frame is silhouetted against the light of the open refrigerator.

"Jax?" I ask, my voice shaky as my pulse still races from the scare of being startled



awake. He jumps, startled by my voice, and drops a bottle of sports drink. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he presses a hand to his chest, taking a few deep breaths before bending down and picking up the bottle of orange sports drink. “I didn’t know you stayed.”

“Of course I stayed.” Yawning, I sit up more fully on the couch as he walks over and sits down on the other end with his sports drink and a handful of crackers. “I wanted to be here in case you or the girls needed anything.”

His head snaps toward mine, eyebrows furrowed. “The girls are here?”

“Yeah. I called to check on them after you went to bed, and suggested that if they wanted to come home they could. I’d be here.”

“Why?” His voice is gentle, he’s not arguing, but seeking clarification.

“I remember once, after Elizabeth left and before Mom came into our lives, Dad got sick. He was always the one that took care of Molly and me when we were sick, and that day he put us on the bus, assured me that he was okay and there was nothing to worry about, and all I did all day at school was worry about him. There was no one to take care of the man who spent all of his time taking care of me and Molly.”

I couldn’t pay attention in class, which was already a problem for me, my thoughts racing about Dad being home alone and sick; he didn’t have anyone there to make soup for him, or to check his temperature. No one to make sure he was hydrated and took medicine. When I got off the bus that day I remember getting home and offering to make dinner that night so he could rest, I got Molly off of her bus and handled the bedtime routine for both of us that night.

“All that to say, I know what it’s like to worry about the only person that takes care

of you, and I wanted the girls to be able to be home with you if that's what they wanted, so they came home. We had a snack before bed, I read to them both and tucked them in. I debated checking in on you before I went to sleep, but you needed your rest."

"Thanks for taking care of the girls," he swipes away tears from under his eyes. "There are a lot of things they've missed out on, but I'm so thankful that they had you here for them tonight. I'm pretty thankful to have had you here for me tonight."

"Mackenzie said something about me not being their mom but being thankful that I could take care of them the way a mom should." Jax sucks in a breath at my words, and my own heart stutters in my chest. This weekend was wonderful and exhausting. I loved being on the field with Lara again, but as I sit here now – my knee throbbing, my muscles aching (and not in the good, post-workout kind of way) – I think of tucking the girls in tonight, of reading aloud to them in bed. I think of the sheer joy that I felt when they came home tonight. I want that.

I want that all the time, and with them.

I want that with the man who scoots closer to me on the couch and shares the blanket with me. The man whose chest is a solid wall of warmth and muscle at my back. His arms are strong and secure around me, holding me close.

But how do I tell him that my brain is a storm of emotions and thoughts that I can't quite corral just yet? Jax – and the girls – deserve stability and finality. They deserve to know what's happening five steps ahead, and I can barely find my footing for the step right in front of me. "I love you, Jax. And the girls."

That's all I can muster for now.

"I love you, too." Jax presses a kiss to the top of my head as he sinks deeper into the

couch, bringing me with him. I adjust the blanket over us as he grabs for the remote and clicks on the television, my show from earlier is still playing. “One episode, and then I’ll go back to bed. What do you say?”

“I say you still need your rest.”

“This is rest.” He kisses the top of my head, and his warmth brings so much comfort that I can’t help but close my eyes, listening to the sounds of the television show and being lulled to sleep by the steady, even rise and fall of his chest.

“Goodnight, Em.”

“Goodnight, Jax.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

#### SNOWED IN WITH YOU

##### JAX

S unlight streams in from the nearby windows and I open my eyes to find myself stretched out on the couch, a vague memory of holding Emma in my arms on this very couch last night or early this morning. Was it a fever dream? That's possible but, I press the back of my hand to my forehead and I don't feel feverish. Sitting up, I stretch my tight muscles and my attention is drawn to the woman in my kitchen, clad in pajamas, with a mixing bowl and canisters on the counter in front of her.

"Good morning," I call from the couch, my voice raspy from sleep. Her eyes meet mine and a smile spreads across her face.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"Much better than I did yesterday, but very, very sore." I join Emma in the kitchen, setting the kettle to boil on the stove, noticing the time on the clock. "Shouldn't you be at school by now? It's awfully late."

"Take a look outside."

I slowly open the curtains that conceal the sliding door, revealing several inches of snow piled up on the deck, with more snow continuing to fall.

“I got the call around six, you were sound asleep and I didn’t want to wake you so I thought I’d let you and the girls sleep in for a bit.”

“And you thought you’d just... whip up some pancakes?”

“Waffles, actually,” she points to the waffle iron plugged in on the counter behind her. “And hot cocoa. I was going to have the girls make it, I’d rather you rest today.”

“I can rest today, and still help you in the kitchen.”

“You’re sick, Jax.”

“It was a stomach bug, Em. Nothing to worry about.”

“Jax,” Emma’s playful demeanor drops as she stops whisking waffle batter in the bowl in front of her. “I worry. It’s what I do. It’s one of the things I’m best at. I try not to worry, but when you’re the oldest daughter of a single dad, with a younger sister who liked to find trouble as a kid – and honestly, still sort of does – worry comes naturally. So please, just...take it easy. For my sake.”

I close the distance, however small, between us and wrap my arms around Emma, drawing her against my body. She relaxes into my arms, tension draining out of her body as she presses her cheek to my chest.

“I’m sorry,” she sighs, her own arms wrapping around my waist. “I get carried away sometimes.”

“That’s one of many things I love about you, Emma.” I press a kiss to the top of her head. “You have nothing to apologize for, I shouldn’t have teased you. You say you worry, and it’s what you’re best at, but what I hear Emma, is that you love. You love so deeply, and that is what you’re best at. I don’t ever want you to think that I’m not

grateful for the love that you give, or that there is something wrong with you and the way that you love.”

I don’t want to lose her. I don’t want to say or do something that would cause her to walk away. Emma and I have both experienced the pain of someone walking out – someone who should have loved us both. Someone who should have loved their children. I’m thankful everyday that Mackenzie and Alice weren’t old enough to remember that Angela left, but they know they don’t have a mom in their lives; I can’t imagine the pain that Emma experienced when Elizabeth left, and all but blamed her oldest daughter.

“I know you know this, but I will never stop reminding you that you are worthy of being loved exactly as you are. You don’t need to apologize for being yourself. Ever. But especially not with me.”

“Thank you, Jax.”

“I promise I’ll take it easy today,” I pull back and meet Emma’s watery gaze. “But, you have to do the same. It is a snow day, after all.”

“I think I can do that,” she smiles and wipes her eyes with her sleeve. “But first: waffles.”

“Always waffles.”

“Do you think Al will want sprinkles?”

“What kind of question is that?” I ask with a laugh, as Emma turns to the pantry and comes back with an assortment of sprinkles and lines them up on the counter before she starts the process of making waffles. I’ve been more than twelve hours now symptom free, but to appease Emma I let her check my temperature before I get

started on bacon and scrambled eggs, and hot cocoa for the four of us.

Working in the kitchen with Emma is like doing any task with Alice, her mind is all over the place; a cabinet door left open here, a drawer left open there. She's a whirlwind, but she's focused on what's in front of her. As the smell of waffles fills the air, I hear stirring at the end of the hall. Bedroom doors open and two very confused girls make their way to the kitchen where Emma and I are hard at work on breakfast.

Mackenzie makes a beeline for me, throwing her arms around my waist and holding on tight. Emma gives me a knowing look before turning back to the waffles with help from Alice.

"Are you feeling better?" Mackenzie asks, her voice small and loaded with emotion.

"So much better," I smooth out her sleep tousled hair and press a kiss to the top of her head. I'm so glad it was nothing more serious than a gastrointestinal virus, and that it didn't last more than twenty-four hours. It's been a long time since I've been that sick, and I don't care to repeat it again any time soon. "And I get to be home with you and your sister today."

"And Ms. Emma."

"Yeah," I turn to see Emma helping Alice take a waffle out of the iron, my breath catching in my throat, "and Ms. Emma."

The four of us sit around the table with our breakfasts – Emma and the girls have their waffles, bacon, and eggs, and I have eggs and toast at Emma's insistence that taking it easy means not trying to push a lot of food right away, and honestly she's right. Alice and Mackenzie catch me up on their Sunday with their grandparents and Alice excitedly informs me that Emma made sure they didn't miss their chapter of

Little Women last night.

“She read to us, she tucked us in, and...” Alice takes a large bite of waffle and exclaims around the mouthful, “she made us waffles.”

“She made sure you were okay,” Mackenzie’s voice is a whisper, eyes fixed firmly on her plate. Mackenzie is very reserved and always has been, she’s empathetic and compassionate, she loves with her whole entire heart – a lot like someone else I know – and I’ve never noticed until now that there could be some underlying anxiety that comes with that; Emma has opened my eyes to what’s been right in front of me all along. “I had fun with Grandpa and Grandma, but I’m glad we came home last night.”

When I saw Emma on the couch last night my mind started racing, thinking about what it would be like to wake up next to her someday, to hold her close in the night, to finally have someone to come home to at the end of the day – someone that doesn’t have an early bedtime, that is – but I don’t know if that’s something Emma and I can have. I don’t know where her head is yet; she said training and the scrimmage went well and seemed excited to play again, but there’s something she isn’t telling me, I can see it in her eyes.

My phone pings with a text from James: Snow’s pretty deep, I’m taking the truck out. Do you want me to dig you out? Does Emma need her driveway done?

Yes and Yes. I reply quickly. He doesn’t need to know that Emma is sitting at my kitchen table. He’ll eventually figure it out because I’m not going to let him dig my house out and leave without coffee or cocoa in payment for it.

“James is going to dig us out, and get your house too, so if you want to head home, you can.” Emma’s face falls, her hands going to her lap under the table where I’m sure she’s fiddling with the hem of her shirt, I’ve seen her do it before when she’s



trying to process how to respond to something I've said. "But, I'm not kicking you out. The roads won't be cleared for a while yet, and you're more than welcome to stay. I'd love it if you'd stay."

"I don't want to impose, Jax. I can head home and..." I can see her racking her brain for things to do once she gets home, and I'd rather have her spend the day here, "...do laundry."

"If you mean that laundry," I point to her overnight bag, still sitting inside the door where she dropped it last night, "just do it here. Stay for the day. You're not an imposition, I promise."

"If you're sure."

"Believe me, I am."

After breakfast the girls help me clear the dishes from the table, unload and reload the dishwasher while Emma uses my ensuite bathroom to shower and change into a pair of sweatpants and my Roosevelt Elementary sweatshirt that I pull out of the dresser for her before she steps inside and closes the door. The girls run off to their rooms to change out of pajamas and get dressed for the day spent inside, sheltered from the cold and snow.

I slowly assemble the blanket fort in the living room, building up the walls and spreading out plush blankets on the floor for extra cushioning. Alice brings out a few stuffed animal friends and tosses them inside, while Mackenzie sets up her own little reading nook in a far corner of the fort with all the pillows from her bed and her favorite quilt. It's been a few years since I've spent a snow day with my girls, and I'm looking forward to a quiet day at home with them. And with Emma.

The water cuts off down the hall, and after a few minutes I hear Emma's muffled

voice from behind the door, not enough to make out what she's saying – not that it's my business anyway – but enough to know that she sounds unhappy, which is confirmed when she walks down the hall with her phone pressed to her ear and a scowl on her face. "I'm not doing another MRI, Scott. I barely got through the first one."

She pauses, listening to whatever Scott has to say, clearly not happy with the response. Her hair hangs over one shoulder, damp and leaving wet patches behind on the heathered gray of my sweatshirt. The sweatpants I offered her hang loosely off of her hips and pool a bit around her ankles, but she doesn't seem to mind, and I don't mind seeing her like this.

"Why can't it be my own medical team here?" She asks, frustration coloring her voice as Scott's muffled voice responds. "I don't have a choice, do I?"

"No." I hear her agent's voice loud and clear this time. And watch Emma for a reaction. Her eyes close and her chest rises and falls in three measured, deep breaths. When she opens her eyes, she locks them with mine, and for just a second something flashes in her gaze that I can't quite name.

"Fine," she sighs. "I'll be there."

Eyes closed, Emma takes another couple of deep breaths before her shoulders slump and she sighs, clicking off the screen of her phone and holding it out to me. "Put this somewhere far away where I can't see or hear it, please."

"Gladly." I take her phone and walk past her, down the hall to my room, where I plug it in on the charger on top of my dresser. When I step back into the hall, I find her in the same place as if rooted to the floor. Wrapping my arms around her, I pull Emma close whispering, "wanna talk about it?"

“They want me there in two weeks. The powers that be are insisting that I have a physical done by the team physicians rather than my own medical team here at home. They want me to come out and do an MRI out there ‘just to be sure.’ And Sasha wants me to have some extra training and practice time in LA before she makes her decision.”

“What decision?”

“Whether or not I’m going to start the match.”

“You’re gonna go all the way out there and you don’t even know if you’re going to be a starter?” That’s frustrating for a lot of reasons.

“It’s one of the things I’ve been worried about since I was offered the contract; I don’t want to be trotted out as a season-long publicity stunt and then be benched. I’m beginning to wonder if any of this is the right thing to do.”

“Come with me.” I let go of Emma and take her hand, as we walk toward the blanket fort. “Get in.”

With a quirked brow and lopsided smile, Emma ducks into the fort and makes herself comfortable on the floor with her back against the couch near Mackenzie’s reading corner.

“Obviously we can’t keep avoiding these discussions, but it’s a snow day, and we’re hiding in the fort for the day.”

“I think I can handle that,” her smirk turns into a soft, genuine smile as I sit down beside her in the fort and pull up a streaming service on the television, setting it to a movie for the girls and covering my lap and Emma’s with a cozy blanket to share. Wrapping an arm around Emma’s shoulders, she leans into me and closes her eyes. I

know my couch isn't all that comfortable and I can't imagine she slept well last night, as evidenced by the yawn she tries to hide.

"I promised you that I would rest today, but I think you need to do the same. You've been busy since you got here last night, and before that you had a scrimmage and training. Give your mind and body a rest today."

Emma lays her head on my shoulder and stretches her long legs out beside me, pressing close to my body as she adjusts the blanket covering us. Turning my head, I press a kiss to her forehead as a blast of cold air shakes the blanket fort and my brother's voice calls from the front door.

"Happy snow day!" He stomps his feet on the doormat before closing the door behind him. "Jax, I stopped at Emma's first and it doesn't look like she's home. She didn't get stuck in New Jersey did she?"

Emma sits up with a chuckle and steals the blanket as I crawl out of the blanket fort. I'm met with a knowing smirk as he clearly saw her car in my driveway.

"She stopped by after the scrimmage yesterday and got stuck here, as a matter of fact."

My brother's smirk infuriatingly grows into a full blown grin, as he calls "hi Emma!"

"Hey James," Emma calls from inside the fort. "Thanks for doing my driveway."

"No problem," his eyes meet mine, searching and then he pivots. "I found out today that my wife has never been sledding, so I thought we'd go to the park for a bit and wondered if the girls wanted to come. We would also feed them and warm them up before returning them to you. With the added benefit of giving you and Emma some alone time today."

“If they want to, it’s fine with me.” It’s more than fine. I can’t keep them cooped up inside all day, and I’m hoping to take things slow today. Emma deserves a day to rest since her weekend was taken up by training and a scrimmage; she can try to hide it, but I see her wince every time she stretches her legs, or bends her knee. She needs a day to herself to rest and recover before going back to work and then eventually going out to LA.

The girls, predictably, are on board with their uncle’s plan and race off to grab their winter gear from the hall closet; they help each other into their snow pants and boots, adding winter coats, hats, and scarves. Once their mittens have been located, James and the girls venture out into the snow, leaving Emma and me behind.

Lowering myself to the floor, I carefully crawl back into the fort with Emma. She grins as I settle in beside her, covering us both with the blanket once more. She shifts, propping one elbow on the couch as she turns to look at me.

“Be honest,” she says. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I was hit by a truck, but at least I’m not as sick as I was yesterday. Food poisoning, while thankfully short lived, is no fun. But, I’m more concerned about you, so be honest...how are you feeling?”

“Sore. And not in a good way. Not in the day after a great workout kind of way. Sore in a...why do I think I can do this again...kind of way.” She heaves a defeated sigh, pressing her forehead to my shoulder and I wrap my arms around her, drawing her against my chest and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “I don’t know if I’m trying to prove to myself that I can still play, or if I’m trying to prove to the world – or at least the world of women’s soccer – that I can still play.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you don’t have to prove anything to anyone.” I realize I’ve said the wrong thing when she tenses up in my arms.

“I started playing soccer because I had anxiety that my dad didn’t know how to deal with. I could run around on the field and kick the ball, and crash in bed at night, completely exhausted,” her shoulders relax the tiniest bit as she tells me her story. “This was after Elizabeth left, and for the first few years I thought that if I could be the best soccer player, she’d somehow find out about it and come back to us. So I played and played and played. I would work on drills in the backyard until it was dark, I’d push myself in my games because I thought that if she could only see me now she’d see a different kid than the one that drove her away.”

It breaks my heart to think that Emma thought she had to prove herself and her worthiness of being loved. There are so many times I question Angela’s leaving and if I could have done anything to make her stay, and if there’s one thing I’m thankful for from those early days after she left, is the fact that my daughters don’t remember it. They weren’t old enough to know or understand why Angela left, unlike Emma who remembers the day Elizabeth walked out and the pain of her never returning.

“I pushed myself so hard during a game that I made myself sick – I threw up on the sideline and nearly passed out. Dad took me to urgent care and they couldn’t find anything wrong with me other than I pushed too hard. My teacher started recognizing signs of anxiety and had me talk to the school counselor. She was the one who finally figured out that my anxiety wasn’t just because of Elizabeth leaving, but because of undiagnosed ADHD. I had a lot of big emotions and didn’t know how to express them or work through them in a healthy way, and she helped me work on that. She also helped me process the trauma of Elizabeth leaving. It’s been twenty seven years since she left, and I’ve been in therapy for all but two of those years. So you’re right, thirty-three year old Emma knows that I don’t have to prove anything to anyone, but eight year old Emma sometimes needs that reminder.”

“What would eight year old Emma do if she could be on the field with no one to impress? With absolutely nothing to prove?”

“What?” Emma pulls away, brow furrowed in confusion, as she huffs out a laugh.

“I’m being perfectly serious; what would it look like if eight year old Emma had a soccer ball and a field all to herself?” She sits back against the couch, and I can see the wheels spinning in her head as she thinks about the implication of my question.

“She wouldn’t know what to do with herself,” Emma’s voice is a whisper, heavy with tears. “To be honest, neither would thirty-three year old Emma.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Then stop by first thing Saturday morning. I have an idea,” Jax says with a gleam in his eye. “But for now, let’s enjoy the blanket fort without the children.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

#### INNER CHILD

#### EMMA

O n Saturday morning, after dropping the girls off with their aunt and uncle for another day spent in the snow, Jax pulls into the parking lot at the rec center, apparently someone owes Jax a favor, because the place is ours for the day.

“Mr. Owens,” Jax hugs the man after he unlocks the doors and presses a set of keys into Jax’s hand. “Thanks for this.”

“Don’t mention it. You and Ms. Mitchell have fun,” he says, “but not too much fun.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“That’s what Elaine tells me,” he laughs. “And where are my granddaughters today?”

I snap my gaze to Jax as he sheepishly tucks his hands into his pockets, not meeting my gaze. “They’re hanging out with James and Amanda.”

“I’ll give him a call then,” Mr. Owens claps Jax on the shoulder and heads toward his car. Jax holds the door open and ushers me inside without a word. I don’t want to push, but I also want some answers. I follow Jax down the main hallway until we walk out onto an indoor soccer field where he directs me to change into my cleats while he does the same.



“When Angela cut ties with me and the girls, she did the same with her parents,” he says, tying the laces of his shoes. “Lee and Elaine – Mr. and Mrs. Owens – tried to reach out to her, tried to find out what went wrong, and she completely cut off contact. With everyone. But I wasn’t about to tell Lee and Elaine that they couldn’t see their granddaughters. It wasn’t their fault. I should have told you, and I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“I had my suspicions, but thank you for telling me.”

We finish getting ready and Jax tosses me a ball as I work through all the puzzle pieces from the last few months falling into place.

“Pick a side,” he says as we walk toward midfield.

“One-on-one?” I ask even though the answer is glaringly obvious.

“Just you and me,” he grins. “No one to impress. Nothing to prove.”

I stand at midfield, the ball on the line between us, and look from one end of the field to the other, assessing, waiting, and before Jax can stop me I kick the ball around him and race after it, streaking down the field before he can catch up with me. I fire it into the net from the penalty spot, and hear Jax call from behind me, “offside!” I laugh, and the sound of it echoes across the empty stadium, wild and free.

“Technically,” I laugh as he finally catches up to me, taking things a little slowly today, “I was onside when I got possession of the ball. It’s not my fault you can’t keep up, old man.”

“Oh, it’s on now,” he laughs as he jogs toward the net and grabs the ball, quickly putting it back in play. I chase him down the field, catching up in no time and jostling for the ball, getting my toe on it and knocking it out of his control. Running after the

ball, I feel like a kid again, running drills in the backyard or kicking the ball around with Molly. There's no pressure, no expectations, just me, the ball, the turf, and the goal.

And Jax.

He's caught up to me now, putting his body between me and the goal, and I stop to regroup, keeping my foot on the ball and a decent distance between us. If Lara were here, she'd be to my right, I'd pass to her, run a few yards, and celebrate her goal, but right now it's just me and Jax. The wall is too far away to try for a ricochet and run around him to get it back. But I could distract him.

Kicking the ball slowly in his direction, confusion evident on his face when I stop in front of him, the ball directly between our feet. Fisting his tee-shirt in my hand I pull him toward me, crashing our lips together in a kiss. One hand cups the back of my neck while the other settles on my waist, bunching the fabric of my shirt, fingers brushing my bared skin. I sink into the kiss, bracing myself with my hands on his shoulders and all thoughts of distraction are tossed out the window when his teeth nip at my bottom lip.

Jax breaks the kiss, leaving me breathless and wanting more as his lips brush the shell of my ear, "your tricks won't work on me, temptress."

I feel the ball brush by my feet and turn to watch as it rolls across the field toward Jax's goal. My feet rooted to the spot, the memory of his kiss on my lips, Jax grins as he runs past me toward the goal where he fires the ball into the back of the net, raising his fists in the air in celebration.

"Well played," I laugh, meeting him once more in midfield. "Very well played."

Jax grabs me around the waist and draws me into his arms, after brushing the loose

hair from my ponytail away from my face with gentle fingers, he presses a soft kiss to my forehead. “Have you always been a midfielder?” He asks, taking me by surprise.

“Since high school. I haven’t known any other position.”

“Anything you’ve ever wanted to do?”

“Yeah,” I nod, my smile stretching into a grin as I look down the pitch toward the goal. “Go stand on the penalty spot.”

With my toes on the goalline, I stare Jax down from twelve yards away. He spins the ball between his hands a few times, taking his time situating it on the penalty spot. He tamps down the turf around the ball as if there might be divots around the spot, and then he finally takes a few steps back from the ball, squaring up and getting ready to kick. I have a split second to react, to choose right or left, high or low, or straight down the middle. He looks unsure in his approach to the ball, taking a bit of a stutter step, but then – with darn near perfect form – he strikes the ball and sends it flying in my direction, right into the back corner of the net. I don’t even move. I’m too mesmerized by the long, toned line of his leg as he strikes the ball and follows through; distracted by the way his tee shirt clings to his body and the way his hair curls ever so slightly when damp with sweat.

“I want a do-over,” he laughs, “you didn’t even move.”

I toss the ball back to him and set back up on the goalline as he sets up once more on the penalty spot, and this time I don’t let myself get distracted by him or his body. I watch as he approaches the ball and leans slightly to his left, taking a chance that the ball will be coming to my right. I leap to the right and the ball smacks into my hands as I fall to the ground, wrapping my body around the ball to keep it from going into the goal. My hands sting like crazy but it’s worth it.

The turf is abrasive against my knees as I kneel in the goal, watching Jax walk toward me. Tears spring to my eyes as unexpected emotion wells in my throat. It's been a long time since I've felt this kind of joy on the field. This kind of freedom. Freedom from the pressure to score, the expectations of my team and coaches, of fans. Freedom from the pressure and expectations that I put on myself to push harder and play better each time. The pressure I was feeling to come back and prove I can play this game again.

Rocking back, I drop to a seated position on the turf, taking a moment to catch my breath as Jax drops down to the ground beside me and hands me a bottle of water that I greedily accept.

"How did that feel?" He asks, his eyes search mine.

"Liberating," I lie back on the turf, and Jax does the same, propping himself up on his elbow, watching me. "It reminded me of the first time I ever had a ball at my feet; I just kicked it and ran and suddenly my world didn't feel so small and confusing. It made me feel the way I did before I started putting all that pressure on myself."

"I'm glad," he nods, thoughtful. I prop myself up, scooting closer to him and mirroring his pose.

"Thank you," I whisper, closing the distance between us and pressing a soft kiss to his lips. "Thanks for helping me. And for helping eight year old Emma a little bit, too."

"Any time." His eyes stray to my lips and I lean into him, this time in a much less gentle kiss. His fingers tangle into the hair at the back of my neck, his other hand settled on my thigh as he kisses me with urgency and need. I kiss back with the same greediness, one hand at his waist and the other twining in his sweat dampened hair.

Jax breaks the kiss and presses his forehead to mine, leaving me breathless and wanting more. He gently kisses my forehead before getting to his feet and extending a hand to help me up. “One more round?”

“If it ends like the last one did? Yes please.”

Our second match ends with me collapsed on the turf beside Jax who makes plans for us to join James and Mandy for lunch. Not as satisfying an end as our last game, but I’ll take it. Jax reaches down and pulls me to my feet, helping me out of my cleats and back into street shoes and my winter coat before we brave the elements for the short drive to James and Mandy’s. The sun is shining when we exit the rec center, and the roads are slushy but not icy.

Pulling up to James and Mandy’s house, we find a family of snowmen built on the front lawn – one is draped with a flannel shirt and has a baseball cap on its head, another wears a fishing vest and a bucket hat with various lures around the brim – and what appears to be a snow fort with a stockpile of snowballs. Jax opens the door and ushers me inside the house, the interior of which is decked out in Christmas. The main floor feels like walking into a modern log cabin with exposed beams and gorgeous wood accents everywhere. The fire burning in the fireplace adds to the coziness and warmth of the house as Mandy greets us from the kitchen.

“Emma!” She gasps when she sees us, “aren’t you freezing?”

I look down at my legs, clad in nylon shorts under my winter coat. “A little, but I’ll warm up.”

“Jax, your brother and the girls are down the road at Mom and Dad’s. James left you some winter gear by the door to join the ambush. Bundle up and then tell my husband that I’ll have lunch ready in about ten minutes. I’m taking Emma upstairs to find her something a little warmer to wear.”

With a single nod Jax makes his way to the mudroom to do as he's told, and Mandy loops her arm through mine before leading me to the upper floor of the house and into the main bedroom.

"We're about the same size, I think," she digs through the shelves in her closet and comes back with a sweatshirt and leggings before shoos me into the ensuite bathroom to change.

"A perfect fit." I emerge from the bathroom and find her waiting on the end of her bed, looking like the cat who ate the canary.

"So," she tries to play it cool. And fails. "What were you two up to today?"

"We played some one-on-one soccer."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" She responds with a grin.

"There may have been some...tonsil soccer?" I immediately regret my choice of words, but the two of us dissolve into laughter as we make our way back down to the kitchen where Mandy asks about my weekend and how training went. As a former mental skills coach and current psychologist, I can see her wheels turning as I tell her about the weekend. And then I get to today.

"He took me to play soccer today. Just the two of us. There was no one else around and I felt so free, in a way that I haven't in a very long time. He had me in the goal at one point, which is something I always wanted to do as a kid and never did."

"How did that feel?" Amanda asks as she passes me a stack of plates to take to the table.

"Is it weird if I say...healing?"

“Not at all,” she turns and leans back against the counter, her smile growing thoughtful. “Is it weird if I tell you that your inner child needed a bit of healing, and it came through playing soccer?”

“What do you mean?”

“You shared a little bit on Thanksgiving about your mom, Elizabeth, leaving, and you’re not my client so I’m going to be careful here, but when she left, did you ever wonder if it was because of you?”

“I didn’t have to wonder,” I exhale a humorless laugh, “she came right out and said it.”

“That’s even worse than I imagined, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “I’ve worked through all of that in therapy, so don’t worry. But today...it was better than any conversation I’ve ever had with a therapist.”

“It sounds to me like Jax helped you tap into your inner child today, gave you an experience you never got to have back then, and it not only helped heal inner child Emma but adult Emma as well.”

“Child Emma would have loved the freedom today afforded, the ease. The lack of pressure. The pressure that I put on myself, by the way. It was never my dad or any of the people around me.”

“We humans have a bad habit of putting pressure and expectations on ourselves,” Mandy says as the door opens and Jax returns with the girls and James on his heels. “I’m glad you’ve found someone to help you shed those expectations.”

“Me too.”

Alice and Mackenzie rush to me, cheeks flushed and rosy from the cold, smiles on their faces as they greet me with hugs. I follow them to the mudroom and help them out of their boots, coats, and snowpants, and Jax isn't far behind. Once the girls are out of their snow gear, they wrap themselves in too-big flannel shirts from their uncle and head back into the dining room. Jax wraps his arms around my waist and nuzzles his nose into my neck holding me tight as I laugh and try to shove his cold body away from me.

"You're freezing !" I laugh, my hands pressing against his solid chest in an attempt to push him away.

"So help me warm up." His voice is a rough whisper as his stubble scrapes the skin of my neck. "We could get out of here. Leave the kids with James and Mandy, and..."

"As much as I'd love to do that, I think I'd like lunch first."

"That's fair," Jax laughs, pressing a cold kiss to the side of my neck. "But after..."

"No promises."

Lunch with James and Mandy is so much fun. Their house is filled with warmth and laughter, and I love the ease with which Jax interacts with his family. I almost don't want to go home at the end of the day; I don't want to go home to my quiet house without the girls. Without Jax.

Mandy and I set up a board game to play with the girls while Jax and James handle the clean-up from lunch. Alice and Mackenzie pour over the rulebook as Mandy and I sort cards and game pieces.

"So," Mandy says between shuffles of cards, "has Jax told you about the Christmas Eve party?"



“He has,” I nod, focusing on the score markers in my hand and moving them to the perimeter of the game board. “It sounds like a fun event.”

“It is. Mr. and Mrs. Owens go all out with decorations and food, and gifts for all the kids, it’s a great time. You’ve got a match the day before, right?”

“I do,” I respond, guilt nagging at the back of my mind. Guilt for not being able to give Jax an answer about the ball. Guilt for still not having decided about my future in women’s soccer. Guilt as I look at the girls sitting at the table with me, knowing that they are impacted by whatever decision I make. I tell her honestly, “I want to be here for it.”

“Are you looking forward to playing again?”

I know that I can be honest with her, I know that if anyone will understand the storm of thoughts in my head, it’s Amanda. She used to work with athletes, she’s a mental health professional, and she knows anxiety herself. Not only can I be honest with her, but I can trust her. She’s proven that in the short time that I’ve known her.

“Yes and no,” I tell her. “I’m looking forward to being on the field again in an actual game setting. But I’m not looking forward to the toll that it takes on my body. And my mental health.”

“So you’ve decided to go back?”

“No. I haven’t. I haven’t decided anything yet. I’m waiting until after the match to decide.” It’s true. I am waiting until after the match to officially make that decision, but after the last few days, I’m leaning toward this game being my last. I always told Molly that I wanted to leave on my own terms, to walk away under my own power rather than have my future decided by an injury and a medical staff. Of course, if I’m not up to par in my medical exams none of that will matter anyway. “If I can get that

far. The medical team wants to check me out first.”

“At the risk of sounding like a cliché, how are you feeling about that?”

“Not great,” I exhale a humorless laugh. “They’re insisting on an MRI and I had a panic attack during my last one.”

“Come see me before you leave,” Mandy says, dealing four piles of cards. “I have a few techniques that might help you with that.”

“I’ll do anything shy of full anesthesia to get me through it.”

“Noted.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

#### NOT GOODBYE

#### EMMA

As I drive from my house to Jax's, I run through my mental checklist again: I have everything I need for travel, I've checked into my flight, and all of my appointments are scheduled. Now all that's left is to say goodbye.

I've been dreading this since I left them the night of the snow day. I stayed and helped Jax tuck the girls into bed. I dozed in his arms on the couch, and then finally he woke me up and walked me to the door, knowing that I needed to get home. I drove home that night with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat knowing that this goodbye would be even worse. And now here we are.

In a few hours I'll drive to Boston and spend the weekend with Molly in our childhood home, and then first thing Monday morning I'm on a plane to Los Angeles. I couldn't help but think of my mother last night as I was falling asleep, the way she walked out and never looked back. My mind drifted back to that night on the balcony with Jax, hearing a similar story about Alice and Mackenzie's mom. At least when I walk away tonight, I know that I'm coming back. I know that I will come back to them and to their dad. But that doesn't make it any easier, guilt and regret still slam into my chest as I pull up to the house.

I see them silhouetted against the front window, and as I turn off my car, Jax opens the door. With slow, measured steps as if trying to hold off the inevitable, I walk up

the front steps into the house and right into his open arms. His hands rub my back as I burrow into his chest, seeking his warmth. His strength. After a few minutes he lets me go and I follow him to the kitchen where the table is set for lunch.

“I haven’t told them yet,” he whispers. “I haven’t quite figured out how.”

“That’s okay, I should be the one to tell them.”

The girls take their seats at the table and I join them as Jax finishes a few things in the kitchen. After lunch, I decide. I’ll tell them after lunch, if I do it now I might not ever be able to leave. Jax carries a bowl of salad and plate of breadsticks to the table before disappearing into the kitchen again, and returning with a steaming pan of lasagna.

“I thought I’d make your favorite,” he says with a small smile, “I’ve never made it before so we’ll see.”

“It’s Grandma Elaine’s recipe,” Alice informs me. “Mackenzie and I always help her make it, so we helped Daddy, too.”

“I can’t wait to try it.”

The lasagna is every bit as delicious as it looks, but the real star of the show are the breadsticks. They are fluffy and buttery, and so garlicky that I’m going to be tasting garlic the whole way to Boston. Biting into my third breadstick, I close my eyes and involuntarily let out a small moan, but I have no shame because this breadstick deserves it.

“Jax, these are amazing.”

“I can’t take any credit,” he shakes his head with a laugh. “My dad made those. He

refuses to share the recipe.”

“If I made anything this good I wouldn’t share the recipe either.”

“Aunt Nelope has the recipe,” Alice quips and Jax’s head snaps to hers, eyes narrowing.

“Are you sure?” He asks, suddenly very serious.

“Yep. Remember when uncle Jake asked to marry her? She was at their house and Grandpa let her look at all his recipes and copy ones she liked. She liked his breadsticks.”

“That was years ago,” Jax’s eyes are wide as he regards his daughter. “How do you possibly remember that?”

“I don’t know,” Alice tilts her head to the side, eyebrows furrowing as if trying to figure out how she remembers. Finally, she shrugs her little shoulders and takes another bite of lasagna. “I just do.”

“ADHD superpower,” I tell Jax. “It truly doesn’t make sense, because most of the time our long term memory is a mess, but some of us have a habit of remembering weird little details of events from years ago. Long term memory storage for us isn’t neat and orderly, and you never know when you’re going to stumble on a memory or what might trigger it.”

“The breadsticks,” Jax laughs.

“The breadsticks.”

“Goodness, I’m gonna miss you,” he says, eyes meeting mine. “You’ve helped me

understand Alice in ways I never did before.”

Two pairs of eyes are watching us now and suddenly the room feels much smaller, the time on the clock seeming to tick faster than before. It’s time. I can’t keep avoiding the inevitable.

“What do you mean you’re going to miss her?” Mackenzie asks, a harshness in her voice that I’ve never heard before, and as she trains her tear rimmed eyes on me, my heart breaks. “Are you leaving?”

“Only for a little while,” I choke back the emotion in my voice. “I’m going out to California to play in a soccer game. After that I have a few meetings that I have to go to, and then I’ll be home in the new year.”

“You promise you’re going to come back?” Alice says, her voice breaking as tears spill down her cheeks, and suddenly I am six years old again.

“You promise you’re going to come back?” The memory comes back to me as clear as it’s ever been. Dad was going away for a weekend teachers conference, leaving Molly and me with his parents. Grandpa and Grandma’s house always smelled like coffee and freshly baked cookies, even if the coffee was long gone and the oven was cold.

“Sweetheart,” Dad puts his hands on my cheeks, his eyes looking right into mine. “I promise I’m going to come back.”

Dad wraps his arms around me and Molly, holding us tight against his chest, and pressings kisses to the tops of our heads. “Be good for Grandma and Grandpa.”

Be good.

I was a nervous wreck that whole weekend thinking that if I wasn't good for them, they'd leave or Dad wouldn't come back. Looking back on it with the benefit of hindsight, I realize how wrong I was, but my six year old brain didn't know that. I barely slept that weekend. I was careful not to make messes or leave anything out of place. I wasn't just going to be good for my grandparents, I was going to be the best, because then Dad wouldn't have a reason not to come back.

"I love you both, so much," tears well in my own eyes as the girls stare back at me, before adding: "And your dad, too."

Jax drapes his arm across the back of my chair, scooting closer to me at the table, and his proximity gives me the boost I need to tell them everything.

"You know I used to play soccer? I got hurt, and haven't played professionally since. I'm better now – mostly, anyway. I still have a doctor's appointment to get through – and they want me to play again. So that's where I'm going. I'm going to go out to Los Angeles and on the day before Christmas Eve I'm going to play with my old team, and then I'm going to come home a few days later."

"Will we be able to watch you play?" Mackenzie asks.

"Yes. I'll send your dad the information for where to watch the game."

"Good. And then you'll come see us once you come home."

"If it's okay with your dad, of course I will."

"Girls," Jax clears his throat, his voice thick with emotion. "Will you give us a minute?"

Mackenzie and Alice head down the hall and Jax waits until the bedroom door clicks

shut before turning his chair and facing me head on.

“Emma, I love you, and I am so proud of you for going back to your old team and playing again. But...”

Oh. No.

No. I don't like this.

My pulse kicks up, and my body's flight response kicks in. I want to avoid this talk, but I know that I can't.

“...But, I can't wait forever, Emma. I – we – need stability.”

“And you deserve it, Jax. I'm not asking for forever...at least not yet. I'm asking you to wait for me for a few weeks. Tops. When I come home, I'll have made my decision.”

“And you still don't know what that is?”

“I'm waiting until after the match. I'm not going to say yes to anything long term until after I've been out there on the pitch in a game setting.”

“That's understandable.” Jax runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “I'm sorry. We've known this day was coming, I just didn't think it would be quite this hard.”

“This isn't...a break-up, right? That's not what we're saying?”

“No,” he looks startled that I'd even suggest it. “It's not. I'm just trying to wrap my head around what the plan is. I'm a planner, I don't know if you know that about me.”



His smile calms my nerves the tiniest bit.

“I did, in fact, know that. And I don’t know if you know this, but I’m not. And not for lack of trying. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve determined to be better about planning ahead, and keeping a schedule, and then giving up a few months, sometimes weeks, into doing it. I can’t stick to a habit to save my life, it’s why I have timers and alarms and reminders on my phone for things like medication and meals.”

I can feel myself getting worked up, feel the anxiety that always creeps in when I feel the need to explain or justify myself. Defend myself and the chaos in my brain. When my mask slips and I finally allow someone I trust to see all the messiest parts of me.

“More often than not, I leave my phone in the fridge, or load the peanut butter jar in the dishwasher and stick the knife in the pantry.” The number of times I’ve done that is a non-zero number. I’m sure he thinks I’m joking, but I’m not, and I’m really glad that peanut butter is shelf stable for all the times it’s spent a day in the dishwasher when I’ve left for work after breakfast. “Jax, I’ve tried...”

“I’m not asking you to change,” he stops me with a gentle hand on my arm. “I would never ask you to change who you are, Emma. I love you. I love you exactly as you are. I love your alarms and reminders and the sticky notes on every flat surface of your house. I love you. Every single part of you.”

“Why do I sense a but?”

“Not a but ,” he says, “an and . I love you and I love my daughters. I love you and I know that I need to give them some kind of stability, some kind of assurance.”

“Is it not enough for me to say I’m coming home?” I interrupt him, irritation replacing my anxiety. “I’m not saying that there won’t be a decision Jax, just that there are conversations that have to happen first. ”

“Yeah,” he blows out a frustrated breath. “No, I know. We’re getting off the rails here. I don’t want to leave things like this.”

“I don’t either.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

I laugh despite myself as Jax realizes what he’s just said. Soon his laughter joins mine and a light mood returns to the room.

“The plan is that I spend the weekend with my sister before flying out to LA. I have an appointment with the team’s medical staff in a few days, training, and then the match in two weeks. After the match, I have a meeting with my agent, the team, and a combined meeting with the two, and then I’m on a flight home as soon as possible.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Jax smiles. “I don’t like the thought of you leaving, but I guess I don’t have much choice.”

“Jax,” I whisper, casting a glance at the clock, knowing if I don’t hit the road now, I’ll be fighting traffic into the evening. “I have to go soon.”

Jax calls the girls back into the room and I give them hugs and reassurances that I’ll be back soon. Promising that we’ll talk while I’m gone and insisting that they not worry about me. Mackenzie is excited about the match and the idea of watching me on television, and Alice is worried about whether or not there will be a sub in the library when they get back from Christmas break. Considering I started as a sub for the librarian, I’m sure there will be, but certainly not for the long term, because I intend to be back at my desk in January.

Jax walks me to the door, his hand at the small of my back, warm and steady, and I’m this close to asking him to build the blanket fort and letting me hide out for the

next few weeks rather than going to Los Angeles. What I wouldn't give for a holiday season here with him and the girls. Pajamas and cocoa and a Christmas cookie contest to settle our debate once and for all. I want to sing carols with him and sit on the couch in a room lit only by Christmas lights long after the girls have gone to bed and know that when I wake up in the morning, he'll be beside me.

"Emma," Jax steps closer to me, one hand cupping the back of my neck as he dips his head and meets my lips in a soft, tender kiss. His free hand strays to my waist and I wrap my own arms around him, pressing myself to his chest, greedy for his warmth. He breaks the kiss, pressing his forehead to mine as his eyes slide closed. "You said you're not asking for forever. Not yet...is forever something you want?"

"Yes." I breathe the word with no hesitation. "Yes. That's why I need you to wait for me."

"I'll be here. We all will be."

"I love you." I crash my lips to his before pulling myself away and forcing myself out the front door and down the walkway to my car, doing my best not to look back at the house. I drive in silence until I'm out of Saratoga and on the freeway heading east before streaming music through my phone. Once it's plugged in, the music starts and guilt and regret slam into my chest as the playlist Jax shared with me picks up. It's a playlist he created with Alice and Mackenzie's favorite music and I've often found myself listening to it when I'm home alone and trying to clean or get work done. I wasn't expecting it tonight, and I certainly wasn't expecting the tug of emotion that accompanies it. I'm glad I was able to talk to the girls, but it doesn't make this any easier.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

#### CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

##### EMMA

After three hours on the road, I pull up in front of my childhood home and climb out of the car on weary legs, barely stifling a yawn. I'm tired and hungry after hours on the road and only stopping for necessities. The front door of the house opens with a clang and I look up to find my little sister grinning at me from the front steps.

“‘Bout time you got here!” She calls, running down the steps and throwing her arms around me. “I’ve got dinner in the oven, if you’re hungry.”

“I’m starving.” With our arms around each other’s shoulders we walk up the steps and into the house, as warm and cozy as ever.

“Get settled in, there’s still time until dinner is ready.”

Taking my bags down the hall, I find the door to my old room and open it gently. It’s still a bedroom, but it’s grown into a guest room from a little girl’s room. Where once there was a set of bunk beds is now a queen sized bed with a simple blue bedspread and matching pillow shams, a far cry from the tie dye and floral bedspreads Molly and I had growing up. My soccer posters and Molly’s baseball posters have been replaced with art prints, our nightlight replaced with table lamps on either nightstand.

“I thought...” Molly’s soft voice comes from the open bedroom door, “...if you were

at all interested, maybe we could put up the tree together?”

“And do a movie?” I ask with a hopeful smile.

“I’ve already got Mom’s sugar cookie dough chilling in the fridge, too. I was thinking we could mash all of Christmas into the next two days so that we can have Christmas together.”

“I love that idea,” I close the distance between me and my sister and hug her tight, her arms. “Three bits of sticky tape?” I ask, quoting our favorite Christmas movie.

“As if we’d watch anything else.”

Molly takes dinner, a pan of her homemade enchiladas, out of the oven, and I take the sugar cookie dough out of the fridge to come to room temperature while we eat. Molly sets places for us at the coffee table in the living room where we eat stretched out on the floor, making quick work of the meal and laughing at bits of the movie before getting to work on our abbreviated Christmas. I’m on sugar cookie duty while Molly sets up the tree in front of the bay window in the living room.

I roll out the dough and cut it into shapes with Mom’s old cookie cutters, carefully lining the tray with stars and bells and sugar cookie people, snapping a picture to send to Jax. After the cookies have been in the oven for a few minutes the sweet, familiar smell of butter and sugar fills the house and with it comes the memories of every Christmas spent in this house.

“Hey,” Molly comes into the kitchen with her hands behind her back and a mischievous gleam in her eye. “I got you these.”

She tosses a bundle of fabric at me and I reach out to catch it, feeling the soft flannel and waffle knit under my fingers. “You better have a matching set.”

“You know I do,” She grins.

Molly and I change into our matching Christmas pajamas of plaid flannel pants and green waffle knit shirts, slip our feet into matching reindeer slippers, and I mix up a batch of Ben’s homemade hot chocolate to enjoy with our cookies, fresh from the oven. We decorate the tree in our pjs and start another of our favorite Christmas movies as the night drifts on.

As the clock ticks toward midnight, Molly and I find ourselves on the couch, covered in a blanket and singing along with Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye at the top of our lungs. The only thing missing is Dad’s crooning voice trying to fit in with our nonsense and Mom doing her best to harmonize with us. As kids, Molly and I tried to learn the choreography to go along with the movie, but neither of us wanted to be the male leads, so the only parts we learned were those of the sisters, but we made it work.

A faint ringing from the dining table grabs Molly’s attention and I pause the movie so she can grab her tablet, and when she returns, Mom and Dad’s faces fill the small screen, and they appear to be wearing the same pajamas that Molly and I are.

“Merry Early Christmas!” Mom calls, as a bleary-eyed Dad waves. They’ve made it to Vienna where they’ll be spending Christmas. It’s a six hour time difference, so just after midnight for me and Molly is just after six AM for Mom and Dad, and Dad is decidedly not a morning person. “How’s it going, girls?”

“We’re two movies in,” Molly says.

“And we’ve made your sugar cookies,” I hold up an unfrosted star and Mom grins.

“The tree is up,” we turn the tablet so they can see the lights on the tree and the paused movie on the screen. “And we’ve got cocoa and Christmas pjs!”

“And Emma,” Dad’s brows pinch together in a look of concern that I’m all too familiar with. “How are you feeling? Are you ready for your trip?”

Those are two very different questions, and the answers are pretty mutually exclusive from each other. How am I feeling? Incredibly nervous. Second guessing myself at every turn. Wondering why I ever agreed to do this in the first place.

Am I ready for my trip? Of course I am. At least from a logistical perspective. I’m packed. I have flights reserved, appointments waiting for me when I get to LA, and a hotel room that I’ll be living out of for the next two weeks. But I don’t tell Dad any of this because I don’t need him worrying about me any more than he already is.

“I’m great, Dad. All set to go and ready to get back on the field.” I’m not sure that I’ve done a good job of convincing my dad, as his brows draw together even further, lips turning into a frown as he regards me through the screen. Mom and Molly both watch me with questioning faces as well and I do my best to change the subject. “How was the cruise?”

This takes their mind off of me long enough to tell us all about their river cruise and the excursions that they were a part of all throughout western Europe. Dad raves about the historical sites while Mom tells us all about the food and some of the things she wants to try to make once they get home. They’ll spend the next few weeks in Austria before flying home on the day after Christmas.

As the conversation continues, a notification drops down from the top of Molly’s tablet screen, it lingers on the screen just long enough for me to see the American Sports Network logo and my name in the headline. Not wanting to be rude to my parents, I refrain from pulling out my phone to search for whatever article this could be.

“...we want to meet him once we get home,” Mom’s voice cuts through the anxious

tension that fogs my brain. She and Dad are both watching me expectantly.

“Sorry,” I shake it off as best I can. “What are we talking about?”

“Jax,” Molly grins.

“We want to meet him,” Mom reiterates. “The girls too, if he’s up for it.”

“I’m sure it would be fine. I want him to meet the two of you, too.”

“You’ll love their family,” Molly offers me an out, thankfully. I can’t stop thinking about whatever that notification was. Blessedly, Molly wraps up the conversation and once we’re off the call, I swipe into her notifications and click through to the article.

Pending a physical, Emma Mitchell’s team says she is prepared to sign a contract with Chicago once again...

“How did they get this?” My hands shake with barely contained anger and anxiety as my eyes continue to scan the small tablet screen. “I haven’t agreed to anything yet.”

“Call Scott,” Molly offers. “Take some breaths, call Scott, see if he knows anything about this.”

“Right. Yes. Okay.” I stand up, shaking out my arms and hands as I do, focusing on my breathing and not the nagging anxiety at the forefront of my brain. I want to believe that Scott has nothing to do with this story getting out, but it’s the part about “Emma Mitchell’s team” that has me worried. I don’t have a team anymore. I used to. I used to have a publicist and an agent and personal assistant that I could never fully get used to having but after my injury we mutually parted ways, the only person who I kept on the “team” is Scott.



The phone rings and I'm sent right to voicemail.

"Scott, it's Emma. I need you to call me as soon as you can."

Short. Sweet. To the point. I'm sure he'll know the reason for my call without me having to spell it out for him, but I worry that he'll be using the next few days before our meeting to formulate a story and somehow spin this to try and convince me that he's not responsible for it. After clicking my phone off from Scott's voicemail, a non-stop stream of notifications sets in. Emails. Texts. Calls. Molly looks at the phone in my hand and what I'm sure is a panicked look on my face, and takes my phone down the hall, into Mom and Dad's room.

"Get some sleep," she wraps her arms around me in a tight, comforting hug. "We'll sort things out in the morning."

Sleep eludes me as I toss and turn in bed, my mind racing into the early morning hours until finally I shut my eyes and manage to keep them closed. When I wake up in the morning, bone deep exhaustion weighing my body down but the smell of fresh coffee lures me out to the kitchen where Molly is perched at the dining room table, hair on top of her head in a messy bun, glasses perched on her nose, and a scowl on her face.

"It was Scott," she says, removing her glasses and rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. "My contact at American Sports Network wouldn't give up their source, but I know it was him. It had to be."

"Yeah," I pour myself a mug of coffee and take a sip, scalding my mouth in the process but I don't care. "I figured that out last night."

"I looked up flights, you can move yours up and fly out this afternoon if you want to. There's just a small rebooking fee."

“No. I’m not letting this spoil our Christmas together.”

“You can’t let him get away with this, Ems.”

“I’m not going to, Molly. Don’t worry.”

“Fine,” she huffs, shutting her laptop with a loud snap. My sister is feisty, and I know if it were up to her she’d be the one getting on the plane this afternoon and heading to LA to deal with this herself. She grumbles something about journalistic integrity as she gathers her stuff and heads back down the hall, calling over her shoulder, “you really should take me with you, Ems!”

Yeah. That’s not happening.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

“I THINK I’VE SEEN THIS FILM BEFORE...”

JAX

The girls are with their grandparents and I’m running.

Rain stings like freezing needles against my skin, cold air burns my lungs with each inhale, and all I can think about is my feet on the pavement and not that notification I woke up to that says Emma’s decision has been made. She tried calling this morning, doing damage control I’m sure, but I don’t want to hear it. The girls are on Christmas break and I’m on call today, so we’re spending the day with the family and I’m ignoring this. But the words of that short article are seared into my mind.

Sources inside the Mitchell and Chicago Soccer camps say that pending a physical examination – set to happen within the next few days – former star midfielder Emma Mitchell will make her return to professional soccer.

Thirty-four words.

Thirty-four words that managed to rip out my heart and stomp on it.

Thirty-four words that somehow hurt worse than Angela’s scribbled note all those years ago.

So I’m running. Just like I did that day. Running so that I don’t have to think about it.

About her. But I can't stop thinking about her. I can't stop thinking about her soft smiles first thing in the morning, or the braid that hangs down her back when she coaches or plays soccer. I can't stop thinking about that night I was on call and we fell asleep together on the couch or our first date and the way she lights up when she talks about something she's interested in.

I can't stop thinking about the alarms and timers on her phone or the notes all over her house or the way that she is able to be her authentic and true self around me and my family. I stop running, and realize that without thinking about it, I've run right to her house.

"First of all," my running partner falls into the wet grass in Emma's front yard, breaths puffing up as he pants, "you're an idiot if you believe that story. Second, why can't you run on a treadmill?"

"You're telling me not to believe a story that came from your network?" I ask incredulously as I stare down at my brother, choosing to ignore his treadmill comment.

"I'm telling you to have a little faith in Emma." Jake sits up and pins me with a hard glare. "I'm telling you that unless you hear it right from Emma's mouth, don't believe it. So extract your head from whatever dark hole you've shoved it up and answer your phone the next time she calls."

"I don't have my head up my – "

"Yes. You do." Jake stands up and stretches out his hamstrings for a minute before turning around and heading back down the road toward Mom and Dad's, calling over his shoulder as he runs away, "and I'm getting you a treadmill for Christmas."

My gaze wanders over Emma's house, and I can't help but picture it decorated for

Christmas, seeing her bustling around inside baking cookies and singing along to Christmas music and my heart squeezes with guilt for not answering when she called earlier and a pang of longing just to be close to her again. Now that I've had my little cry, I pull myself up, dust myself off, and keep going. I run back to Mom and Dad's with the rain pelting my back, shedding as many soggy layers as is decent on their front porch before running up the stairs for a warm shower.

Once I'm warm and dry, I get a cold reception from my family upon returning to the kitchen. My cell phone buzzes against the countertop and my siblings seem to be silently communicating without me. Mackenzie and Alice, thankfully, are occupied in the living room with the dog and aren't paying any attention to the tension in the room.

"You need to talk to her," James nails me with a glare that rivals our mom's sternest gaze. "Stop ignoring her and answer that phone."

"When you talk to her, let her know that I've spoken with Molly and my contacts at the network, and they will be posting a retraction to their story," Penelope is the only one in the room not glaring daggers at me, and I appreciate her for that. "But in order to do that, you need to stop ignoring her."

"If everyone could calm down and give me a second to answer my phone, then you'd know that I was going to try to talk to her before you all cornered me. So, if you'll please excuse me." Grabbing my phone from the counter, I make my way downstairs to the basement living room where I can have some amount of privacy, but also a bit of space and comfort. After a couple of deep breaths, I unlock my phone and pull up Emma's contact card, but just as I do, the phone rings again.

"Hello?"

"Jax it's Emma, please don't hang up," her words come out in a rush before she

pauses to take a breath. “Listen, I’m sure you don’t want to talk to me but I need you to give me a chance. I need you to know that every word of that story is wrong. Scott released it without my knowledge. I’m not going back. I’m playing in the friendly and then I’m done. I’m done with soccer. Professional soccer. I’ll be talking to Lucy about coaching next season but that’s not the point. Jax, the point is, I need you to know that I didn’t leave you and the girls and run off to play soccer without telling you, I would never do that to you. Or to them. Or frankly, to myself because I’ve been there, and it sucks, and Jax, I love you and I understand if you don’t believe me, but I’m asking you to please just....give me a chance.”

The emotion in her voice tugs at my heart, and I know, in that moment, that there’s nothing but truth in her words. I hate that I ever doubted or thought the worst of her.

“Emma, honey,” she exhales sharply, as if surprised to hear my voice. “I’m the one who should be sorry. I shouldn’t have ignored your calls, and you shouldn’t feel like you have to explain yourself. I love you more than I can put into words, and I’m sorry that I believed that story for even a minute. But enough about that. How are you doing?”

“Better now,” she sniffs. “ So much better now. I was so afraid that this would...that this would ruin everything.”

“No, sweetheart, it hasn’t ruined anything. I hate that you thought that it would, and that’s on me.”

“How’s LA?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs. “I’m still waiting to board my flight.”

“When do you meet with your agent?”

“I have my physical tomorrow with the team doctors, and after that I’m taking the rest of the day for myself. Wednesday morning I meet with Scott, and more than likely that will be our last meeting. Ever.”

“Good, I’m glad you’re handling that,” my anger toward Emma’s agent, the American Sports Network, and anyone else involved in this story being released without her input is barely contained. “I wish I could be there with you.”

“Okay, down boy,” she laughs. “Molly wanted to come out here with me, too. I can handle this. Don’t worry about me.”

“I do worry, but I know you can handle yourself.” It’s true, I know that Emma can handle herself. I’ve seen her stand up to Elaine Owens, and if she can do that, then I’m sure she’ll have no difficulty confronting her agent. “I just wish you didn’t have to do it all on your own, you know?”

She’s quiet for a minute, silence hanging heavy and thick between us. I want to reach through the phone and wrap her up in my arms, get her out of LA and away from all the pressure and anxiety that she’s feeling.

“I forgot to tell you, Alice had her first therapy session.” I try my best to keep it casual. “She loved it. She learned all about the way her brain works and how to help herself when she’s overwhelmed or anxious, but I think she had more fun teaching those things to me and Mackenzie.”

“That’s great, Jax. We’ve talked about this, but I was around the same age when I started therapy and it really does make a huge difference.”

“It sure does. For instance, just this morning, she taught Mackenzie and me all about being mindful of our bodies and our breathing. Something that might be helpful, say, during an MRI?”

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“You can also ask for earplugs. There’s no shame in that. And then just breathe; as deep as you can without a lot of movement. You’re going to do great.”

“Tell the girls hello for me.”

“I will. They’re excited about the match coming up. We can’t wait to watch you. Oh! I’m supposed to tell you, apparently Penelope chewed out somebody at the network. They are pulling the story, printing a retraction, and someone is going to reach out to you directly to apologize. They won’t go through Scott.”

“Tell Penelope thank you for me. Molly was ready to do the same thing this morning.”

“Those two would be quite the formidable pair, wouldn’t they?”

“They sure would.” She’s thoughtful for a moment. Quiet. “I love you, Jax. Thanks for having faith in me.”

“Always, Em.”

Tucking my phone into my pocket, I sink deeper into the couch and take a minute to collect my thoughts, eyes closed and enjoying the quiet before rejoining my family. Quiet footsteps come down the stairs, and someone sits down beside me on the couch, an arm around my shoulder. I know without even opening my eyes, it’s Jenna.

It’s always Jenna.

“How is she?” She asks.



“Frustrated. Anxious about the appointment tomorrow. Angry at her agent, for good reason.”

“And you?”

“Trying to convince myself not to get on a plane and go to LA.”

“You’re so much like Marcus,” Jenna laughs. “He’s a fixer too, and I have to remind him that there are things he can’t fix; things he has to let me do on my own, so I’ll tell you the same thing. Let her do this on her own. She doesn’t need you out there fighting her battles.”

“I don’t want to fight her battles, Jay. I want to be there at the end of the day when she comes home and takes her armor off.”

Jenna presses a kiss to my cheek and pats me on the arm, a smile on her face. “You’re a good one, Brother. But don’t go to LA.”

Jenna hops off the couch and heads back upstairs and I follow close behind, sending the girls off with their aunts – and my credit card – for their shopping trip for dresses for the Christmas Eve ball. Another reason I’m not going to LA. The girls are so excited about the Christmas Eve ball, and I’m excited to take them. Mandy, Jenna, and Penelope have been looking forward to this day for weeks, and I’m looking forward to spending a day with my brothers and getting a bit of Christmas shopping done.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

#### SURPRISES

##### EMMA

The exam room hasn't changed since the last time I was here, it's still cold and sterile. Stark and intimidating. The buzz of the fluorescent lights and whirl of the machines around the room threaten to overstimulate my senses, but I remember the breathing technique that Amanda taught me just before I left; it helps me to recenter myself and calm my mind for what's to come.

The team insisted on a full physical before signing off on me playing in the match, including an MRI to ensure that my ACL and MCL are healed. My physical is done, now all that's left is the MRI. I'm waiting to be taken to the machine and can feel myself starting to panic, even with Amanda's breathing exercises. It's not long before I'm taken to the room and asked to get on the table.

"If it's not too much trouble," I ask the nurse before she helps me into the machine, "could I get some earplugs?"

"Of course," she steps out of the room and comes back in with a set of moldable foam earplugs that cancel out most of the room noise, and once I have them situated, she helps me onto the table. When I'm moved into the machine, I focus on my breathing, closing my eyes and picturing a day spent in the blanket fort with the girls, remembering the fun that we had on the snow day. Before I know it I'm moved back out of the machine and a gentle hand on my shoulder startles me. Sitting up, I remove

the earplugs and the nurse tells me that results will be sent to the team and I'll meet with them in the next day or so.

I'm free to go once I've changed back into my clothes. After getting through the MRI I feel like I can take on the world, so I place a quick call after stepping out into the California sunshine.

"Scott Sanford's office, how may I help you?"

"David," Scott's assistant answers the phone, "This is Emma Mitchell, does Scott have a minute to talk?"

"He's...uh..." David hesitates, a hint of nervousness in his voice. "He's got a pretty packed schedule today. I can...take a message?"

"Not a problem, David," I inject my voice with all the people-pleasing sweetness I can muster. "I don't want to bother him."

But that's exactly what I'm going to do.

I hop in my rental and punch the address to Scott's office into the map on my phone. With windows rolled down and my Game Day playlist blasting through the speakers and pumping me up in a way that only this music can. Deep breaths. A reminder of the panic I felt when I talked to Jax. And a reminder of the front door slamming shut behind my mother the day she left is the mood I take with me as I open the door to Scott's building and punch the up button on the elevator.

The elevator moves at a glacial pace as it carries me up to the top floor of the building, my sights on the corner office and the man sitting inside, his eyes wide when he sees me.

“Emma,” Scott stands up and comes out into the reception area as David scurries off down the hall. “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“Don’t talk to me about surprises, Scott. Not today.”

“Now Emma, don’t make a scene…”

Don’t make a scene.

Be on your best behavior.

Don’t ask for what you want or else you’ll be called a diva in the press.

Be quiet. Be kind. Be nice. Be the good little soccer player who doesn’t stand up for herself.

“Scott, you’re fired.” His jaw drops and it’s almost comical the way he sputters and searches for a response. “You’ve taken advantage of me one too many times, and starting a rumor in the press is the final straw. I’m done – with you, and the game. When my ninety minutes are up and the whistle blows at the end of the game, I’m done. I will talk to the press and I’ll do it without you. I will meet with the team tomorrow to go over my physical without you.”

“I made you,” he sneers. “You wouldn’t have a career if not for me.”

“That’s not true,” I shake my head and try to contain the laugh that bubbles up inside me. “You don’t get to take credit for the things I’ve been doing on the pitch since I was a kid. You don’t get to take credit for making me anything. You have no power over me anymore, Scott. And if I get word that you’re doing this to any of the other women on your client list, I’m going to the media myself.”

“No one will take you seriously.”

With Jake, Penelope, and Molly in my corner, I’m not worried. Sure, they cover baseball, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have connections.

“It was nice working with you, Scott. It’s a shame you had to go and ruin it like this. David,” I seek out Scott’s assistant, “Scott is no longer needed at any of our meetings this week. Go ahead and cancel them, and while you’re at it, cancel his ticket for the match.”

David’s eyes go shifty as he looks to Scott who gives him a terse nod before turning and stepping back into his office, slamming the door behind him. Good riddance.

“Have a nice day, David.”

Alone on the elevator my breath leaves my body in a rush, my hands shake, arms vibrating with tension as I realize what I’ve just done, and a laugh bubbles out of me as an odd sense of calm washes over me.

I did it.

I call my sister.

“Molly, I just left Scott’s office.”

“What?” There’s a twinge of anger in her voice. “You weren’t supposed to meet until tomorrow. What did he do?”

“He didn’t do anything,” I grin. “I fired him.”

“Sorry, what? I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“You heard me just fine, Molls. I walked in a day early and I fired him.”

“What will you do if he goes to the media and paints you as the villain?”

“I have some friends who work for the American Sports Network, and a contact in the Detroit News sports department.”

“Darn right you do,” I can hear the grin in my sister’s voice. “I’m proud of you, Ems. I wish I could be there to see you play. I’m always cheering you on.”

“I know. Thanks Molly, I love you.”

“I love you, Ems.”

I settle onto the bed in my hotel room with food I had delivered, a movie streaming on my television, and a video call with Jax on my laptop; we’re watching a movie together while he unwinds after putting the girls to bed. At the start of our call, I recounted my surprise visit to Scott’s office, while Jax beamed with pride over every word. I wish more than anything that I was sitting on the couch beside him rather than separated by three time zones, but I remind myself that this is temporary.

“I’m glad we were able to have this date night,” Jax stifles a yawn as our movie wraps up, a quick glance at the clock tells me that it’s gotten later than I realized.

“Me too. It’s getting awfully late for you, I don’t want to keep you up.”

“Any other time I’d be happy to have you keep me up,” Jax’s lopsided smile sets my insides to fluttering, and I resist the urge to kiss my screen. “Rain check?”

“Sounds good to me. Get some rest, Jax. I love you.”

“I love you, Emma.”

After hanging up with Jax, I clean up from dinner and take a long hot shower, giving myself a chance to finally process everything that happened today, starting with the appointment and the visit to my former-agent’s office. All of the pent up emotion evaporates under the steam and pressure of the shower and by the time the water runs cold, I’m physically and emotionally spent, and not at all ready for the surprise of exiting the hotel bathroom to find Lara Estep unpacking her suitcase into the dresser under the television.

“Lara!” I yelp, clutching my towel to my chest. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been assigned to your room, babe,” she waves a key in my direction. “The team has us rooming together. Didn’t anyone tell you?”

“Nope, they sure didn’t.” My heart rate finally gets back to somewhat normal as I cross to the suitcase I haven’t bothered to unpack and throw on some pajamas. A little yellow puff ball falls out of my suitcase and Lara picks it up, turning it over in her hands. I didn’t pack that and I’m not sure how it got into my suitcase...

“What’s this?” Lara asks, continuing to turn the yellow fluff in her hands.

“He’s Walter.” Tears prick my eyes at the sight of Alice’s fluffy creation.

“What on earth is Walter?” Lara asks, laughter dancing in her eyes.

Walter is a reminder of the life I left behind in New York. A reminder of the kids – and their dad – who changed my life. Walter is a reminder of what I never thought I could have but somehow managed to find. A reminder of the life that I can’t wait to get back to.

“He’s um...” Alice’s voice rings in my head, telling me all of Walter’s attributes and skill, his origin story and why he’s so fluffy and all my brain can come up with, as I whisper through impending tears is, “He’s a bug.”

Lara tosses Walter to me and after I catch him, I nestle him carefully into my suitcase so that he doesn’t get left behind. I’m still wondering how he got into my suitcase in the first place as I crawl into bed and pull the covers up to my chin.

“Just like old times,” Lara grins, sitting on the edge of her bed and taking off her glasses. “Ready for one last ride?”

“One last ride.”

“I heard what you did today,” Lara’s voice is a whisper in the darkness of our hotel room. “I think there might be a few others that follow your lead.”

“Seriously?” I don’t even bother with a whisper as I click on the bedside lamp and sit up in bed, staring wide-eyed at a bleary, squinty-eyed Lara.

“Yes, seriously. Now turn that light off,” Lara groans and throws her arm over her eyes. “I ditched Scott years ago, but some of the younger girls have stuck with him, and last I heard Lorena is leading a crusade to ‘stand in solidarity with Grandma.’”

“Those better be your words and not hers,” I laugh.

“They are,” Lara chuckles.

“Good.” I reach behind me and grab a pillow that I’m not using, and fling it across the room to Lara’s bed. The soft, muffled oof that answers tells me that I connected with my target. “If anyone is going to step up and be a leader, it’ll be Lorena.”



“She’s young.”

“So were we, once. She’s got a good head on her shoulders, though. I can see her leading this team, and the National Team someday.”

“Just like you did.”

Just like I did.

There’s no greater honor than wearing that captain’s armband. And now I have to fight to wear it one last time.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

#### ONE LAST TIME

##### JAX

“ W e’re gonna miss kick-off,” Mackenzie vibrates with nervous energy as I scroll through the menu of streaming services to find the one that is carrying tonight’s game.

“Mackenzie,” I calmly click into the streaming service before turning to my daughter, “we’re an hour away from kick-off, I promise you we’re not going to miss it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.” I leave the menu on screen knowing that it’s going to eventually time out, but also knowing that Mackenzie is finding some comfort in knowing that we won’t miss kick-off. Alice has been in and out of the room most of the afternoon as she cleans her room and reorganizes her space. When she gets a burst of energy to start cleaning, it’s best to stay out of her way and let her do the thing, but she’s just stopped in front of the Christmas tree, hands on her hips and head tilted in contemplation.

“Dad? Were these boxes always here?”

“Nope,” I grin. I slipped those under the tree this morning before they woke up. “I think you and your sister need to check those out.”

Mackenzie and Alice eagerly grab the boxes from under the tree and sit on the floor with them.

“From Emma?” Alice reads the tag and turns to me with wide eyes before ripping into the wrapping paper. Mackenzie is a little more methodical with her unwrapping, but soon they’re both lifting the lids off of identical boxes.

Emma brought these gifts with her on the day she left, and insisted that I give them to the girls on game day. I don't even know what's inside, but I'm not prepared for the girls to lift matching US Soccer jerseys out of their boxes. Alice holds hers up and turns it around to reveal A. Hutchinson and the number 3, Emma's number, emblazoned on the back. Mackenzie's has the same number, but with M. Hutchinson across the top. They immediately throw the kits over top of their tee shirts, and have me snap a picture to send to Emma.

Just a few seconds after the message shows it's been delivered, my phone rings with an incoming video call and my heart lurches with anticipation as I fumble to swipe and answer her call.

“I can't talk long,” she says, and I take note of the locker behind her, her own kit hanging there, “But I wanted to see my girls.”

My girls, she said.

Her girls.

Our girls? I don't want to let myself think about it, not yet. But I hope, someday, for that to be the case.

Passing the phone to Mackenzie, I take on the role of silent observer as both girls position themselves in the frame so Emma can see them. She wishes them a Merry

Christmas and reminds them that she'll be home soon. It's hard to miss the light in my daughters' eyes as they talk to Emma, their joy radiating in the room. They thank her for their jerseys before passing the phone back to me, and I walk down the hall for a little bit of privacy.

"You just made their day."

"Seeing you three made my day." Emma's smile has faded a bit, shadows under her eyes betraying the cheerful mask she wore just a few minutes ago, brows pinched together in a wince. "I'm looking forward to the final whistle."

"I'm looking forward to watching you play," this elicits a smile, a real smile that reaches her eyes. "And having you here with us again soon."

"Soon." Her eyes flick to something across the room and off screen. "But, for now I have to go. I love you, Jax."

"I love you, Emma."

With a bowl of popcorn between them, mugs of hot chocolate, and a promise that they can stay up to watch the whole first half, the girls settle into the couch together as I click into the match. I've turned off all the lights in the house, except for those on the Christmas tree; we sit together in the cozy glow and watch as the camera pans the starting lineups. To my surprise, Emma is standing between Lorena MacArthur, and the line of officials.

"She's the captain!" Mackenzie squeals beside me, nearly bouncing off of the couch.

"She sure is," I whisper, a surge of pride pressing against my chest. The camera zeros in on Emma's face and any casual viewer might not notice the anxiety etched into her face. Her smile is tight but she looks good out there, all long limbs and strong lines.

Her hair is in her usual game day braid, a headband keeps flyaways in place. The captain's armband looks good on her, but she's said before how much pressure it adds, the weight of the expectations that come with that little bit of fabric.

With a quick touch of the ball, Emma kicks off the game and they get off to a good start. I watch her as she follows the action of the game, continuously running from one end to the other, always following the action. Emma gets the ball at her feet and streaks toward the goal, looking for an opening...

"SHOOT!" the girls shout in unison, someone throwing a handful of popcorn in the air.

Emma takes the shot and the ball sails into the back of the net. My girls are on their feet, celebrating and cheering her on as her team does the same on the field. A smile spreads across her face as she embraces her teammates and then gets right back into the action of the game.

After a strong start, Emma slows down as the clock ticks up toward forty five minutes. After the first half, the game is tied, and Mackenzie launches a campaign for her and Alice to stay up well past their bedtimes to watch the rest of the match. I was planning to let them, but the look of triumph on her face when she thinks she's changed my mind brings a small bit of joy tonight, but even better is sitting between the girls on the couch for the second half, Alice and Mackenzie both curled up beside me as the second half kicks off.

Emma gets the ball and streaks toward the goal, finding an opening just as a defender gets close to her and swipes the ball from her and races toward the opposite goal. I see the defeat on Emma's face, that was the first solid chance she's had since the start of the game, and I know Emma, I know that individual goals aren't what's important to her, but I also know that right now she's probably beating herself up about a missed opportunity for the team.

I can see it on her face.

And then the sub board goes up.

Emma's number glows red.

Her teammates clap her off the field and she claps for the fans filling the stands before pulling off the armband and jogging toward the goal. Emma wraps her arms around the young goalkeeper in a squeezing embrace before slipping the band on her arm and gripping Lorena by the shoulders, sharing a private conversation before Emma finally exits the playing field.

The last thing Emma wanted was to be made a spectacle, trotted out for a retirement tour, one last hurrah to sell tickets, and that's not what this feels like tonight. Tonight feels like a proper farewell for an excellent player. A footballer who gets to go out on her own terms, with the praise that she deserves after a great career.

The girls have long since fallen asleep on the couch, so I gently wake them and walk them down the hall to be tucked into bed. With Emma out of the game, there's not much more to watch, but after kissing the girls goodnight, I sink back into the couch and finish off the popcorn while the clock continues to tick toward ninety minutes. After a handful of stoppage minutes, the whistle blows, and I'm about to turn the television off when they cut to the analysts, but Emma's name is the first mentioned.

"Is this the beginning of the end for Emma Mitchell?" One of the analysts asks as they transition into the postgame interviews. "She looked good, but didn't have the same speed and conviction on the ball that we're used to."

"What game were you watching?" I ask aloud as I look for the remote to turn this off. But I stop in my tracks when her face fills my screen. Julie Morgan asks all the standard questions, all the questions you'd expect to be asked of a returning athlete.

“My knee feels fine,” she says, forcing a smile. Fine for Emma means that her knee has been bothering her all day, and she just hasn’t said anything. Fine for Emma means that when she gets back to her hotel tonight she’ll need to elevate and treat her knee. But Julie, and the audience watching, don’t know that. What they know is that she’s ‘fine’. “It felt good to get out there again. There’s nothing like playing in front of a crowd like this, and I loved playing with old friends and former teammates again.”

“And so the question on everyone’s minds, Emma: What’s next?”

Emma’s eyes lock on the camera, almost as if, somehow, she’s looking right at me, and a wide smile spreads across her beautiful face. The first genuine smile I’ve seen from her all night and my heart leaps in my chest.

There she is.

That’s my girl.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

#### GOING HOME

#### EMMA

“ And so the question on everyone’s minds, Emma: What’s next?”

The question I’ve been dreading for so long. One that I finally feel confident in answering. Seeing Jax and the girls tonight before the game was the mood boost that I needed before taking the field for the last time. Before I wore the captain’s band for the last time. Before I played my last forty-something minutes of professional soccer.

I’ve dreaded the question, but I finally have an answer.

“Retirement. Leaving this game that I love, and has been such a part of my life for so long, on my own terms. When I was recovering from my injuries, I moved in with my sister, and was reminded of the importance of family and support, but I mostly kept to myself, until she moved out and I was left on my own to get out and meet people. And that’s what I did. I met someone.” Tears sting my eyes, and roll slowly down my cheeks as I think of the man I’m going home to. “The most wonderful family of someones. And tonight, Julie, I’m walking off the field under my own power, making this choice for myself, and for them . What’s next? Hopefully the best chapter of my life so far.”

Julie watches me in stunned silence. I remember a brief window of time, when she and I were teammates, and she made this same decision for herself, and when the



camera is off and she's done with her spot, Julie wraps her arms around me in a tight hug.

"I am so proud of you, Emma."

"Thanks, Jules." I return her embrace quickly before she has to move on to her next interview and I move down the tunnel into the locker room. After a quick shower, I throw my clothes in my bag, and order a car to the airport.

And now, I'm a distant memory. The sports networks have moved on to free agent signings in baseball, college football rankings, and disappointing hockey teams. And as I sit down at my gate, waiting to board, I wait for the feeling of regret to wash over me, but it never comes. If anything I'm feeling...hopeful, if a little scared. Not scared of Jax, or our future together, but a little scared that I'm not cut out for what's next for us.

While I wait to board, I call my sister. "Molly, I'm flying back early, any chance you can pick me up? And then drive me to Saratoga?" The words tumble out of my mouth in a rush. And I know that it's late, so late, in Boston. I'm not even sure if Molly registered anything I've said.

"Yes." She doesn't hesitate. "When do you get in?"

"It's a red eye, I'll be there," I look at the departures board in front of me with my estimated arrival time in glowing red numbers, "looks like I'll be there by six o'clock."

"We'll get coffee and donuts, and then drive. I'll be there."

"Molly, I can't thank you enough."

“I saw the postgame interview,” Molly’s tone softens. “I’m so proud of you, Emma.”

“Thanks, Molly. It was easier than I thought it would be. Helps to know he’s waiting for me.”

“I bet it does. Does he know you’re coming home early?”

“No. I’m hoping to surprise him. I need to try and coordinate something with Amanda, but it’s so late.”

“Text her. She’ll get it when she wakes up. And I’ll see you in a few hours.”

After disconnecting with Molly, I send a text to Amanda, letting her know that I’m waiting for a plane and coming home earlier than I’d planned. I’d like to be able to surprise Jax and the girls, but I’m not sure how. When the bubble on the other side of the screen starts to bounce, hope surges.

Are you on the plane now? She asks.

Nope. Waiting at my gate.

I wait for her response, and soon my phone is buzzing in my hand.

“Hey Amanda,” I answer quickly, keeping my voice low so as not to disturb the handful of travelers around me.

“First of all, congratulations. The game was amazing, your post game interview was amazing, and I can’t wait to see you soon. Second, I’m totally on board with surprising Jax and the girls. How are you getting back to Saratoga?”

“I’m flying to Boston. Molly is picking me up and driving me back home.”

“Perfect. Have her bring you to the Hutchinson’s, we can hide you in a room upstairs. The guys are getting ready at our house, I’ll have the girls at Mom and Dad’s, and...we’ll figure out the rest of the logistics later. Do you have a dress?”

Crap.

“No. I don’t...”

“That’s okay. We’ve got time to figure that out, too. For now, get some rest, enjoy your flight, and I’ll see you before you know it!”

“Thank you so much, Amanda.”

“We take care of family, Emma. You’re one of us now. You have been for a while.”

“I don’t know what to do with that...”

“That’s okay. I didn’t at first either, but you get used to it. See you soon.”

We finally board, and due to the last-minute nature of my ticket, I’m in a middle seat, and the passengers on either side of me don’t seem thrilled with any part of our trip, and while I’m not either, I can’t wait to get home. I can’t wait to see Jax and the girls, and get him alone so that we can talk. But first I have to get home. I’m too keyed up to sleep on the plane so I rehearse what I’m going to say to him. Over and over and over again, I play the words in my head. Eventually I doze off, just in time for us to land in Boston. When the rest of the plane has emptied of passengers, I grab my bag from the overhead bin and race down the jetway.

Molly is waiting for me, and she immediately grabs my bag and takes off in the direction of her car, pressing a coffee into my hands when I slide into the passenger seat beside her.

“What’s the plan?”

“I’m going home,” I tell her. “Back to Saratoga. To the Hutchinson’s.”

Molly grins as she starts the car and starts to navigate us out of the airport and into the early morning Boston traffic. My phone buzzes with incoming notifications now that I’m off the plane and I weed through to figure out where to start with responses.

From Amanda: Text me when you land. James and I have a plan.

From my parents: What a game, Kid! So proud of you!

And from Jax: Ice. Elevate. Come home to me soon. I love you.

I respond immediately to Amanda, letting her know that I’ve landed and Molly and I are on our way.

We’ve got your room ready at Mom and Dad’s. Take a nap, shower, I’ll come and get you for lunch. James will occupy Jax and the girls while we have lunch and figure out your dress situation. Unless you’d rather go home, but it’s Christmas Eve and everyone wants to see you. Molly can hang out with us too. See you soon.

That’s a lot to take in, but I’m used to the overwhelming kindness of this family now, and it’s hard to say no.

“Amanda said you should stay and hang out today. Don’t just drop me off.”

“Cool,” Molly nods, her lips twitching the tiniest bit. “I think I can do that.”

There’s that twitch again. That’s her ‘trying not to spill the beans’ smile. But I’m too tired to interrogate her just now.

My fingers itch to respond to Jax and tell him that I'll be home sooner than he thinks, but if I do that, I'll spoil the surprise. And for now, a car nap is calling my name. I didn't sleep for more than a few minutes on the plane, and after a busy day yesterday, I'm exhausted. I'd love to catch up with my sister on the drive, but I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, letting the rhythm of the road lull me to sleep.

Molly shakes me awake and I open my eyes to find the familiar and comforting sight of the Hutchinson family home in front of me and I sigh with relief. I grab my bag and carry it up to the front porch, noticing for the first time that Molly has her own overnight bag that she carries up the steps and right into the house.

"Go upstairs and rest," she says, dropping her own bag against the wall before heading deeper into the house. "I'm going to go say hi to Mom and Dad."

I shake my head, certain I didn't hear her correctly in my sleep deprived state, choosing to climb the stairs and find the door with my name on it, dropping onto the plush bedspread, my head dropping onto the pillows and sleep claiming me quickly – the benefit of exhaustion.

I wake to surprisingly warm December sunlight streaming in from the sliding balcony door and the sound of laughter carrying up from the main floor of the house. I stretch the kind of deep shuddering stretch that only comes after a good, long sleep, and it feels good to luxuriate in the pillows and blankets and warmth of the winter sun, knowing that my future stretches out in front of me without looming contracts and duplicitous agents.

Making my way to the bathroom, I splash some water on my face and tame my hair into a braid before following the smell of coffee and baked goods to the kitchen where familiar faces stop me in my tracks. Dad is bent over his phone, Mandy, Jenna, and Penelope gathered around him as he shows off photos – presumably of Molly and me – and Mom is seated with Claire in the living room, looking through Hutchinson

family albums.

“I thought you were spending Christmas in Vienna!” Penelope scoots away so that I can greet my dad with a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“We came home early,” Dad hugs me tight and presses a soft kiss to my forehead. “We wanted to surprise you when you got home, so Molly put us in touch with Ben and Claire, and now here we are.”

“And we’re so glad they’re here,” Ben enters the kitchen with several aluminum catering trays in his hands. “Your dad has been helping me with the pastries for the Christmas Eve ball.”

Ben hands me a flaky, buttery pastry fresh from the oven before stacking the already cooled confections in the catering trays and securing the lids.

“Elaine is on her way to pick these up, if you wouldn’t mind helping her load them in her car.”

When Mrs. Owens arrives, I do as Ben asked, carrying the trays out to her waiting vehicle.

“Emma, this is a surprise!” Mrs. Owens wraps me in a warm hug before holding me at arm’s length and looking me over, head to toe. “Great match last night. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you,” heat rises in my cheeks at her praise. “I appreciate that Mrs. Owens.”

“Elaine. Please. And on that note, I owe you an apology.”

“For what?” I blurt and for once I don’t try to cover or mask it. I let it hang between

us like the snowflakes in the air.

“For not being forthcoming about my relationship with Mackenzie and Alice. And Jax. It’s not necessarily common knowledge around the school that they are my granddaughters, but once you and Jax started dating, one of us should have told you sooner.”

“Honestly, I had my suspicions, but I didn’t feel like it was my place to ask. You don’t owe me an apology.”

“Well...good.” I’ve flustered Elaine Owens. That’s somehow better than last night’s win. “I just wanted to clear the air. In case we’re family some day.”

“On that note, Elaine,” there’s a question in the back of my mind. One I’ve been thinking about for a while and something I need to discuss with Jax, but considering the history... “Is that something you’d be okay with? Me being...part of the family?”

“Oh Emma,” Elaine looks at me the way Maureen did the night she asked Molly and me if she could marry our dad. “I’d be honored to have you in the family. Now, wipe those tears and get back inside. You have a ball to get ready for!”

There’s never a dull moment with Elaine Owens.

I have to laugh as she sends me back into the house where I’m ambushed by the Hutchinson women, Molly, and my mom.

“We’re taking the girls to the salon this afternoon,” Mandy informs me, “and since I’m sure they won’t be able to keep a secret if they see you, are you good here for a while?”

“I’m good, I just don’t have a dress.”

“We’re the same size,” Mandy whispers as she hugs me. “Check the closet upstairs.”

Mom and Molly stand on either side of me, staring down at the dress laid out on the bed in front of us. The green gown has a full satin skirt, and an off the shoulder, lace bodice that immediately draws the eye. The deep green color is perfect for the occasion, but I can’t wear this. And I tell Mandy as much as soon as she answers the phone.

“Of course you can,” she assures me. “It’s your size.”

“Size isn’t the issue, Mandy.”

“Then what is the issue?” She’s incredibly patient with me which is both frustrating and comforting.

The issue isn’t the dress. The issue is whether or not I’m making the right decision in going tonight. In surprising him, in asking him to make me a part of his life in a more permanent way. A part of the girls’ lives. Telling him that I’m ready for that is a huge step, and one that I don’t take lightly. One I’ve been thinking about long before I decided to retire. Long before I decided to come home early.

I don’t answer right away, and Mandy doesn’t push, but eventually she does break the silence.

“If you’re worried about Jax, don’t be. He’ll be happy to see you, I promise.”

“I’m going to choose to trust you on that one.”

“Good. Now go. I’ll see you tonight.”

Here goes nothing.



### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

#### MAY I HAVE THIS DANCE?

#### JAX

L ate in the afternoon, The Aunts descend upon my home in a swarm and whisk the girls away to a salon to have their hair done and their nails painted, and the house is too quiet without them. I turn on Christmas music and pull out my ironing board, iron, and steamer before excavating my closet for my uniform. James comes over with his uniform in tow and we alternate pressing and steaming our uniforms.

Amanda assured me that she would make sure my children were fed, so James and I eat a quick supper of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and the potato chips I keep in the house for Emma, before changing into uniform. It's been a while since I've pulled this out, and I'm relieved to find that everything still fits as it should. With ribbons and medals in place and shoes polished to a high shine, I tuck my hat under my arm and step out to find my brother waiting for me.

"We look good." James grins, straightening the wings pinned to his lapel and adjusting his bow tie before holding his hand out for a fist bump. I indulge him, and take over adjusting his tie so it sits straight, and he does the same for me.

"I can't wait to see the girls." The day Amanda took them dress shopping, I handed over my credit card and didn't ask questions. I trust her with my kids, and I know that she'll have them dressed to the nines tonight.

“I can’t wait to see Mandy,” James sighs, a dreamy-eyed look on his face that sends a sharp pang of loneliness straight through my chest. I consider, for a brief moment, calling Emma, but I know that she had meetings scheduled for today, even with her announcement last night, so I hold off. I can call her tonight, when this is all over.

It’s a short drive to James and Mandy’s house, and I’m nervous as we climb the porch steps to the front door. Before James opens the door he turns to me and rests his hands on my shoulders.

“Hey,” he gives me a lopsided smile, “take a deep breath. It’s just your daughters, there’s nothing to be nervous about.”

“James, last year’s Christmas Eve party was a pajama party at the rec center. I’ve never done anything formal with the girls. They’ve never seen me in uniform, at least outside of pictures, what if I screw everything up...” I’m nervous, and I’m rambling, and James is laughing at me.

“There’s nothing to screw up, Jax. You go and you dance with your daughters. No pressure. Now get in there and see your girls.”

James opens the door and ushers me inside, insisting that I wait at the foot of the stairs for the girls to make an entrance. Tears sting the back of my eyes when I hear footsteps on the stairs and soon Mackenzie is standing in front of me looking five years older than she is. Her hair is pulled back in some sort of half-updo with curls cascading down her back, and she beams at me as she twirls, showing off the floor length green dress she’s wearing.

Right behind her is Alice with a shy, curious look on her face as she takes me in from head to toe. Her dress is the same deep green as Mackenzie’s, but has long lace sleeves and a thin belt at her waist. Alice’s blonde curls are pinned up with sparkling clips, and just as her sister did, she twirls to show off her dress. I swipe away the tears

from my eyes as I kneel down to hug my daughters who've somehow grown up right before my very eyes.

Mandy comes downstairs next, dressed in a deep burgundy ball gown and at James's sharp intake of breath I know it's time for the girls and I to clear the room. I help them into their coats and give their aunt and uncle a moment together before we pile into the car and make our way to the party.

Lee and Elaine went all out. We step into the hotel and after hanging up our coats we pass through a photo area; the girls and I take a few photos together, I ask for one with each girl, and a few of the girls together. I take the girls' hands in mine and we enter the ballroom together, where we're greeted by Lee and Elaine.

"Grandma! Grandpa!" The girls twirl some more, showing off their dresses to their grandparents, Lee asks them to save him a dance, and Elaine takes them right over to the chocolate fountain in the corner of the ballroom.

"You boys sure clean up nice," Mr. Owens says, shaking James's hand when he enters the room behind us. "Glad you could come tonight."

"I'm glad we could, too."

Lee sends us on our way, and I make a beeline for the girls, encouraging them to step away from the chocolate fountain, and moving toward the tables arranged on either side of the ballroom. I grab a table and motion to James, saving the table. The girls sit down with their plates of fruit and cheese, and Elaine carries over two glasses of sparkling grape juice, leaving them on the table for the girls. Taking my phone from my pocket, I snap a few pictures of the girls, one of the room, and then take a quick selfie, sending all of the pictures to Emma.

Wish you were here. Merry Christmas.

Rather than waiting to see if she's read the text, I drop my phone into my pocket and find myself something to drink before the lights dim and Lee is welcomed to the stage. The room falls silent as Lee speaks, welcoming us all, and reminding us why we're here. None of us in this room would be here if not for Lee and Elaine Owens caring enough about the veterans in their community to bring us together, offering support and community when we needed it most.

James drops a hand on my shoulder and squeezes tight. We owe a lot to Lee Owens. We're here for him, and because of him.

"Alright, that's enough of that," Lee declares and laughter breaks out across the room. "You're here to party, and the dance floor is officially open."

"Girls," James holds out his hands to my dates, "may I have this dance?"

"And just what am I supposed to do?" I ask, with a laugh.

"You'll figure something out." James winks and leads the girls to the dance floor, leaving me alone at the table with my lemonade like the spinsters in the book he made me read. I watch as Mandy joins James and the girls on the dance floor, the four of them busting moves to the upbeat song in way that I don't think I'd even try, but when the music slows, and James takes Mandy in his arms, I find my way to my girls, sharing a slow dance with them both.

After our dance, the girls and I find our way to the table laden with Dad's baked goods. He's been working for days on cookies and tarts and finished up with the last of the pastries just this morning, and he's passed off Christmas breakfast and dinner responsibilities to Jake, Penelope, and me. I've got breadsticks and lasagna for dinner, and no idea what my brother has planned for breakfast, but it's sure to be good, and Dad deserves the break after pulling off the food for this event.

The girls make quick work of their snacks and then head right back to the dance floor, holding hands and twirling and having the best time together. I slip my phone from my pocket, quickly checking for a response from Emma.

Merry Christmas, Jax. See you soon.

Soon, but not soon enough.

I hate the idea of her spending Christmas in a hotel in California. Sure, she's got her, now former, teammates out there, but it's not the same as celebrating with family and friends. With the people you love. And sure, selfishly, I wish I could spend Christmas morning with her and the girls. I wish I could have her with us when the girls wake up and run downstairs to Mom and Dad's tree, that I could spend the evening with her wrapped up in my arms by the light of the tree and the warmth of a fire in the fireplace.

After dancing to three more songs, the girls come back to the table for a little break. A break that ends when their Grandpa Lee requests a dance with them and they happily agree. As I watch the girls with Lee, the man who took a chance on an angry teenager, a man who has been an intentional part of our lives, even after his daughter left. A man who has every reason to be angry and resentful, but instead pours into our lives everyday, I am filled with gratitude for him and for Elaine.

"He loves those girls," Elaine sits down beside me, eyes locked on her husband, a wistfulness in her tone as she echoes my thoughts. "Jax, I don't know if I've ever said thank you."

"For what?" I turn to fully face her.

"For giving us a place in their lives. I know it couldn't have been easy for you, and to be honest, for the first few years it wasn't for us either. Our relationship with Angela

will never be what it once was, and the girls don't replace what we lost, but they give us so much love and so much joy, and that's because of you."

"You're right," I swallow past the lump in my throat. "It wasn't easy, especially right after she left, but the thought never even crossed my mind to exclude you from our lives. We needed you. Especially in those early days. If not for you and Lee, and my family, I truly don't know where the three of us would be."

"Well," Elaine swipes her thumb under her eyes, a rare show of emotion from her. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too." As one song drifts to the next, my girls show no sign of stopping, and I'm not going to sit here all night long, so I hold out a hand to Elaine. "Dance with me."

She looks like she wants to protest, but offers me a smile instead as I lead her out to the dance floor.

"As long as we're on the subject," She's using her principal voice, and I can't help but laugh. "I've assured Ms. Mitchell that her being a part of your lives is not going to be an issue for Lee and me. In fact, if you'd like to get a move on with that, we'd all be grateful."

For a moment I'm too stunned to speak. All I can do is shake my head in bewilderment. I don't know when she and Emma would have had a chance to talk, but I'm weirdly glad that they did. Not that I need outside approval for our relationship, but it does smooth over some of the rough, awkward edges of the blending of our families.

Once she's home, I intend to get a move on as Elaine suggested.

I just have to make sure the timing is right.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

#### CHRISTMAS WALTZ

##### EMMA

“Y ou have to go in eventually,” Dad gently nudges me with his elbow. We’ve been sitting in the parking lot at the hotel for the last fifteen minutes while I muster the courage to walk into that ballroom. “Knock his socks off, Kid.”

That’s it. That’s Dad gently kicking me out of the car.

I gather my courage, and my skirt, and step out of the car and make my way slowly into the hotel. Leaving my coat to be hung up by a kind volunteer, I find myself at the edge of the ballroom, sticking to the shadows, watching as Alice and Mackenzie dance with Mr. Owens, and Jax skillfully dances with Mrs. Owens in the corner of the dance floor.

I’ve only ever seen pictures of Jax in uniform and can confidently say that the pictures do not do him justice. Even standing in a room filled with men and women in their dress uniforms, Jax stands out. I take a moment to admire the cut of his jacket and the expertly tailored line of his trousers. His face is clean shaven, which throws me for a minute because I’m so used to his neatly trimmed beard. But even with a close shave, I’d recognize him anywhere.

As the music drifts into three-quarter time, Jax’s steps change and Mrs. Owens follows him. Mr. Owens and the girls head to a table on the perimeter of the room

while I approach the floor. Jax's back is to me, and Mrs. Owens meets my gaze, a smile tugging at her lips as she does. When I'm a step away, I reach out my hand and rest it on his shoulder, and he stills immediately when Mrs. Owens makes a hasty retreat.

"May I cut in?" My voice wavers and my steps falter, breath hitching in my throat as Jax turns and I'm hit with the full force of his gaze.

"Emma," he breathes and time stands still. "You're here."

I vaguely hear the music that fills the room, and notice a few pairs of eyes on us, the only two people on the dance floor that aren't moving. Jax holds out his hand, and I slide my hand against the soft fabric of his glove, grateful for his steady presence and strong form as he settles his other hand at my waist and somehow we're dancing. He leads with confidence in his steps and I follow, secure in his hold, and safely held in his arms.

"As soon as they realize you're here, the girls are going to want to see you, my family too. Am I being selfish by wanting to keep you to myself for a little while?" His hand slips lower on my back as he pulls me closer. If anything, I'd like to be a little selfish tonight, too.

"Not at all." Jax slows and I follow until we're simply swaying on the dance floor, bodies pressed close together as he bundles me against him. "I spent the day with your family. They've seen me. I'm all yours."

"I like the sound of that." Jax settles one hand at the nape of my neck and kisses me softly as the world around us melts away. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Staying in the guest room at your Mom and Dad's," I smile as he kisses me again, less gently this time, a firm press of his lips to mine.



“So you’re the reason I’m in The Bunk Bed Room again. Not that I’m complaining.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He kisses me again, before turning us the other direction as if shielding me. “Let’s leave the girls with James and get out of here.”

“Jax, we’re not doing that,” I laugh. “But I appreciate the offer.”

“Fine,” he groans, burying his face in my neck. The waltz fades out and the tempo picks up once again as Jax takes my hand. “I guess I can share you for a little while.”

I trail behind him to the table, and as soon as the girls see me they are out of their chairs, rushing toward me. I crouch down and catch them in my arms, holding them close as their arms wrap around me. Home. This feels like home. Here with these girls, their dad’s steady presence at my back. I’m home. This is where I belong. Not in this ballroom, wearing this fancy borrowed dress, no. Home is where Jax and these girls are.

When the girls let me go, Alice takes her dad’s hand and the two of them head out to the dance floor, but Mackenzie pulls away tears glimmering in her eyes.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I gently thumb away her tears, “what’s wrong?”

“All I really wanted this Christmas was to have you spend it with us,” she says and I have to blink away tears of my own. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

I pull Mackenzie into my arms, and she melts into me, wrapping her arms around my waist. I gently rub her back as she cries against my shoulder, overcome with emotion.

“I missed you,” she whispers. “When you’re home, it’s almost like having a mom.”

Home. I tighten my arms around her and press a soft kiss to the top of her head, too stunned for words. I think about the fort and the tuck-ins and the bedtime routines. I think of afternoons in the library after school and dinners around Jax's table or mine and that feeling of home is wrapped up in all of it.

"Everything okay?" Jax's voice is pitched low, his hand on my shoulder giving a gentle squeeze.

"We're all good, aren't we kiddo?" I pull away and Mackenzie and I both wipe our tears, smiling at each other as she tucks her hand into mine.

"All good," she grins.

"Good, because I'd like to get a picture," Jax tilts his head toward the door.

The four of us make our way out to the photographer, and Jax insists that the girls and I, in our matching green dresses, get a few pictures together before he joins us. The photographer comments on what a lovely family we are, and my heart swells as Jax draws me into his side, pressing a kiss to my cheek as the camera shutter clicks.

"Alright girls," the photographer says, resetting her camera, "how about one with only your grown ups? What do you think, do you want to come behind the camera?"

The girls are eager to help set up the shot for me and Jax, and the photographer is great at distracting them so that Jax and I can have a moment. There's no one else in line for pictures, so she lets us take our time, setting up, snapping shots as Jax and I situate ourselves in front of the backdrop, then sending the girls back into the shot.

I can't wait to see how these turn out.

"Ready to go home?" Jax whispers in my ear before dropping a kiss on my cheek. "I

called us a ride so James and Mandy can stay a bit longer.”

“Then let’s go home.”

A minivan pulls up outside the hotel, and Jax opens the passenger side door and helps me and my massive skirt into the seat beside our driver, Jake.

“Good to see you Emma,” Jake gives me a soft smile. “Awesome press conference last night. The game was good too, but you handled the post-game beautifully.”

“Thanks Jake, I appreciate that. And I really appreciate you and Penelope handling the network for me after that mess with my agent.”

“That was all Nell,” Jake beams with pride, “and she was more than happy to go to bat for you.”

As the girls give Jake a rundown of the evening’s events, I take the opportunity to close my eyes and enjoy the drive, knowing that in just a few minutes this feeling of peace is going to be yanked away by both of our families. I’m anxious for Jax to meet my parents, and hadn’t planned on it happening this abruptly. Once we get to the house, the girls race up the porch with Jake behind them as Jax offers me his arm and helps me navigate the snow with my dress gathered up away from the ground.

When we get to the door, Jax holds it open and I step inside, throwing him a nervous glance but rather than stopping him, prepping him, or even taking a chance to prepare myself, I wrap my arm around his waist, kiss his cheek, and walk confidently into the house with Jax right behind me.

When we reach the living room, the girls are already on the couch between my parents, telling them – presumably – about the party tonight. Mom and Dad are enraptured, and the girls are giddy with Christmas Eve magic on top of their usual

enthusiasm and zest for life. Jax turns to me with wide eyes that soon give way to a sly smile. Pressing a hasty kiss to my cheek he leaves me in the kitchen before stepping into the family room and shaking hands with my dad.

“Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, it is wonderful to finally meet you. Emma’s told me so much about you both,” Jax glances up, eyes meeting mine ever so briefly when Mom stands and hugs him. “She’s also told me that when she was a kid you’d dress her in costume for tours and I was hoping there might be pictures.”

In the morning, I wake to the smell of coffee drifting up from the kitchen below and without waking my sister, with whom I shared a bed last night, I make my way downstairs to find Jax and Jake in the kitchen, prepping food for breakfast.

“Merry Christmas,” I wrap my arms around Jax’s waist and press a kiss to his cheek. “Anything I can do to help?”

Jax turns in the circle of my arms and claims my lips with a kiss.

“Merry Christmas,” he smiles. “Jake is the one in charge this morning, so ask him and he can put you to work.”

“I’ve got Dad’s orange cinnamon rolls ready for the oven,” Jake tells me, “I’ve got Jax getting fruit ready, if you’d like to do the breakfast casserole.”

“I think I can handle breakfast casserole.” I give Jake a mock salute as he hands me the recipe I’ll be using, a knife, cutting board, and vegetables to dice. The three of us work side by side, getting a meal ready for our families, as the rest of the house slowly wakes up.

Soon, everyone is awake and the house is filled with laughter and music, and the smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls and smoky bacon; Mackenzie, Alice, and

Leigh perch themselves at the kitchen island with plates filled with cinnamon rolls and fruit, and mugs of hot chocolate in front of them. The grown ups fill our plates and find open seats wherever we can, scattered around the house enjoying our food and each other's company.

Amanda and I help Jake with the breakfast dishes, and as we're wrapping up, the soft strains of acoustic guitar float from the living room, and with it a familiar voice. Soon, other voices join in, singing familiar Christmas carols together. Jenna told me that Jax was the best caroler, but she undersold how smooth and melodic his voice is, and as he bends over his guitar, a smile on his face, I am overwhelmed at the joy that fills the room. When the song ends, Jax passes the guitar to his dad who takes over.

Sitting on the floor in front of my mom with Alice and Mackenzie tucked against my side, Jax drops to the floor beside me, draping an arm around my shoulder and pressing a soft kiss to my cheek. Soon, stockings are passed around to those who have them, and one is placed in my lap – it's hand-knit, just like the others, my name carefully sewn across the top.

"How...?" I ask, confused and overwhelmed with emotion all at once. "I didn't even know I'd be here until last night."

"I asked Mom to make you one after Thanksgiving," Jax wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. "I guess I was just hopeful."

After stockings have been unstuffed, the girls open a few gifts from their grandparents, and lunch is laid out, nothing extravagant, mostly finger foods that can be snacked on while playing board games or just hanging out around the house. I find myself seated at a table with Jax, Marcus, and Penelope, playing a rather intense island settlement game that James and Jenna are apparently not allowed to play anymore.

As the game comes to an end and people start drifting off to watch a movie or take naps, I find myself alone in the kitchen with Jax. Watching from my perch at the kitchen island, my hands wrapped around a mug of Ben's hot chocolate, as Jax kneads bread dough, his strong hands and muscular forearms flexing as he skillfully works the dough on the surface of the island.

"How are you doing?" Jax asks, eyes meeting mine over his black framed glasses. "I know you haven't had any time to yourself in a while."

"I'm okay. Everything is a little overwhelming," for the first time in a long time, the familiar feeling of shame that comes with conversations like this is blessedly absent. "But quiet moments like this make it worth it. And knowing that you'd understand if I went upstairs and laid on the bed for ten minutes in total silence helps a bit too."

"I'm game if that's what you want to do," he winks, forming the dough into a ball and dropping it into an oiled bowl to rise. "Or, if you'd like, I can sneak you out of here."

"No, thank you. But you're sweet to offer."

Once the dough is rising, Jax cleans up and steps around to my side of the island, stepping between my knees and drawing me into his chest, arms wrapping around me, more comforting and secure than any weighted blanket. Wrapping my arms around him, I sink into the warmth of his embrace and sigh, content to be held in his arms.

One week later, on New Year's Eve, I step into the kitchen and take a peek into the oven, satisfied that the sugar cookies are baked beautifully golden and not burned. After the cookies cool, I decorate them and get ready to head over to Jax's house for the night.

A week ago, my family and the Hutchinson family gathered to celebrate Christmas, and as much fun as that was, I'm looking forward to a more low-key affair tonight with just Jax and the girls. I've spent the past week following the game, and my retirement announcement, fielding media requests and phone calls, and dealing with the fallout of splitting off from my agent. Scott has painted a picture of me in the press as an ungrateful athlete, and while I'd like to defend myself, my reputation speaks for itself, and frankly Scott doesn't deserve the time of day from me. Not anymore.

Penelope and Molly have helped me work on an official statement that covers all of my bases, and I finalized it today, closing the book on that chapter of my life for good. A chapter that I loved while I was in it, but one that I'm not going to miss, something that is confirmed when I walk into Jax's house and am immediately greeted with hugs from the girls, and a kiss on the cheek from Jax as I join him in the kitchen.

"Sorry," I drop off my cookies on the kitchen island, heat flooding my cheeks. "I'm early."

"Never apologize for letting us spend more time with you," Jax takes me in his arms, holding on tight. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad to be here." I'm also a little nervous. I know I shouldn't be, but I am. If this past week – really, these past six months – has shown me anything, it's that I want to be a part of Jax's life in a more...permanent way. And being a part of Jax's life means being a part of his daughters' lives, too. There are conversations that Jax and I still have to have, and I don't necessarily want to do that tonight, but I at least want him to know how I'm feeling. What I'm thinking.

"Want to help me with dinner?" Jax asks, pulling back but still keeping me in his arms. "We're doing tacos."

“Sure. What can I do to help?”

Jax hands me a knife and cutting board, and I work on lettuce, tomatoes, and onions for our tacos while he browns and seasons the meat in the cast iron pan on his stove. Alice and Mackenzie get tortillas, cheese, and sour cream from the fridge, and soon we have the spread ready on the counter.

With plates piled with tacos and chips with homemade salsa, the four of us gather around the dining room table, and not for the first time I think about what life would look like if we did this every night. If I could be a part of this. After dinner, I help Jax wash the dishes and put away leftovers while the girls change into their pajamas and pick a movie for us to watch before watching the televised New Year’s Eve celebrations.

“What are you looking forward to in the new year?” Jax asks, dropping onto the couch beside me as the girls carefully unpack their blanket fort basket and start setting it up all on their own.

“More of this,” I lay my head on his shoulder, drawing my legs up onto the couch as the girls wall us in with the blanket fort. “More of you.”

“That sounds like a great plan,” Jax kisses me before relocating the two of us to the floor in front of the couch, the girls stretched out in front of us. “I think I can get on board with that plan.”

After the movie, Jax pops popcorn and I change into comfy clothes that I pilfer from his closet before we settle back into the fort with Mackenzie and Alice nestled between us. We watch the New Year’s Eve celebration on television and as I think about the past year, the past several years if I’m honest, I think about the year ahead. My future with Jax and the girls. There’s so much that I want to say, so much that I’ve wanted to say all night but I’ve been scared.



Do it scared.

So much of what I've done in the last six months I've done because of Jax's insistence that we do the things that scare us, and don't wait to stop being scared.

So I'm going to do it scared.

"I know I told you before I left for LA that I wasn't asking you for forever....but Jax..." I take a deep breath, the words playing over in my brain. Words that I've rehearsed more times than I can count before I showed up on his doorstep tonight. My breath hitches in my throat and tears sting the back of my eyes as I finally coax the words out. Letting them hang between us. "Forever is exactly what I want. With you. With them."

The girls are sound asleep on the floor between us, twinkle lights casting a soft glow on their sleeping faces. All the times I thought about asking him, I never imagined that it would be in the blanket fort with the girls between us, but this is perfect. For us, anyway.

"Emma..." Jax's eyes dance with anticipation, his arm stretching across the couch, hand curling against my neck and drawing me closer. "What are you asking?"

"If you'll marry me."

Jax crushes his lips to mine, fingers threading into my hair as he deepens the kiss.

"Is that a yes?" I ask, breaking the kiss and pressing my forehead to his.

"Yeah Emma, it is." He laughs and kisses me again, wrapping me in his arms as best he can with the girls in between us. "I love you."

“I love you too, Jax.”

EMMA

### TEN YEARS AFTER THE WALK OFF

“M om, come on, we’re gonna be late!” Alice shouts down the hall as I finish getting dressed. Jax is already at the soccer field, holding down the fort and saving seats for the rest of the family, and Mackenzie is getting ready for her final match of the season with our local developmental pro soccer team, a part of the same league that I spent my summers playing in during college.

When Mackenzie was approached to play, she sat her dad and me down and listed the pros and cons, and asked us for our input. I’m biased, as I’ve spent time in this league and am grateful for the experiences that I had playing in different settings than school fields and university teams. Mackenzie is one of the youngest on the team, and I stressed to her that there was no pressure from me, and never will be. If she doesn’t want to play in college, or after this summer, that is fine with me. And her dad.

It has been a joy to watch her this season. Alice and I have been to every single match, even the ones on the road, and Jax has come to the ones that his schedule allows. We’ve all blocked out time tonight. Mackenzie’s team has made it to the league championship after a hard fought season, and tonight the whole family is coming to cheer her on. Marcus and Jenna have flown in from Montana, my parents drove over from Boston, and all three sets of grandparents have matching jerseys to wear tonight.

“I’m coming!” I yell down the hall, slipping into my shoes and grabbing my keys as I meet Alice at the door. “You ready?”

“I’ve been ready,” she rolls her eyes and walks out the door, smiling all the way.

Alice and Mackenzie have grown into such amazing young women, and I’m overjoyed at the strides they are both making. Mackenzie is making waves on the pitch and Alice is excelling in music. Our girl realized that music helped her focus on her schoolwork, and wanted to learn to make music herself. She started by working on guitar with her dad, and when the time came to try out band instruments at school, she fell in love with the cello, and we’ve been listening to her fall more in love with it ever since.

She’s heading to fine arts college in a couple of weeks and I’m trying to prepare myself for moving her to the city, and I know I’m not ready for it. It was hard enough moving Mackenzie to Michigan to attend her dad’s alma mater, so at least Alice will be nearby...but the house will be so quiet without them both here; without Alice’s constant music and Mackenzie’s soccer analysis. But I can’t think about that today, today we have a match to get to.

Alice and I find our way to our seats and are greeted by the whole family with hugs and high fives, just in time for the announcement of starting lineups and the embarrassingly loud cheer that erupts from our section when Mackenzie is introduced.

“She looks good out there,” Jax wraps an arm around my waist after sitting down with a box of popcorn to share. “Reminds me of you.”

“I can’t take any credit for this,” I laugh reaching for the popcorn, my fingers brushing against my husband’s. “This is all Mackenize.”

The clock ticks toward ninety minutes, and Mackenzie hasn’t slowed down, the game is tied and I know their coach is thinking ahead to stoppage time and potential penalty kicks, going easy on late game substitutions, and I’m growing more and more

anxious. I haven't coached above middle school age in years, and can't imagine making game time decisions in the heat of a game like this, with everything on the line.

The ball is passed to Mackenzie who streaks toward the goal, looking for a shot, for an open teammate, any opportunity to get the ball in the net, and I recognize the minute she finds it. With a few touches, Mackenzie rockets the ball to the center forward who shoots at the goal, sending the ball into the back corner of the net. Mackenzie and her teammates wrap each other in a quick hug, celebrating for just a moment before getting back to the game. They still have time on the clock, and only lead by a single goal.

We're all on our feet as the final whistle blows, and no one leaves or sits down until the cup has been presented and we've all seen Mackenzie hoist it over her head. Alice is giddy to find her sister after the match and Jax and I hang back as the girls celebrate together.

It's been ten years since Jax and I married and I adopted the girls. Ten years of learning how to be a mom, how to navigate the pre-teen and teenage years, the reminders that I'm not the one who gave birth to them – and reminding them in turn that while I didn't give birth to them, I chose them, and will continue to choose and love them until the end of my days.

Them, and the man whose hand I'm holding. The man who has been a rock for me these last ten years. Jax wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close, pressing a kiss to my cheek before we're joined by the girls.

"Mom!" Mackenzie squeals, throwing her arms around me.

"Great match, kid!" I squeeze her tight. "What a way to end your season."

Mackenzie pulls me aside, away from the gathered crowd and our family, with tears in her eyes she takes something from her pocket, holding it tightly in her hand.

“I never would have gotten here without you,” she says, fidgeting with whatever is in her hand. “I want you to have this.”

Mackenzie holds out the captain’s armband that she wore tonight while on the field. I take it from her hands and run my fingers over the familiar bit of fabric, similar to one that I wore so many times over the course of my career, and one that I know she’ll find herself wearing again.

“I am so proud of you,” I wipe tears from my eyes as I wrap my daughter up in my arms, “and I can’t wait to see where you go from here.”

“You wouldn’t be disappointed if...” she trails off, eyes not meeting mine. “If I didn’t...”

“Mackenzie,” I grip her shoulders, looking her in the eyes. “The only thing that would disappoint me is if you did something because you thought you had to. Or because you were afraid you’d disappoint me or your dad.”

“I’m not going to quit,” she laughs. “I was going to ask if you’d be disappointed if I took Alice and the cousins to dinner tonight, instead of going out with you and Dad.”

“I suppose,” I pretend to be offended. “Your dad and I will fend for ourselves.”

Mackenzie waves Jax over, and he joins us, wrapping an arm around my waist and pressing a kiss to my cheek. “The reason I want to take Alice and the cousins to dinner tonight is because I’m leaving earlier than we thought.”

“Leaving?” Jax asks. “Like heading back to school?”

“Not exactly...” Mackenzie smiles, tears rimming her eyes. “I’m heading to Chicago for a match. You guys can come if you want to. We’re playing Canada.”

“Mackenzie,” Jax is barely containing his emotion. “Who is we?”

“The National Team.”

I’m as nervous as I’ve ever been as we sit in the stands pre-game, and the stadium bustles around us. I remember what it was like to be on that field. What it was like to play in this stadium. Wearing the national team emblem on my chest. And tonight I get to watch my daughter take the field and do the same thing. In this place where I spent my entire professional career. This place that holds so many memories, and tonight, as a family, we get to make new ones.

I’m sandwiched between Jax and Alice, and Alice is buzzing with nervous energy that outmatches my own.

“When I talked to her this morning she still didn’t know if she’d be starting,” Alice bounces her legs up and down. “Do you think she’ll get in the game?”

“It’s hard to know,” I put my arm around Alice’s shoulders and she stills her nervous movement. “But look down there at the field...”

I point at the group of players wearing green vests over their kits, the subs, and then direct Alice’s attention to the group nearby, the group kicking the ball around in a passing drill. No vests.

“Is that her? Is she starting?”

“Looks like it.”

And she does.

My girl is a force on the field. When she's taken out with a bad tackle, she jumps to her feet and keeps going. She defends the ball well and strikes even better. Even in my prime, I didn't play as well as Mackenzie is playing tonight. And I couldn't be prouder of her.

Jax sits beside me, tense, for the entire game, breathing a sigh of relief when the final whistle blows and we watch as Mackenzie celebrates on the field with her team. Alice stands and lets out an ear-splitting whistle before high fiving everyone around us. I watch Mackenzie turn and survey the stadium as the crowd begins filtering out, the minute she sees the three of us in the stands she waves us down to her and we make our way to the front row of seats.

"Mom!" She throws her arms around my neck as I lean down to meet her. "Coach wants to see you."

"I always knew you'd get here someday," I tell the young coach as she approaches Mackenzie on the sideline before reaching up her hand to shake mine. "I'm proud of you, Lorena."

"Thanks . If you ever want to...I've got a place for you on my staff."

"I appreciate the offer," I take Jax's hand in mine and wrap my other arm around Alice's shoulders. "But there's only room enough for one Hutchinson on your team. You don't need me."

"Special consultant, maybe?" Lorena grins.

"Maybe. For now, I'd like to let Mackenzie stretch her wings."



Lorena nods, walking away and corralling her team into the locker room, as Jax, Alice, and I get ready to meet up with Mackenzie. When Alice spots her sister, the two run to meet each other with wide open arms, and Jax draws me against him as we watch the girls celebrate.

I never dreamed I'd be a mom, let alone a soccer mom. And I never dreamed that one day I'd be back in this stadium, where I got my profession start, watching my daughter start for the National Team.

"Can you believe it?" Jax asks, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "Look at our girl."

"She's pretty great, isn't she?"

"They both are." Jax turns me in his arms and presses a kiss to my forehead. "We never would have gotten here without you."

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AMANDA

### TEN YEARS AFTER THE FASTBALL

“ B oys!” I shout up the stairs, anxiously glancing at my watch. “Hurry it up! Your dad is waiting for us!”

My twin sons, Ben and Sam, race down the stairs in their baseball uniforms, hair disheveled, and skid to a stop in the mudroom where they dig for their cleats and grab their mitts before heading to the car where James is patiently waiting.

After a short drive, we arrive at the ballfields and Ben and Sam race out of the car to meet up with their cousins in the dugout while James and I cross the field to the other dugout where the grown ups are waiting. Jake, Jax, and Jenna are already working on a game plan when we arrive, and Penelope hands me the scorebook so I can set myself up behind the backstop with Claire and Ben.

Ben and Sam take to the field with their cousins and the six of them start warming up; batting practice, a few infield drills led by Ben, my shortstop, and Leigh warms up her pitching arm, ready to face her dad in the batter’s box. It’s July Fourth, the day of our annual Hutchinson Kids vs. Grown Ups baseball game, and for the last few years we grown ups have had our rear ends handed to us by the kids.

And we have a Cy Young winner on our team.

We’re six on six, so infielders play a combination deep infield/shallow outfield, and we’ve made it work, but those kids move fast and we can’t keep up with them

anymore. Not with a softball player, soccer player, and my two baseball players on the team. Ben has an affinity for shortstop, just as his dad did, and Sam loves playing second base. The two of them work in tandem so well together, turning double plays like they're nothing.

"We ready for this?" Marcus calls from his spot behind home plate.

"Sure are!" The kids take to the field first, declaring themselves the home team, and Leigh takes the ball in her hand as Jake steps to the plate to lead off. Leigh has been playing softball for two years, so I expect a softball wind up and pitch, but she hikes her leg up and fires a fastball right at the heart of the plate. Jake is so stunned he doesn't even try to swing.

"Strike one!" Marcus calls.

"What was that?" Jake ask a grinning Leigh as the rest of the kids cheer her on.

"That was a fastball."

After a three-up-three-down top of the first, it's the adults' turn to take to the field. Jake is on the mound, and Jenna crouches behind home plate as Ben leads off. He smacks one into the gap, and it's far enough into center field that Penelope can't get a jump on it. Ben stands on second base, taking a decent lead in what I'm sure is an attempt to steal.

If I were cheering for his team I'd tell him that it's not a good idea to try and steal with his Auntie Jay crouched behind home plate, but that's a lesson that needs to be learned firsthand. Leigh steps to the plate and digs into the batter's box, a determined look in her eye as Jake stares her down from the pitcher's mound.

He winds up and fires a wicked fastball down the heart of the plate. Leigh swings and

misses, but gives it an honest effort.

“Strike one!”

Jake tries not to, but smirks at his daughter before winding up and firing another pitch, just outside to get her to chase, but she’s got a good eye.

“Ball one!”

Another fastball.

“Strike two!”

And then, I see it. The gleam in my brother-in-law’s eye.

He winds up and hurls a pitch down the heart of the plate, right in Leigh’s sweetspot. But it’s off speed, and Leigh swings too early as the ball drops.

“Strike three! You’re out!”

“What was that ?!” Leigh stands at the plate, stunned.

“That, my darling daughter, was a curveball.”

The kids make us pay for Jake’s little display of hubris and after they’ve handily beaten us, we all head to Mom and Dad’s for a cookout in the evening. We cook hot dogs on the fire, and s’mores of course, and as the sun goes down, James and I bid the family goodnight before walking home, leaving the boys with the family for the night.

July Fourth has never been James’ favorite observance, and he still struggles with it

sometimes, so as night falls, we step into our library and shut the door behind us. He grabs my hand and pulls me down onto the couch beside him, picking up a book from the end table and opening it to where we left off.

Leaning my head on his shoulder, I sink deeper into his side, soaking up his warmth as he begins to read aloud. James and I have spent countless nights in this room over the years. This room that James so painstakingly and lovingly crafted for me all those years ago. He reads aloud from an old favorite, the book I was reading the day I met him on that plane from Seattle to New York. The day my life changed.

I hear the first round of fireworks in the distance and reach for a blanket from nearby, spreading it across our laps as James holds me just a bit tighter against him. After a few chapters, James lays the book on the end table, and presses a kiss to my temple.

“Did you have a good birthday?” I ask him, turning to face him.

“I did,” he nods, contemplatively. “It would have been better if we’d have beaten the kids, though.”

“Be careful how you say that!” I laugh and stand up from the couch, reaching out a hand to him. “Come on. Your birthday isn’t over yet.”

We turn on a baseball game and I shoo James into the living room while I put the finishing touches on his birthday cake. After my first birthday celebration with James, Penelope shared her confetti cake recipe with me, and I’ve been making it for him every year since.

Handing James a plate, I drop onto the couch next to him as we dig into the delicious cake.

“Best birthday ever.”

“You say that every year,” I mutter around a bite of cake.

“And I mean it every year.” He presses a kiss to my cheek. “Baseball. Cake. Time with you and the boys? That’s the makings of a perfect birthday.”

When the cake is gone, we move into the library and curl up together on the small couch. James pulls a blanket over us and opens a book – the same book that we’ve read together every summer since our first summer together. A book that he sent to me back when we only knew each other by nicknames. A book that he sent to me when I was at my lowest, that he reads to me anytime I’m sick, and that we’ve had to replace a few times over the years.

“Hey,” James pauses in his reading, dropping a kiss on the top of my head. “Would you look at that? The duke gets his duchess in the end.”

“She’s pretty lucky.”

“No Love, he’s the lucky one.”

MARCUS

FIVE YEARS AFTER THE CHANGEUP

“Happy anniversary,” I crouch beside the bed, and gently wake my wife. “I’ve got a surprise for you, but you have to be awake first.”

“We can’t just spend the day in bed?” She grumbles, sinking deeper into the bed. “That would be fun.”

“Well, you can stay in bed if you want to...and I’ll go to the conservation center myself.”

“Conservation center?” She sits up in bed, suddenly awake. “Which conservation center?”

“One I think you’re going to like.”

With surprising quickness, Jenna throws off the covers and jumps out of bed, headed straight to the bathroom for a shower. While she gets ready for the morning, I work on breakfast for us, including a large pan of homemade hashbrown potatoes. When she comes out of the bathroom, I hand her a glass of water and her morning medication, before pouring us each a very large cup of coffee.

There’s a wildlife conservation center in Idaho that is the only place in the country where you can bottle feed and pet bear cubs. I made reservations months ago after meeting some of the scientists from the center on one of Jenna’s hikes. As soon as

Jenna is out of the shower and dressed, we start our drive just across the state lines into Idaho.

“How are you feeling today?” I ask, reaching over the console and taking Jenna’s hand in mine.

“Not bad. A little achy, but that’s pretty normal these days.”

“You tell me when you’re ready to call it quits today, okay?” I know she won’t, but I remind her anyway.

“Of course,” she answers, squeezing my hand. “Don’t I always?”

“No,” I laugh, “you almost never do. That’s why I’m reminding you. If you get to the point that you’re just...done...tell me. I don’t have any expectations for the day other than you enjoying yourself.”

“I’m with you,” she says with a contented sigh. “It’s going to be a great day.”

The minute we walk into the conservation center, Jenna forgets I exist, and that’s okay with me. Watching her talk to the scientists, veterinarians, and conservationists is like watching a master at work. She’s in her element as she learns about the research the center does and the way that their work supports the work in Yellowstone as well.

And then, the reason we’re here.

We’re led to an enclosure and given instructions on how to interact with the animals and then we’re each given a bottle. Jenna reaches for my hand, practically vibrating with excitement as she leans in and presses a soft kiss to my cheek. “Thank you, .”



“You’re welcome, Jay.”

A couple of bear cubs are brought into the enclosure and Jenna and I have the opportunity to feed them. It’s quite possibly the coolest thing I’ve ever done in my life. Every animal here at the conservation center has been rescued and removed from the wild for one reason or another, and the cubs that we’re feeding were found abandoned and brought here to be rehabilitated, and as part of that, they require bottle feeding.

Jenna is fully in her element, petting and feeding the cub that was brought to her. My cub accepts the bottle warily, warming up to me once I start petting her, running my hand over her dense, thick fur. The little bear closes her eyes and nuzzles her head into my hand much like a cat would ask for more pets, and I can’t turn her down.

“I want one,” Jenna says with a laugh, “I know it’s impractical and we could never do it, but I want one.”

“They are pretty cute, aren’t they?”

“The cutest.”

When the food is gone, the bears are taken to a wide open enclosure where they are allowed to run, climb and explore, and Jenna and I get to watch from behind a fence. Her arms wrap around my waist as we watch them play together.

“I will never forget this day, . Thank you for this.”

“The day’s not over yet.”

After the conservation center, we drive into the park for dinner at the same hotel where our wedding reception was held just a few years ago and after parking, I take

two bags from the trunk, relishing the look of surprise and confusion on my wife's face as I do. It's not often that I'm able to surprise her, but I'm always satisfied when I can pull it off.

"We have dinner reservations," I pull Jenna close, tucking her against me in the elevator, "but we've got time if you want to shower and change first."

"Yes please."

Once in the room, Jenna hustles off to the shower and I check out the view from our windows, not at all disappointed to look out and see Old Faithful, steam rising from the fissure in the ground as people gather on the boardwalk to wait for the show. There are other, far more impressive, geysers in the park, but none as consistent as Old Faithful who continues to live up to her name.

My own Old Faithful (though she'd hate that I called her old) hums an old standard as the water shuts off in the bathroom, and a few minutes later she's changing into one of several things I packed for her to choose from. While she gets dressed, I change into dress pants and a button down shirt, that was a gift from my brother-in-law who told me that I'm never allowed to wear the sleeves down and cuffed. They are apparently meant to be rolled up. And judging by the look on Jenna's face as she watches me adjust the sleeves, that is very sage advice. I will never tell her that it came from her brother.

We eat dinner on the patio at the back of the hotel, enjoying the cool fall air, knowing that it won't be long before snow starts to fly and winter will be setting in. But for tonight, I have the warmth of my wife beside me as we share a meal together, and when the meal is over, I offer her my arm as we walk carefully to the boardwalk and around to the front of the hotel.

"Do you want to watch from here, or up close?"

“Up close,” she wraps her sweater tighter around her shoulders as she steps closer to me and we find our way to a bench.

The sun is almost below the horizon and the boardwalk is nearly empty this time of night, allowing us a bench to ourselves. I sit and tug Jenna down beside me, wrapping an arm around her waist as she leans her head against my shoulder. Steam continues to pour out of the nearby vent, and every now and then water bubbles up, signaling the imminent eruption.

We’ve had our fair share of those over the years, but every time I watch one of these geysers, I’m reminded of our first summer here, and that night in the laundry room. I’m reminded of walking back home to Jenna, my Old Faithful. Steadfast and true when I need her the most.

“Thanks for another year of being my forever hiking buddy,” I turn and press a kiss to the top of her head. “I wouldn’t want to do this with anyone else.”

PENELOPE

TEN YEARS AFTER THE WALK OFF

JANUARY

We're about ten minutes away from being shuffled into the studio to get ready for tonight's show. I'm in my office, working on some last minute notes, thoroughly distracted by the sight of my husband sitting in his office across the bullpen. His sleeves are rolled up, glasses perched on his nose, and the overhead lighting is calling attention to the little bits of gray that have begun to appear at his temples. He looks up and catches my eye, throwing me a wink that makes me melt. I'm so distracted by the sight of him, I almost don't hear my phone ringing.

"This is Hutchinson."

", this is Dianna Rollings. Do you have a moment to talk about the show tonight?"

Diana has been my contact in Cooperstown all throughout the planning of tonight's show and the lead-up to On the Field's Hall of Fame special. The final voting is in, and she's calling to give me the updated list of inductees, and final vote count to announce later in the show. At the end of the call, I quickly hunt down Morgan, still going strong as executive producer of On the Field , and pass along the final list. Her eyes scan the page and meet mine for a split second before a grin spreads across her face.

"You should be the one to do it, " she says as Jake walks up behind me, trying to

sneak a peek at my note cards before I tuck them into the pocket of my skirt.

“Do what?”

Jake asks, his voice a rumble just behind my ear that still sends a shiver all the way to my toes. He presses a kiss to my cheek as he straightens his tie before helping me into my blazer.

“Oh, nothing, ” I brush away the inquiry with a wave of my hand. “Something for another show.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” Jake draws me toward him and pulls me in for a kiss in an attempt to get me to spill my secrets, but I won’t take the bait. I break the kiss and straighten his tie, giving him a pat on the cheek before turning on my heel and walking off toward the studio. Jim gives me a questioning look as I take my seat beside him and I have to school my features into something a little more professional and a little less just-made-out-with-my-husband-in-the-office. I clip on my microphone, straighten my notecards, and then the cameras roll.

“Good evening, and welcome to On the Field . I’m Hutchinson, and joining me tonight are Max Harrison and Jake Hutchinson. We have an exciting show for you tonight. As you know, this is our Hall of Fame show. We have the lists in front of us of the upcoming Hall of Fame inductees, and it’s truly a privilege to be able to make this announcement tonight. Max, take it away.”

Jake is next to me, shuffling through his notecards, a furrow in his brow as a muscle tics in his jaw. I reach out my hand to slow his movements, he looks at me and tilts his head to the side, an unspoken question hanging in the air between us. He doesn’t have the list. I didn’t give it to him. I haven’t given it to him for the last handful of years. This is Jake’s fourth year of eligibility for induction into the Hall of Fame. He had a brilliant career that was unfortunately derailed by a series of arm injuries. We’d been hopeful that he’d make it in after his first year on the ballot but tempered our

expectations.

Each year when voting rolls around, Jake signs out of his social media accounts, and avoids watching anything other than our show. He doesn't like to hear his career rehashed – debate over whether or not he deserves to be elected. I think he does. But I don't get to vote. Jim is wrapping up reading the list of honorees, congratulating each one on this well deserved honor. This years' class is small, but power packed.

When Max finishes with the list of honorees, he throws to me to introduce the discussion portion of the show. But what only Morgan and I know is, there's another name on the list. I pull my notecards from my skirt pocket, and with them, a very discreetly folded handkerchief, a gift from my brother-in-law James and set them on the desk in front of me.

“Thank you, Max. And, I apologize, I gave you an incomplete list. There's one more member of this years' Hall of Fame class.” Max and Jake give me twin expressions of confusion, Jake's eyes meeting mine as if pleading for some unspoken...something. I can't even look at him. I force myself to face the camera. To keep it professional. I clear my throat and try to swallow around the emotion that wells up as I begin to read my notes.

“With a career 2.55 ERA, two Cy Young Awards, an All-Star start, and World Series MVP....it is my distinct honor, ” I turn to Jake, who looks stunned, as tears slip from my eyes, “to announce that you, Jake Hutchinson, have been elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame.” Max stands and applauds, the crew behind the camera joins in, and I turn to my husband, tears in his eyes as he wraps his arms around me and buries his head against my shoulder, body shaking with tears.

“You earned this, Stormcloud. I'm so proud of you.”

JULY

It's a beautiful sunny day in upstate New York. The whole family has driven over from Saratoga and have taken up an entire row on the lawn. Bright blue sky overhead, big fluffy white clouds, and the backdrop of the stage. Row upon row of chairs is set up on the expansive green lawn, and as my gaze drifts up to the stage, I can't help but think of all the years I spent sitting at home with my dad, watching this ceremony on television.

We'd get home from church, and mom would let us eat Sunday dinner in the living room while we watched. I always loved watching the announcement of the living hall of famers in attendance, dad would comment on which ones he'd seen play. The ones he grew up watching. The ones who weren't included amongst their ranks, but should have been. We'd watch the speeches of the incoming inductees, both of us crying through the whole thing.

We always said we'd be here together someday.

I never imagined I'd be here without him.

And I never imagined I would end up sitting in the section reserved for the family of the inductees.

We find our way to our seats, and Junie fidgets beside me, she's restless and looking for her dad. I reach into my 'keep the kid occupied' bag and hand her a book and a bag of grapes. Satisfied, she settles into a seat beside Mackenzie, who helps her sound out words as she reads aloud to anyone willing to listen. So, everyone.

My phone pings with an incoming text from Jake, after making sure the family is situated and someone has an eye on my daughters, I excuse myself to go find him backstage. He's standing in the back of the tent, alone, going over his speech again. He is surrounded by a sea of hall of fame baseball players and I do my very best not to stop and introduce myself to every man in this tent. I'm here to see my husband.

“Jake? Sweetheart? What’s wrong?” His brow is furrowed, lips turned down in a scowl. This should be one of the best days of his life, yet he looks as if he’d rather be anywhere but here. Looking up and meeting my gaze, his features soften. Brow smoothing out and a small smile replaces his frown. He frames my face gently with his hands and draws me forward for a kiss. I twine my arms around his neck and stretch up on to my toes to meet him.

“I didn’t want to go out there without doing that first.” He smiles as he wraps me in a hug, gathering me into his chest. He holds me tight, my head pressed to his chest, and I can feel his erratic heartbeat. He breathes deep and matches his breathing to mine. I feel him relax in my arms. “Thank you.”

“Knock ‘em dead” I whisper, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You deserve this. Soak it all in.”

I make my way back to where the family is waiting for me. My brother Peter, looking more and more like our dad with every passing year, gathers me in a hug and presses a soft kiss to the top of my head. “How is he?”

“Understandably nervous, but he’ll be just fine.”

“I have no doubt. And how are you?” He gives me a very pointed, big brother look.

“I’m trying really hard to hold it together,” I laugh as a tear slips down my cheek and I swipe it away. “But, I’m good.”

How can I not be? On a day like this, surrounded by family, and generations of baseball history? How can I not be okay? A hush falls over the crowd as people begin to take their seats, the master of ceremonies takes the stage, and I take my seat – Leigh and Juniper are seated on one side of me, and Jax on the other.

The living hall of famers file out and take their seats. Legends, all of them. Men that I



grew up watching or heard stories about from my dad. Men that Jake looked up to and learned from. And now, my husband will be among their ranks.

A hall of famer.

I couldn't be prouder.

There's no greater honor in baseball than this, and I am thrilled we get to share this with our family. I sit, flanked by my daughters, and the rest of our row is filled with family. Junie sits beside her cousin Alice, who drove up from her fine arts college to be here, and next to her is Mackenzie, fresh off of an international friendly with the national soccer team. Sam and Ben are sandwiched between James and Mandy, chattering excitedly about the baseball players they'll get to see today, including their uncle Max. Maxwell Harrison was elected to the Hall in his first year of eligibility and has been working with us on On the Field ever since.

Leigh is talking to the people around us, ever my social butterfly. She turns and faces the stage as we're welcomed and given a history of the Hall of Fame and Museum.

And then the moment we've been waiting for...

Jake is the last to give his speech. When he steps to the podium, his gaze scans the crowd until he finds me. Finds us .

Jake didn't share any of his speech with me ahead of time, but it's what I expected. He thanks his parents and siblings, coaches and teammates. And then...

"I owe a debt of gratitude to a man who isn't with us today. To a man who watched me when I was a struggling minor leaguer and reminded me of the joy that I was missing. The joy that I'd let drain out of me. A man who made me feel like a star when I was facing being cut from the roster. A man who, in one fleeting moment in my first spring training, completely changed my life. And whose example lives on in

his daughter.”

I can’t look at him.

I can’t.

Because if I do, my already slipping composure will dissolve completely.

“And to my wife,” whatever illusion of composure I thought I had is gone now. “The woman who gave me what I never knew I needed: stability. A home. The woman who helped me come to terms with the grief I experienced after my injuries. The woman who taught me to cook.”

This draws a laugh from the crowd.

“You brought Sunshine back into my life.”

“Leigh and Juniper, my precious girls. , my Sunshine. As wonderful as this honor is, I consider it the honor of a lifetime to be your father. Your husband.”

The crowd goes nuts. I stay seated as the audience around me erupts. Someone pats me on the back, Jax reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. And Jake, his eyes scan the crowd once more and land on me. He presses his hand over his heart and gives me a nod.

At the end of the night, exhausted from celebrating and full from the delicious meal we enjoyed with this year's inductees, we drive home and after sending the girls to their rooms, I join Jake on the deck.

He pulls me down onto the swing beside him, and gathers me into his arms, holding me close and pressing a kiss to the top of my head. Crickets chirp around us, and stars glitter in the sky overhead. The sound of a baseball game floats out the screen door

and fills the air around us. I lean into my husband's embrace and close my eyes, wrapped in the comfort of home and baseball and family.