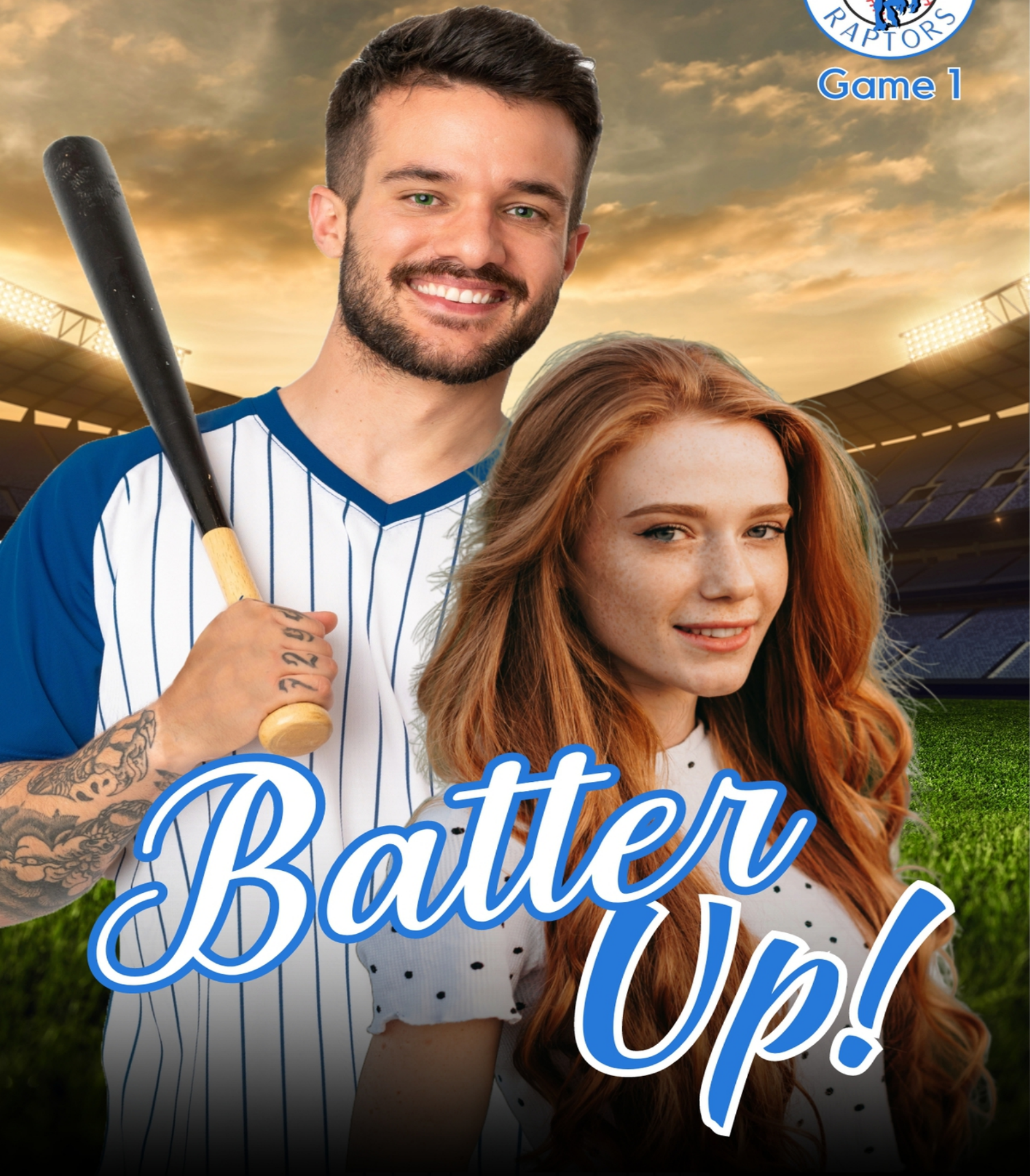




Game 1



Batter Up!

Sasha McCallen

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Editor: Kimber Alexander

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For Magnolia, Dahlia, Maggie, and Kimber

Without you all, I would not have had the courage to write my
first book.

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Meet the Raptor's staff and roster

Owner

Dr. Sebastian Campbell

Coaches

Benito Hernandez 52

Bullpen coach

Adam "Mack" McAlister 44

Head Coach/Manager

Mark Reeves 82

Hitting Coach

Jason Snyder 78

Pitching Coach

Pitchers

Ivan Cruz 27

B/T: R/R Ht: 5'10" Wt: 190

Cooper Dixon 32

B/T: L/L Ht: 6'7" Wt: 229

Kevin Swick 33

B/T: R/R Ht: 6'2" Wt: 201

Keegan Tucker 1

B/T: L/L Ht: 6'0" Wt: 170

Catchers

Neil Endicott 41

B/T: R/R Ht: 6'1" Wt: 230

Tyler Stone 7

B/T: S/R Ht: 6'4" Wt: 225

Infielders

Dominic Anderson 2

B/T: S/R Ht: 5'9" Wt: 167

Ian Baxter 24

B/T: R/R Ht: 6'2" Wt: 215

Jude Fox 20

B/T L/L Ht: 5'11" Wt: 210

Hayden Scott 11

B/T: R/R Ht: 6'3" Wt: 218

Ben Swanson 16

B/T: R/R Ht: 5'11" Wt: 180

Outfield

Trent Brooks 60

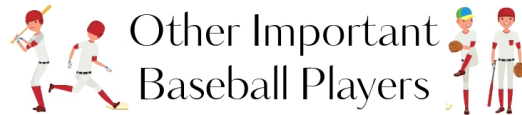
B/T: L/R Ht: 6'3" Wt: 210

Antonio Walker 36

B/T: S/R Ht: 6'6" Wt: 245

Jordan Woosley 75

B/T: L/L Ht: 5'10" Wt: 182



Steve Henderson 10

Manager for the Bristol Lightning

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B/T: L/R Ht: 6'0" Wt: 196

shortstop for the Bristol Lightning

Landon Stone 29

B/T: R/R Ht: 6'4" Wt: 210

outfielder for the Miami Jaguars



Penelope Benton: manager, baker, & cashier

Janel Boyher: part time baker

Molly Green: owner & baker

Lillian Paddington: cashier & social media manager

Cash Wehmeier: part time cashier

Dear Reader,

I have been an avid reader forever and recently began going to book events, where I made many close author and reader friends. Some who I consider my best friends now!

Many authors encouraged me to write and told me my characters would help tell their own story. I had no idea what that meant until I actually began writing. This really is Molly and Tyler's story that I just helped to write.

Batter Up! is the first book in the Riverbend Raptors series. It is a duet about a baker and a baseball player, and this book will end in a cliffhanger. This is a sweet, romantic story with spicy, open door scenes. There is also a surprise pregnancy after a one-night stand, in case that triggers anyone.

I also want to say that this is my very first book and I am excited and nervous to share Molly and Tyler's story. I hope you enjoy it.

Thanks for reading,
Sasha McCallen



Since 1959, the final game of every Little League World Series has been played at Howard J. Lamade Stadium. The stadium sits on land donated by the Lamade family.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! We’re here! We’re really here!” I squealed with excitement as I put both my hands on the window frame and stuck my head as far out of the window as my seatbelt would allow.

My papaw’s booming laugh filled the car, and I looked over at him, grinning. His laugh was one of my favorite sounds in the whole world. “You would think I was taking you to Disney with a reaction like that.”

“Welcome to Howard J. Lemonade Stadium,” I read out loud.

Papaw laughed again, and he corrected me, “That’s Lamade, darling girl.”

I just shrugged, “I still can’t believe it’s free to come.”

“Oh, Molls, look at that,” Papaw said and pointed to the side of the stadium. Words were cut out of bushes on a hill next to the stadium that read, ‘Welcome to the Little League World Series.’ “We’ll have to get a picture in front of that for Mimi.”

“She would love that,” I said as we circled around looking for a parking space. Then, I saw a bunch of kids of all different

ages sliding down a steep hill while riding in cardboard boxes. “Holy shit, that looks awesome!”

“Molly Nicole Green! Watch your language,” Papaw chided. “Your Mimi would have my hide if I let you use language like that.”

“Sorry, Papaw,” I murmured and hung my head. I didn’t like when he was upset with me.

When I was four years old, my parents were killed in a car crash after celebrating their anniversary. My grandparents, my mom’s parents, were babysitting me when it happened, and they took over raising me. My dad’s I don’t really remember too much about my parents other than the stories Papaw tells me or the pictures Mimi shows me. I couldn’t ask for better people to raise me.

Mimi was the bakery manager at the big department store in town, and because it was corporate-owned, she really couldn’t be creative with her baking. When she was home, however, she taught me all her skills. We would have the best time making up crazy recipes and testing them out on Papaw. He said I was just like my mom, Jennie, because we would both get so excited to try new things. I loved learning little things like that about her.

Papaw was the high school principal, and I secretly hoped he would retire by the time I got there. Talk about awkward! He had been the head baseball coach before he became principal, though he still helped coach each year. He taught me everything about baseball, especially how to love the game.

“I won’t tell Mimi if you don’t,” Papaw said as he gently squeezed my shoulder. “Just watch your mouth. It’s not nice language coming from my sweet girl.”

“Ok, Papaw,” I said as he finally found an empty spot and parked the car. As soon as he put it in park, he pulled out his cell phone and called Mimi.

“Hi, Eloise. I just wanted to leave you a message letting you know that Molly and I are here safely in Williamsport. We miss you and wish you were with us. Thanks again for packing

the hazelnut chocolate chip cookies so we didn't starve on the way here. Love you. Call me back soon."

We walked up to the sign made from hedges and watched as several baseball teams, families, and even individuals took their turn taking pictures at the sign.

When we finally got to the front of the line, a woman was taking a picture of three boys, all wearing the same uniform.

"If one of those handsome young men is yours, I can take your picture with him," Papaw offered with a broad smile.

The woman laughed. "I claim all three of them. That would be really sweet. Then, I can get a picture of you two."

After the pictures were taken and we stepped to the side, I heard one of the three boys complaining about being hungry.

"You just ate!" Their mother said. "With the way you three eat, I'll go broke trying to feed you when you guys are teenagers."

"I have some cookies," I offered. "We have plenty if you guys want to share."

"Yes! Cookies!" The complaining boy cheered, pumping his fist in the air.

"That's very sweet, honey," the mom said, smiling. "But, knowing these boys, they will eat every cookie you have."

"We have more in the car, so I'm not worried," I said with a grin as I dug into my backpack for the ziploc baggie I'd stashed there earlier.

As I pulled it free, the other two boys turned around and grinned at the sight of the cookies. My eyes locked on the most beautiful green eyes I had ever seen. Those eyes were trained on mine, and I felt frozen in place. Butterflies began to flutter in my tummy, I had never felt like this before. My friends, Chelcie and Mary, always talked about how cute certain boys were on the playground at recess, but I hadn't ever really noticed a boy until now.

"Hi," he said. "Thanks for the cookies."

“Hi,” I echoed, not sure what else to say. I didn’t want to look away from his eyes but wanted to take all of him in. Cute dimples popped out on either side of the wide smile that lit up his face.

One of the other boys grabbed the bag of cookies out of my hand, and their mom reprimanded him for being rude.

“I don’t think she minds,” I heard Papaw say with a chuckle behind me. “Sweetheart, are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” I said, taking a cookie offered to me by the third boy. I took a bite while I watched as the boy who caught my attention also took a bite.

“These are really good,” he murmured, his mouth full. “Did you make them?”

“I did,” I said proudly. “Someday, I want to own my own bakery.”

“You would have my business with cookies like these,” he replied, popping another whole cookie into his mouth. “I’ve never tasted anything like this.”

“I’m glad you like them,” I replied, secretly thrilled at his praise.

He suddenly began to cough and couldn’t stop. His eyes started to water, and he started to massage his throat.

“Oh, shit. Mom!” One of the other boys yelled, “Where is your purse?”

I wasn’t sure what was happening, but it didn’t look good.

“Were there nuts in the cookies?” The woman asked as she began digging in her huge purse.

“Yes, these are my favorite hazelnut chocolate chip cookies.” I replied as I felt tears welling up in my own eyes. “I am so sorry!”

“Don’t worry. It happens a lot,” one of the boys said nonchalantly while my crush tried to offer me a smile, but I could tell he was in pain.

The woman grabbed a blue pen out of her purse and immediately jabbed it into his leg. His coughing began to slow, and he sat down on the ground, trying to catch his breath.

“Do you feel okay? Do we need to go to the hospital?” The woman asked as she gently rubbed his back.

He shook his head and held up his pointer finger to let her know he needed a minute.

“I am so sorry,” I repeated as I held onto my papaw’s arm. “I should have asked if you had any allergies.”

“He’s the one with allergies, so he should have asked,” one of the boys said dismissively. “But he was too busy staring at a pretty girl.”

“Shut up,” the object of my attention hissed, his first words since his allergic reaction. “I’ll be okay. Don’t worry.” He spoke slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. He reached for my hand and gently squeezed it.

“Are you sure he doesn’t need to go to the hospital?” Papaw asked. “I have insurance if that’s the reason, and since it was our cookies...”

“Oh, no. I’m an RN, and if I think for a second he needs to go, I will take him. I just can’t believe he didn’t ask. I’ve always drilled into his head to ask if something has nuts in it, but of course, the one time he doesn’t ask,” his mom said, then turned to look at him. “I’m going to watch you closely. No physical activity for the next ninety minutes, young man. I don’t want you to be alone, either. I volunteered to check people in, and that starts in a few minutes. I’m going to see if someone can switch with me.”

“You can go,” the boy said. He looked around, his wide green eyes taking everything in, then pointed over to a huge tree with a shady area underneath. “I’ll just watch from under that tree over there. It’s not far from the check-in tent.”

“I can sit with him,” I volunteered, not ready to leave him yet.

“I don’t want you to miss out on going down the muddy hill,” his mom argued. “I can sit with him.”

“Mom!” My crush hissed. “Maybe she doesn’t want to get muddy?”

“Yeah, my granddaughter doesn’t like to get messy,” Papaw interjected.

“Well, if you don’t mind,” his mom agreed. “Boys, you be sure to check in to make sure he’s doing ok and call me the minute he’s not feeling well.”

“We promise,” the other two boys chorused at the same time before they ran for the muddy hill. I walked with him toward the tree, waving over my shoulder to Papaw as he called out that he was going to go check us in at the motel we were staying at. He told me he’d find me soon.

“So, Strawberry Shortcake, where are you from?”

“Strawberry Shortcake, huh? I like that,” I said with a grin.

“Well, you’re short with strawberry-colored hair. It works,” he said, his dimples popping out. “Plus, I’m not allergic to strawberries, so it’s a safe nickname.”

“We’re from New York. How about you?”

“We’re from Tennessee,” he said.

“That sucks. That’s so far away,” I said with a tint of sadness in my voice. “What position do you play?”

“Only the most important position. My coach lets me help research the different players we play against. I also have to know what pitches our own guys can pitch and when it is a good time to throw a certain pitch against a certain hitter,” he said with a puffed out chest as we sat down under the tree.

“You must be the catcher on your team, then,” I said.

“Yes! So you know about baseball?”

“I love baseball!” I said excitedly, and my heart skipped a beat at how he laughed along with me.

We sat under the tree and talked about our favorite baseball players and teams, our favorite baseball memory, and everything about baseball. I have no idea how much time had passed, but I didn't want this time with him to end.

"Most boys get intimidated because I know so much about baseball."

"No way!" he said with a grin. "It's cute as hell. Someday, I'm going to be in the major leagues, and I'll want a girl who knows about baseball and appreciates it. She'll have to understand how much I'll be gone."

"Any specific team you hope to play for?" I asked as I picked a dandelion and started making a flower chain.

"Nah. I just want to play ball. My oldest brother is a better player than I am, and he wants to play for the Yankees someday. He can play every position, but he's best in the outfield, and he's super fast. He's going to make it, too. My big dream is to throw him out in the bigs when he tries to steal against my team."

"That would be awesome," I grinned, loving the spirit of rivalry between the brothers and wishing I'd had siblings. "The Yanks are the best! That's my team! What about your other brother?" I asked, wondering if all three were into sports.

He just shrugged. "He plays ball with us, but he doesn't love it like we do. He loves taking things apart and putting them back together."

I wasn't sure what kind of things he would take apart and put together, but I didn't get a chance to ask because his brothers both came over, covered head to toe in mud.

"How ya feeling, bro?" his brother asked. I couldn't even tell which one asked because of all the mud.

"Totally fine," he responded, but I could tell he was annoyed with them for interrupting us.

"Good! We're playing in an hour. We gotta head over and clean up and get ready for warm ups."

“You’re going to watch us, right?” He asked as he stood up, then turned to look at me as he reached his hand down to help pull me up.

“Of course,” I said with a grin and stood up next to him. I didn’t miss the fact that our hands were still linked. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

“You’ll be my good luck charm,” he said sweetly.

“Yeah, a good luck charm that almost killed you with hazelnuts,” the other brother said with a cackle.

“Shut up, C,” he said, letting go of my hand to punch him in the arm. He seemed to miss the contact because he reached back over and intertwined our fingers together again. The butterflies were back in my belly and making it feel very warm.

“Can I get your number?” he asked.

“Oh. I wish, but I don’t have a phone,” I said shyly. “My grandparents don’t believe I should have one until I’m at least sixteen.”

“Ouch. That sucks,” one of the brothers said, and I nodded in agreement. I never wanted my own phone more than I did right now, so I could keep in contact with this green-eyed cutie.

“Boys! You better get going, or you’ll be late, and Coach Johnson won’t start you,” I heard their mom yell from the check in tent. “T, are you feeling okay to play?”

“Yes, Mom, I am,” he replied and then brushed his lips against my cheek. “Bye, Strawberry Shortcake.”

T was now my favorite letter in the alphabet.



TYLER

CHAPTER ONE

Minor league baseball teams don't hold open tryouts, and the path players take to reach the minors isn't always simple. Either way, they were all scouted and watched by someone along their journey to the pros.

"I'm going to tell them tonight," I said to my two brothers as we sat in the apartment that Carter and I shared. I was pacing along the family room wall and looked over at Carter lounging comfortably on the couch. Landon sat backward in one of the kitchen chairs, so he could face us. Landon had flown in earlier that day, and I loved seeing him in our space.

"Dad's going to be so mad," Carter replied, looking over at Landon. "But you've got to take this opportunity."

"I agree," Landon said while he turned his baseball cap to sit backward on his brown hair. "You've got our support, Ty."

I nodded and sighed, "I just need to rip off the band-aid."

"And you know Alec will fill in for you at the shop," Carter said about his best friend. "I think he'll probably want to move in here and take your room, too. That way, our rent will be the same, and you won't have to worry about that. His parents and sisters, Vera and Nora, will be really happy to have him out of their basement."

Landon nodded, "Great idea. Maybe Dad won't be so upset if you have a plan."

“Are you ready for Sunday night supper?” Carter asked. Every Sunday, my mom insisted our family get together to make sure we all got at least one home-cooked meal every week. “And do they know you’re coming, L?”

“Nope. I hope my surprise of being here will take some tension off Ty.”

“Let’s go,” I said and was already not looking forward to my dad’s reaction.

My parents still lived in the same house we had grown up in. It was a white, two-story house with a wrap-around porch that my mom loved. Her vegetable garden could be seen from the side of the house, and I couldn’t wait to bite into a fresh tomato. Our older sister, Julia, and her husband, Rob, were getting out of her car as we walked up the front steps.

“Hey, sis!” Carter called out as he walked towards the front door.

“Landon! Hi!” Julia cried and ran over to give him a big hug.

“We see how we rate,” Carter scoffed with a shake of his head. We had just seen him at Christmas, so not that long ago.

“I love you two, too,” she said as she gave us each a hug.

“Good to see you again, Landon,” Rob said and gave him a handshake. “How is Miami?”

“Wonderful,” he said with a grin. “Nice and warm.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready for Spring Training?” Rob asked.

“Yeah, I report to Jupiter in a week. Catchers and pitchers report this coming week.”

“I love seeing you, but why are you here?” Julia asked.

“Just supporting T,” Landon said and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Well...” Carter began, “Let’s go inside and get this party started. Prepare for fireworks.”

“Fireworks? Did you get them on sale or something?” Julia asked, confused because we had nothing in our hands. Rob held the door for her as she walked in, and we all followed her inside.

“Not literal fireworks, you nerd,” Carter said with a roll of his eyes.

“Hi, Mom!” I said as I entered the door.

“Hi, kids, come on back!” My mom’s voice rang out from the back of the house.

I walked through the entryway hallway that was covered in pictures of us in diapers, Julia and Carter making mud pies, Julia putting bandages on us boys, the three of us boys playing t-ball, and pictures of all three of us playing Varsity baseball. Mom even had some of Carter’s drawings he did in art class on the wall still. He was very talented when it came to drawing. Julia’s wedding pictures were at the end of the hall, and so was one of my favorite pictures of Landon and me playing for the area high school all-star game. I sighed when I looked at Landon’s picture with all of us when he got drafted by the Jaguars a few years ago. Maybe Mom would put up a new picture of me soon.

I went into the kitchen and walked to where Mom was. I had to bend down to give her a kiss on her cheek. Mom was a petite woman at only five foot two. Dad always said he liked shorter women, and his dad and brother had been the same way. All four of us kids got Dad’s height. Dad is six two, and Carter and I are both right around six four. Landon was the tallest at six four and a half. (That half inch was very important to him to hold over his brothers.) Julia surpassed Mom in sixth grade and finally topped out at five-nine.

“How are my babies?” Mom asked as she sat down her wooden spoon and turned to the others, “I made your favorite spaghetti and homemade meatballs, Carter.”

“Let’s go!” Carter said excitedly. “It smells amazing.”

“Landon Oliver!!! What are you doing here?!” She squealed and rushed over to the prodigal brother.

“Surprise!” Landon said. “I wanted to catch one more Sunday Night Supper before the season began.”

“Oh, honey! What a wonderful surprise!” Mom said, “If I had known you were coming, I would have made your favorite meatloaf.”

“I love your spaghetti and meatballs, too.”

“Where is Dad?” I asked, tentatively.

“Cleaning up in the shower, of course,” Mom said. “But he’ll never be fully clean. All that grease and oil will be under his nails forever.”

Dad owned Stone Family Auto Shop, the local mechanic shop, that he inherited from his dad.

All three of us boys worked there during high school, but Carter was the only one who actually enjoyed working there. He had always loved working on cars. I worked there now but was about to give Dad my notice. I hated working on cars and wanted to follow in my oldest brother’s footsteps. Landon had worked there until he got drafted to the Miami Jaguars to play baseball five years ago. He had finally made it to the major leagues two years ago, and we couldn’t be prouder of him.

“Hey, kids!” Dad said as he came into the kitchen. He gave Julia a big hug and shook hands with Rob. He then looked over at us three boys and almost did a double take.

“Landon, what are you doing here?”

“Hey, Dad,” Landon said. “Just wanted to see you guys before the season starts”

“I see,” Dad said. “How long are you in town?”

“Just a few days,” he said. “Why were you working on Sunday, Dad?”

“Stuff always needs to be done,” Dad replied gruffly and then looked over at my other brother. “Thanks again for staying late on Friday and helping to finish Mrs. Cowan’s car so quickly. She appreciated it.”

“No problem,” Carter said as he took Mom’s wooden spoon to taste the spaghetti sauce.

“Carter Andrew!” Mom scolded. “Don’t you dare put that spoon back in the sauce. You better clean it off.”

Landon and I looked at each other, shook our heads, and had to laugh. Some things never changed.

“Dad, um, I was wondering when it would be a good time to talk?” I began as my dad grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“What’s up, son? Is this a before, during, or after dinner conversation?”

“Before or after, definitely not during,” Carter answered for me as Dad handed each one of the guys a beer. He then poured a glass of wine for both Mom and Julia. Rob declined a beer since he was on call, so Carter threw him a bottle of water instead.

“Well, then, let’s get it over with, so I can eat. I’m starving.”

I took a deep breath, pulled the letter from the back pocket of my jeans, and handed it to my dad.

“What’s this?” He asked as he opened the folded letter. “It’s from Paul Howard.” He began reading, but I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“Who is Paul Howard?” Julia asked as she moved the salad to the table.

“The guy who was scouting Tyler in high school for baseball,” Landon said. “He scouted me and is the one who convinced me to go for the draft.”

“But then he got that knee injury and couldn’t play in the championship game,” Mom said quietly. “What does Mr. Howard want now, Tyler?”

“He wanted to see how the knee is and see if he still has what it takes. He said he was so happy to see you doing well and playing at the same competitive level as the college players he was watching,” Dad said, paraphrasing the letter.

“Where were you playing ball?” Julia asked.

“A group of us were just playing for fun,” I said.

“But Ty never plays baseball just for fun,” Landon said. “I heard from some of my friends that Ty still had it.”

“Oh, honey. I didn’t know you were playing again,” Mom said with a bit of pride in her voice. “How did the knee feel?”

“Like it had never been hurt.” I said. I had been devastated as a senior in high school and having to sit on the bench as my team played in the championship game and lost. I’m not saying we would have won if I had been behind the plate, but not playing was painful. Not playing hurt worse than when Chris Richmond, who played for the other team, was racing for home plate a few weeks earlier and slammed into my knee, tearing my ACL. No one could prove he had done it on purpose, but I had thrown him out twice in the series for attempting to steal, and he had let it be known that he was mad at me. The pain was excruciating, and I had wondered then if I would ever play again. I knew I would never forget his name.

“Son, I don’t know....” Dad said. He handed the letter to my mom to read while he ran his fingers through his graying hair. “I don’t want you to get your hopes up. I know how hard it was when your brother and teammates were going off to college to play ball, and you were stuck here. You’ve got a good thing with me and your brother at the shop. I know it’s not as glamorous as playing in the major leagues would be, but it’s good, honest work.”

“I know it is, Dad,” I began, knowing how he felt. “But I was born to play ball.”

“Well, let’s all sit down for dinner, so it doesn’t get cold,” Mom suggested.

We all took our seats and began passing around the food. It was my brother-in-law, Rob who spoke first, “So, what happens if you hurt your knee again?”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take. The surgeon said it was repaired, and if I didn’t play for a while, there was a chance I would be fine to play again in the future. It’s been seven years.

I already felt old when the scouts asked to see a bunch of us, and I was by far the oldest there.” I realized my mistake as soon as it came out of my mouth.

“Already? The scouts saw you already?” Dad asked, the vein in his forehead becoming more pronounced.

“Oh, Tyler!” Mom said, “How did it go?”

“Hold on a minute, Susan,” Dad said without taking his glare off of me. “How dare you just forget your responsibilities to the family business. Are you just going to leave us high and dry?”

“Alec Kight said he would love a job at the shop,” Carter stepped in for me. “And he’s going to take Ty’s room, so my rent won’t go up.”

“Oh, so you knew about this, huh?” Dad said.

“Of course, we did,” Landon replied.

Dad put his fork down, “It is the Stone Family Auto Shop. Not Stone’s one son and friend Auto Shop.”

“But, Mike, at least they thought about finding a replacement and a roommate to help with the bills. You know Tyler was never going to stay here. He always wanted to play ball and travel and see places. Owning a mechanic shop was your dream. Julia’s dream was to be a nurse, and Landon and Tyler wanted to play baseball.”

“So, when do you find out the results of the tryout?” Julia asked as she passed the garlic bread to Carter.

“He already did,” Carter replied and then took a big bite of the bread.

“You already know?” Dad said and looked at each one of our faces. “Oh. So, tell me Tyler, when do you leave?”

I put my fork down on my plate and looked from my dad to my mom, “Tomorrow. I will be taking a bus to Riverbend, Ohio, to be a Raptor. They are the Single A minor league team for the Cincinnati Cyclones.”

Dad threw his fork down on his plate and got up from the table, “Thanks for the big notice!”

“Dad, I knew you’d be mad. I didn’t know how to tell you. I – “

“You know what – go off and play your game. But if you hurt your knee again and can’t play anymore, don’t come crawling back to me. When you’re in run-down motels, heading from small city to small city, and have no money, don’t be calling us for cash. You will no longer be part of Stone Family Auto Shop!” With that, Dad stomped out of the dining room. We were silent as we heard the garage door slam.

“Oh, honey,” Mom said with tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry about your dad. He’ll come around.” Mom and I both got up, and I pulled her into a big hug. My head rested on the top of her head. “I am so proud of you, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, not realizing how much her approval meant. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, and I believe in you,” Mom sniffled. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

Julia got up and hugged me, too, “I knew you could do it. And if you need any cash or need to vent, you have my number.”

“I agree,” Rob said and shook my hand. “Congrats, Tyler. I don’t even like baseball, but I’d come to a game to see you play. Just like I did for Landon.”

I laughed. Julia had followed in Mom’s footsteps and became a nurse, and Rob is a doctor, but he is still in residency, so they didn’t have a lot of extra money yet. I already decided I wasn’t going to rely on anyone. “Thanks, Jules, but I’ll be okay. Living in run-down motels and playing in small towns is part of the experience.”



“If you love baking, then I know you love hands-on work. You enjoy the dough’s texture and creating masterpieces out of simple ingredients, sugar, and flour.”

“Hey, bestie! Where are you?” My former college roommate and best friend Meadow Lawson’s voice came through my cell phone. “I’m heading down to Sweeties if you want to meet up.”

“No can do.” I said as I looked at the highway sign ahead of me that said Riverbend 175 miles.

“Well, where the heck are you? Heather said you weren’t working today, and you always work on Thursday mornings.”

Meadow wasn’t wrong. I always worked at Sweet Corner Bakery (Sweeties for short) on Thursdays, but I hadn’t been able to tell my best friend I was leaving. I was a coward, and I hated goodbyes. I also knew Meadow would put her life on hold to come with me, but I wanted to do this on my own.

“Did she tell you anything else?” I asked.

“No. She just said you weren’t in and to give you a call.” Meadow said, “What’s going on, Molly Nicole Green?”

“Ooohhh, you full named me,” I said with a laugh. “I found it, Meadow.”

“Found what?” Meadow asked, and I could hear her chewing something as she talked.

“The perfect building for my own bakery.”

“Where is it?” Meadow asked with her usual excitement in her voice.

“Well...” I said and took a deep breath, knowing how she would react. “Ohio.”

“Ohio?!” I heard her screech, and I had to pull the phone away from my ear. “That’s like a million miles away.”

“Oh, stop your dramatics,” I said with a laugh. “It’s only about 500 miles away.”

“And how long of a drive is that?” she asked.

I mumbled an answer.

“What did you say?” she asked. “When did you freaking leave?”

“I left early this morning after the realtor called me last night to say I could look at it today. She said the family wanted to sell it quickly.”

“And you didn’t tell me? I could have come with you!” Meadow complained.

“I know you would have, but your two-year anniversary with Ryan is this weekend. I didn’t want you to miss that. Maybe this will be the year he proposes!”

“Don’t you dare distract me with that,” Meadow said. “I’m giving up on that. Tell me all about this dream place of yours.”

“When I stop for gas up here, I’ll send you the link,” I said as I noticed there were several options for gas stations at the next exit.

“How much farther do you have?” Meadow asked. “I can’t believe you’re making this long drive all by yourself!”

“I have about three hours left of the drive. If I didn’t leave right then, I would have made lists of why I shouldn’t go, and I would have talked myself out of it. Maybe this is crazy...”

Meadow interrupted me and said, “Or maybe you’ll love it and get your dream of your own bakery. What is so special about this bakery to make you leave so quickly to look at it?”

“Well, it has two kitchens in the back, Meadow! I’ll be able to make allergy-friendly items in the second kitchen, so I can offer all kinds of nut-free, gluten-free, and vegan goodies.”

“Girl, you are going to have your very own AF Kitchen! You are so crazy with your nut free stuff. But hey, I got to take advantage of that with all the lactose-free baked items you made me.”

“I love that nickname!” I said with a smile. “And see, it wasn’t just for him!”

Meadow let out a laugh and said, “So, how many years ago did you meet that boy?”

“I don’t know,” I said quietly.

“Don’t lie to me! I know you know, you know,” Meadow chastised me.

“Okay, okay. 12 years ago. I just felt so horrible seeing him having a hard time breathing, and I’ll never forget it.”

“You’ll also never forget he was your first kiss,” Meadow made a kissing sound and then had to laugh. “Maybe someday you’ll find a guy that will live up to his memory.”

I sighed and thought about all the dates that Meadow set me up with during culinary school, and how none of those guys were ever good enough compared to my ‘T.’ I had one serious boyfriend in college, Tim, who I lost my virginity to. We went out for almost a year, but I never felt a very strong connection with him. Meadow teased me that I dated him because he had a ‘T’ name. He was a few years older than us, and when he graduated culinary school, he got a job on the west coast. We decided to break up as friends and not even try the long-distance thing.

“No one finds their soulmate at eleven,” I said. “Maybe I’ll find someone in my new city.”

“Yes!” Meadow said, and I could tell she was smiling. “That’s the spirit! Tonight, you need to go out and just say hi to the first hot guy you see who’s unattached.”

“Maybe I should have waited and brought you with me,” I said, suddenly unsure.

“You’ve got this!” Meadow answered with the confidence I wish I shared. “Just go up to him and say, ‘HI,’ and everything else will fall into place. But say the word, and I’ll be on the first flight to Nowhereville, Ohio.”

“You really are the best friend ever. Alright, I’ll try,” I said. “I’m going to let the realtor know I’m only a few hours away, so I better get off here. I want to make sure she knows I’m serious and not to let anyone else buy the property. I’ll send pics soon.”

“You better!” Meadow said. “Good luck, and I love you, Moll. You’ve got this. I’m a little jealous of you starting a new life. Your grandparents would be so proud of you.”

“Damn you, Mead,” I said while wiping a tear that fell from my eye. “I hope they will be proud of me.”

My grandpa had died of a sudden heart attack just a few months after the Little League World Series. It was our last baseball game together, and it will always have a special place in my heart. Maybe that is one reason my connection with the boy allergic to nuts continues to have such an impact on me so many years later. Just a few months ago, my grandma passed away after having a stroke. She was 81 and had lived a long, wonderful life. I missed them both like crazy.

I pulled off the highway, and once I was parked, I sent a quick text to the local realtor. I went to the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and looked at myself in the mirror. I still couldn’t believe I had done something so spur of the moment, but if this business space was everything the pictures made it out to be, it would be perfect for my dream.

I got back in my car and turned on a new romance audiobook about hockey players. I had just finished one about baseball players and wanted to try a different sport. The book

was really good, and before I knew it, I saw a sign that said, ‘Welcome to Riverbend! Mayor Toni Robinson welcomes you! Population 7,215.’ I entered the town, and saw a few fast-food places and a gas station. I also saw a small car lot across from a hardware store. As I kept driving, I saw a row of brick buildings lined with sidewalks shaded by lots of trees. There was a small courthouse in the middle of a square, and I thought it would look a lot like Stars Hollow from *Gilmore Girls* if it had a gazebo in the middle of the square instead of the courthouse.

“Your destination will be on the right,” my GPS announced.

I looked to the right and saw the red and white awning hanging over a glass door. The name of the previous business had been stripped off, so I wasn’t sure what had been here before. I smiled, pulled my older Honda Civic to the curb, and shut it off. This was really happening. It really began to sink in that I was on my own and going to open a business somewhere I didn’t know anyone at all. I got out of my car and walked up to the glass door that said 315 Main Street on it. Stepping back, I looked up past the awning and saw a window on the second floor with matching red shutters.

I did a slow turn, looking at everything around the bakery. I saw a florist, a small convenience store, a diner, and at the end of the street, I saw a building that might even be more beautiful than the building I was just going to purchase. I walked to the end of the street with a huge grin on my face. A construction fence was in front of a large brick building in the shape of a horseshoe with several arch shaped entrances. I touched the banner that read:

COMING SOON

Campbell Field: the home of the
Single A MiLB RAPTORS.

Grand Opening March 31 for Opening Day!

At the bottom of the sign was information to call about becoming a season ticket holder. As I was reading the sign, a cardinal landed on the banner and looked right at me. My papaw's favorite bird was a cardinal, and he told me he'd always watch over me. This was my sign that I was making the right choice, and my papaw was with me.

I picked up my phone and dialed Meadow's number.

"You get there okay?" Meadow asked in lieu of saying hello.

"It's my dream come true, and I haven't even been on the inside. You'll never believe what is down the street from my bakery."

"What? A male strip club?"

"Oh my god!" I laughed. "Even better. Let's just say my car could get hit by a foul ball."

"Explain," Meadow said, and I could just imagine her eyebrows lifting in question.

"They are almost finished building a minor league baseball stadium just down the street from me. I can sell desserts to fans on their way to a game. I could even sponsor the team next year if my bakery does well!"

Meadow giggled, "Slow down, Moll. You haven't even seen the inside of the building. But it sounds perfect for you. We can go to games when I come to visit and check out all the hot baseball players. You should have a baseball-related name for your bakery!"

"Oh, I already know what I'm going to call it. Papaw had an idea for my future bakery when I told Mimi that I wanted to go to culinary school in sixth grade. Mimi had rolled her eyes, but I loved it. My bakery is going to be called 'Batter Up!'"

"This is just serendipitous!"

"Molly Green?" A female voice asked from behind me and made me jump.

"Oh my gosh. Yes. Hi. You must be Ms. Rhodes," I said and spoke into my phone. "Sorry, Meadow. I'll call you back."

“Call me Autumn,” the realtor said with a bright smile. She was only a few years older than me but was at least a head taller and had shiny light brown hair that framed her face. Her makeup was flawless, and she had perfected her smokey eye shadow. She wore a cream-colored pants suit with a red shirt under the suit jacket and matching red heels. I knew I must look horrible compared to her in yoga pants, a baggy t-shirt, my hair in a ponytail, and no makeup to be seen. My flip flops didn’t help my short stature.

“Thank you so much for all the help in getting this place,” I said as we walked back towards the location I would most likely end up buying.

“You found it online. All I did was send you pictures, and if it’s what you want, I’ll do the paperwork,” Autumn said. “Ready for a tour and to see if you want to put down an offer?”

“Yes, I am!” I said. “Do you know if there are any other offers?”

Autumn unlocked the door, and I followed her inside. “I have received two offers. One was for more than the asking price, but they said they planned on tearing the space down and making apartments. I know the family does not want that. The other was a lowball offer.”

I nodded and was glad I had enough money from my grandma’s will to offer the asking price. I would also have money left over for updates to make the place my own. I was the only living relative left, so I got everything my grandparents had. Once I sold my grandparents house in New York, I would have a good cushion to sit on while the bakery hopefully brought in business.

“So, what was this before?” There was a high counter filled with clear cases to showcase some kind of product. It had been hard to tell what they were used for in online pictures.

“A butcher shop. Old Man Jones passed away, and his family had no desire to keep the business in the family and just wanted to sell the shop. As you can see, all his supplies are

still here and come with the shop. Feel free to use it or sell it and make it your own.”

I looked at all the cases and could see they were still in good shape and would hold products that would need to be refrigerated. I walked around behind the counter and then had to laugh. Autumn looked at me and began to laugh as well. I am only four feet ten and a half inches (yes, that half inch is very important), and my eyes were right at the top of the counter. I couldn't even see Autumn.

“I guess selling these would be a good idea,” I said.

“I can reach out to some of my contacts and see if anyone needs tall refrigerated cases. I know they are only a few years old because his kids went together to help him modernize and renovate his butcher shop for his 80th birthday.”

“Oh, really?” I asked, “What else did they do to modernize it?”

“Come see the kitchen!” Autumn said, “I will warn you that Old Man Jones was very tall.”

“Of course, he was,” I replied with a shake of my head. “But if I sell stuff, I can use it to buy new stuff.”

In the kitchen were two stainless steel refrigerators, a walk-in freezer, tons of counter space, a rack for all sorts of butcher tools, very high cabinets, and a walk-in storage closet the size of my bedroom back home.

“There is definitely a lot of potential,” I said. “Know of anyone who is a contractor or very handy? Because this includes the apartment, I do have money to invest in this place.”

Autumn nodded, “My fiancé, Nathan, is in construction and very handy. I'm sure he and his friends would help you with a good deal.”

“I would pay them and feed them baked goods,” I offered.

“I will give him your info once I talk to him.”

Autumn took me through an archway and down the hall to a second kitchen. The kitchen was very similar to the first

kitchen, only smaller. It had one refrigerator, but it did have a double oven. I noticed there was a separate pantry, and I knew I could store all my allergy friendly ingredients safely. Having no cross contamination was very important to me.

“So, this was his wife Jane’s space. She makes prize-winning jams and sells them at the local farmer’s market. She loved working up here in this kitchen because she could be out of her husband’s way, but she was still very close to him. Now, she makes a few jams in the kitchen of her new condo, but not as much.”

“I’m going to need to get in touch with his widow. I would love to buy some of her jams for my cupcakes and even as filling for cakes.”

“Oh! Jane would love that!” Autumn said. “What a great idea!”

I smiled with different recipe ideas already floating around my head. Jam-filled donuts, cupcakes, cakes, and other items would hopefully be a hit.

“Let’s go check the apartment upstairs.” Autumn led me up the stairs located in a hallway between the two kitchens and the main shop area. I liked the fact that the apartment could be accessed from the back of the building or from the bakery itself.

“So, this living area of the apartment was only used when their children were visiting. It’s very basic, but that will give you more opportunities to make it your own. His wife used the kitchen a lot, and I already know from our emails that is your favorite part.”

“Yes, it is” I said and couldn’t wait to see where I would soon be living.

Autumn unlocked the door, and it opened up to a small family room. There was a faded brown couch that looked pretty comfortable against the wall, sitting next to a small brown end table. Next to the couch on the other side was a matching brown bookshelf I couldn’t wait to fill with my well-loved books. There was a small TV across from the couch and

a DVD player next to it. I hadn't seen a DVD player in a very long time. I noticed there was a box of DVD's next to the TV stand, and I knew I would have to see what was in there later. We walked through the family room continuing on into the kitchen.

I looked around and was so thankful to Jane Jones's kids for having her sell it. The kitchen was even better than the pictures on the real estate app had made it out to be. Everything was in a farmhouse theme. The countertops were butcher board brown, which I'm sure Jane used to cut up her fruits for her jams.

I continued to explore my new kitchen. The cabinet doors were a light green that made the space seem airy and bright. I ran my hand across the white farmhouse sink and admired the beautiful, curved faucet. My eyes were drawn to the beautiful double ovens, which I was very excited about after seeing the pictures online. In the middle of the room was a small island with the same butcher block countertops where the stove top burners were. There were two stools on the opposite side of the island, and I knew there wasn't a dining room, so I guess that's where I would eat my meals. On the other wall was an arched, built-in shelf with three different shelves I'm sure housed the canned jams. I could already see my cookies and bread sitting there, waiting to go down to the bakery.

"In here is the bedroom. It isn't much, like the family room, but I'm thinking that won't be an issue."

"Not at all," I replied. I looked in the bedroom and saw a full-size bed with a clean mattress on it. Next to it was a nightstand, and on the other wall was a simple four drawer dresser. "Does the bedroom and family room furniture come with the place?"

"I'm not sure, but we can always put that in with the offer."

I nodded, "That would help me a lot."

I walked to the other side of the bedroom where there was a small closet behind one door, and the other door led to a bathroom with a bath/shower combo, vanity, and toilet. It wasn't much, but it would work for exactly what I needed.

I knew I had a big smile on my face. I could see myself living here and starting my bakery.

“Well, do you need some time to think about it? I can let you walk around by yourself for a bit or video call with a friend or family member,” Autumn said with a similar smile on her face.

“No, that’s not necessary. I would love to put in an offer for the full asking price. I would also request the soonest closing date because I would like to move in as soon as possible. My grandparents’ house is on the market as well, and we have an offer on it contingent on my finding my own place.”

Autumn nodded, “I will put in the paperwork right away. Are you staying in town or heading back to New York?”

“Depending on how soon I can move in here, I would love to just stay. Everything I own is in my car or in a storage unit.”

Autumn nodded, “Well, let me make a quick phone call. You can look around some more if you would like, or if you’re hungry, I would recommend Fulton’s Bar and Grill.”

“Thank you. I ate a lot of snacks on the trip, so I think I’ll explore around here some more,” I said and immediately went back to the kitchen to look around.

Several minutes later, Autumn reentered the kitchen. “Hey, so I just got off the phone with Jane Jones. I told her all about you wanting to make this into a bakery and how you wanted to use her jams. She totally loved that idea, by the way. But she didn’t accept your offer.”

“What? No,” I said and felt my stomach sink. I didn’t think I’d ever find a place just like this for this price. “Can I up my offer? Or do they have a counter offer?”

“Oh, she has a counter offer,” Autumn said, and then I could tell she was trying to hide her smile. “She wants to know if you’d like to rent this apartment until a closing date can be set and just stay here until you close on it. She even said the rent payments could go towards the down payment.”

“No fucking way,” I said, then covered my mouth. “I mean, no freaking way! That’s perfect. Where do I sign?”

Autumn laughed, “I will go to the office and type everything up, then I’ll stop by later tonight to have you sign everything. Jane said she could come to the office, too. Welcome to Riverbend, Molly Green.”

“Thank you!” I said, and I didn’t care if it was unprofessional or not, but I gave her a big hug.

“Before I leave you to unpack your car and get settled, I wanted to let you know I want to get you a thank you gift for using me as your realtor and welcome you to town. Is there one thing you’d love to have for your bakery but don’t see yourself splurging on right away?”

I said the first thing that came to mind, “I would love an espresso machine, so I could offer special coffees with my baked goods. It doesn’t have to be top of the line or anything, but...”

Autumn laughed, “I love vanilla lattes, and the closest Starbucks is a few towns over. I will get you a great espresso machine!”

“Thank you! Anytime you want a vanilla latte, it will be on the house!” I said and gave her another hug.



TYLER

CHAPTER THREE

*From the travel to the food to the releases to the clubhouses -
Minor League Baseball is full of incredible life experiences.
One thing it isn't, though? Glamorous.*

“It isn’t much to look at, but it will be your home for the foreseeable future,” Mark Reeves, the hitting coach for the Raptors said as he pointed to the small apartments across from the stadium. “It used to be a dorm for the college, but they built new ones on the other side of the campus, so we purchased them for you players.”

I could do dorm rooms. I shared the basement of my parents’ house with my brothers forever, then we all got an apartment together. How bad could it be?

I grabbed my bags and walked towards the dorms. A couple players were hanging out front.

“You the new rook?” a guy asked as he was stretching in front of the dorm and getting ready for a run. “You’re kinda old, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m Tyler Stone. I’m a catcher,” I replied and chose to ignore his age comment. “Which way is room C?”

“Ian Baxter. Third base,” he replied with a head nod. “Room C is three doors down.”

“Thanks, man,” I said and headed to find my new apartment. I wasn’t sure if I should just walk right in since it

was my place. I decided to go ahead and knock, and I heard, “It’s open!” called from the inside. I opened the door and found a small room with an old couch in the corner where two guys sat holding video game controllers in their hands. They both looked up but didn’t stop their game.

“Hey, you must be our new roomie,” a guy said on the other side of the room, where he was getting milk out of a cooler. He looked to be taller than me, and that was saying something since I was over six four. He had his dark blonde hair pulled back in a trendy man bun and had a thin, muscular build. My guess is that he was a pitcher. He poured the milk into a bowl of cereal. “Want a drink or something?”

“Sure, bottled water would be great if you have it.”

He nodded and threw me one. “I’m Cooper Dixon,” he said as he sat down on a milk crate next to the couch.

“Tyler Stone,” I introduced myself while looking around. “No kitchen?”

“No kitchen,” the blonde guy playing the video game responded. He looked up at me with kind, bright blue eyes. “But you get used to it. I’m Hayden Scott. This is Ivan Cruz. He doesn’t speak much English, but we’re working on it.”

“Hola,” I said to Ivan. I didn’t know a lot of Spanish but knew the basics.

“Hablas español?” Ivan asked with a hopeful look on his tanned face. His dark hair was longer on the top and gelled into a faux hawk but cut close on the sides of his head.

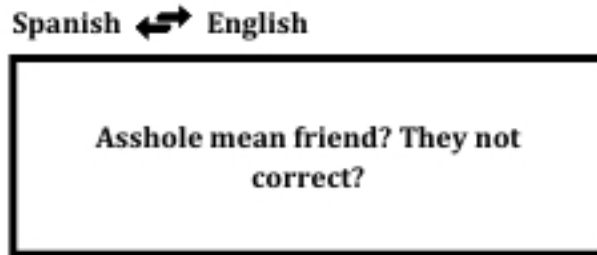
I felt bad for getting him excited over nothing, and I shook my head, “Sorry.” I held up my thumb and pointer finger to let him know I knew very little Spanish.

Ivan nodded, “Hi, asshole.”

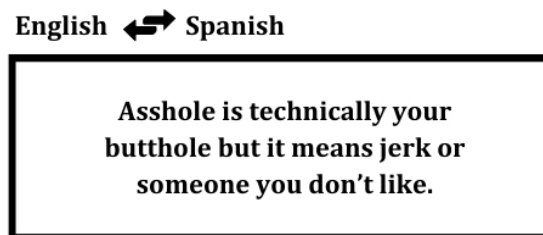
I had been taking a drink and spit a bunch of it out from the shock of his words. I had to cough a few times and shook my head looking at my two other roommates to see if I had heard that correctly.

Hayden and Cooper burst out laughing. When Cooper was finally able to speak, he said, “Yeah, we’ve been teaching him some important English phrases.”

Ivan looked at me sheepishly and pulled out his phone. I noticed he was using a translator app. He showed me his phone.



I shook my head. I took his phone and typed in the English to Spanish box.



Ivan read what I said and rolled his brown eyes. “Assholes,” he said to Hayden and Cooper, who just laughed. I joined in with the laughter and could see myself getting along just fine with these guys.

“You can put your stuff in that room,” Cooper said, pointing with his spoon to the room on the right. “You’re my new roomie. I hope you don’t snore like Shane did.”

“I don’t,” I said and went to the room. I could hear Cooper say, “Thank God!”

I put my stuff on the empty bed and looked around. Cooper’s suitcase was lying on his bed, and clothes were all

over it. Dirty socks and shirts were all over his nightstand and desk. There were also several unwashed cereal bowls stacked on his desk. I was guessing if we didn't have a kitchen, we probably didn't have a dishwasher either.

I went back to the main room and sat on an empty milk crate on the other side of the room.

“So, where are you from?” Cooper asked. “No hate, but you look old, friend.”

“I'm from around Nashville, and I'm 25. I feel old for the minors. Two words: knee injury.”

“Fuck. That sucks,” Cooper replied. “That's not good, especially for a catcher. All good now?”

I nodded, “I sure as fuck hope so.”

Hayden laughed, “So do we. I play 1st base, but these two are both pitchers, so you'll work a lot with them.”

“Nice,” I replied. “Where are you guys from?”

“I'm from Missouri so not too far,” Hayden answered as he stretched. They must have been at a break in the game. “Cooper is from Maine, so he's far from home. Cruz is from the Dominican, so he's really far. You play COD?”

I nodded, “Oh, yeah. My brothers and I play Call of Duty all the time.”

“Good. Cruz calls his wife every day at this time, and Coop sucks ass at COD.”

“Wife? Wow.”

Ivan nodded with a smile and pulled up a picture on his phone, “Camila – mi esposa.” She was beautiful with dark brown skin and long brown hair pulled in a side braid. She had a large smile as she looked up at Ivan in the picture. I also was drawn to her stomach in the picture. She was very obviously pregnant.

“Baby?” I asked, pointing to the picture.

Ivan nodded, “Tres meses mas.” And he held up 3 fingers. I was guessing he meant the baby was due in 3 months.

“Congratulations,” I said, hoping he knew I meant it. I couldn’t imagine being in the minors with a pregnant wife. I knew I wanted a wife and kids someday but not while in the minors.

“Adios,” Ivan said with a wave and went into the other bedroom. I took his spot on the couch and picked up the controller to play Call of Duty with Hayden.

“I can’t believe he’s married. That’s gotta be hard,” I said a few minutes later as we destroyed the enemy squad together.

“Yeah. That’s why I’m unattached. Too much drama and distraction,” Cooper replied as I looked over to see he was making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on top of an ironing board. Cooper saw me looking and shrugged, “The ironing board was in the closet and works as a table. One less thing to buy.”

I just shook my head and wasn’t sure what I was getting myself into, but I knew I wouldn’t ask my family for any money. I just wanted to play baseball.

“You got a girl?” Hayden asked as he shot a nearby opponent.

“Nah,” I said. “I had a girl in high school, but when I got injured, she ghosted.”

“What a bitch.” Cooper’s reply came with a mouthful of food.

“Yep.” I recalled how upset I had been when Aubree had stopped responding to my calls and texts after teams had decided not to draft me because of my injury. Everyone thought I was going to be drafted right out of high school. It’s amazing how fast life can change.

“Scott has a girl back home, and she comes to games every once in a while,” Cooper said, bringing me out of my memories.

“Is she back home?” I asked.

“Yeah, but it’s only a few hours drive. Quinn and her best friend, Allie, are definitely coming for Opening Day.”

“Allie is hot!” Cooper said with a wink at Hayden.

“Don’t fucking go near her again,” Hayden said but didn’t have much bite in his tone.

“I’ve already been there, done that. I was thinking about our new boy here.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” I said with a groan. I did not want sloppy seconds.

“You know what? We should go to Fulton’s tonight,” Hayden said, and I was glad he was changing the subject.

“What is Fulton’s?”

“The only bar in town. Fulton sponsors the Raptors, is a season ticket holder, and knows we don’t make much, so he gives us beer cheap since we can draw a crowd,” Cooper explained. “We don’t have the thing where we meet the new coach until ten tomorrow.”

Hayden rolled his eyes, “That means Coop won’t be out of bed until 9:55.” He then turned to me. “I usually run five miles in the morning if you want to join me.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “I’m in for tonight and tomorrow morning.”



The Tequila Sunrise strikes a perfect balance between sweet and tangy flavors. The sweetness comes from the grenadine syrup, while the tanginess is derived from the fresh orange juice. The tequila adds a subtle kick, resulting in a harmonious blend of tastes.

I was exhausted after bringing all the things I stuffed into my car up the stairs to my new apartment. I also made lists of things to sell and things I would need to buy. My friends all made fun of my list-making, but it helped me make decisions. I was lost in my list of items I would need for the bakery kitchen when I heard my text notification sound.

Meadow: You better be getting ready to go out tonight!

Me: Yes, I'm going out. There is only one bar in town so hopefully there will be at least one cute guy to talk to there.

I quickly went upstairs and looked at my outfit in the mirror. I was wearing my favorite ripped jeans that were a little tight and made my ass look awesome. I remember my mimi shaking her head when she first saw the ripped jeans and couldn't believe someone would pay money for damaged pants. I was also wearing an old t-shirt and decided to change that. As I

was changing into a simple black tank top, my phone dinged again. I took a selfie in the mirror and knew immediately that Meadow would say it wasn't cute enough. She was always dressed to impress. I grabbed a red crop top Meadow had insisted I buy last summer. I hadn't worn it yet, and even though it was the beginning of March in the Midwest, I could pair it with my jean jacket. I sent her both selfies.

Meadow: Wear the red shirt! ♥

I applied a light coat of mascara and some lip gloss. I took my long red hair out of the ponytail and brushed it until it curled naturally down my back. Then, I got into my car and drove the short distance to the only bar I had seen in the small town.

The parking lot of the bar was full, indicating this was definitely the place to be. I got out of my car and walked towards the door. I could hear music playing and a lot of talking as I opened the door and headed inside. I walked over to the bartop and sat on a barstool. I ordered my favorite drink, a tequila sunrise, and munched on the chips the bartender sat in front of me. I looked around the bar but didn't see any unattached guys that caught my eye. There was a group of good looking guys playing pool but they were surrounded by a bunch of girls wearing a lot less clothing than I was. After I finished my drink, the bartender asked if I wanted another.

"I'm going to use the restroom, then I'll take another," I said, and he gave me a nod and pointed to the back corner where the restrooms were. After I finished my business and washed my hands, I reapplied my lip gloss and ran my fingers through my hair.

After exiting the bathroom, I ran into what felt like a wall. My breath was stolen from my lungs but not because of running into him. He was the best-looking guy I had ever seen. I looked from the green henley shirt he wore over a very muscular chest up to the scruff around his chiseled jaw and over his nice, straight nose. I had to practically strain my neck but locked onto his beautiful green eyes. He was well over a

foot taller than me, but I couldn't bring myself to take my eyes off of his.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi, Red," he said. "Are you okay? Can I buy you a drink to apologize for almost running you over?"

"That would be really nice," I said as we walked over to the bar.

"What can I get you?" The bartender asked him.

"I'll take a draft beer and whatever the lady in red wants."

"Another tequila sunrise?" the bartender asked.

"That would be great, thanks," I said.

"Coming right up," the bartender said and began making our drinks.

I hopped up on the barstool to wait as the handsome man sat down next to me and turned so his knees touched mine.

"So you must be a regular if he knows your drink order."

I shook my head, "Nope. First time here, actually. I'm new in town. How about you?"

"What are the odds? I'm new here, too," he said, and I noticed the dimples in his cheeks. They somehow made him look even more handsome. "I guess I can't ask you for a tour around town, Red."

"I guess not," I said with a nervous laugh. "I was just sitting here and had already ordered, so he knew what I wanted to drink." I took a deep breath and tried to tame my nerves. "So, Red, huh? I have a nickname already?"

He nodded with a smirk. "You have red hair, a red shirt." He looked down and pointed at my feet. "And red toenails. It fits."

"Should I call you Green, then? You have a green shirt on and the most beautiful green eyes.... I mean you have green eyes and green shoes, too." I couldn't help it, but I had to giggle at something that occurred to me.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, looking amused. “Want to fill me in on the joke?”

“Well, my last name is Green, so I really can’t call you Green,” I said with another laugh.

“You can call me whatever you want to,” he flirted with a wink.

The bartender sat our drinks by us, and I took a nice sip of the sweet and tangy drink.

“Mmmm.” I said and smiled.

“I might have to order one of those if they taste as good as you make them seem to.”

I laughed, “You want a taste?”

He shook his head and reached his hand out to skim his thumb over my lip. “There is a little right here,” he said, then put his thumb into his mouth to get a taste.

I took a deep breath and shouldn’t be so turned on by something so simple, but there was just something about this man.

“Hey, Stone, are you going to play the next game?” One of his friends came over asking. He wasn’t as muscular as Stone but was even taller, somehow. He was wearing jeans and a black henley with a black backwards baseball cap.

“Nah, man. Go ahead. I might be distracted.”

His friend laughed and said, “Don’t forget what I said. D and D.”

“Do I want to know?” I asked as his friend laughed and walked away.

Stone shook his head. “He was just telling me girls are just distractions and drama, but I think you might be a good distraction.”

“I can’t stand drama,” I replied honestly.

“Perfect!” he said and took a swig of his beer. “Do you want to play darts, Red?”

“I’ve never played, but I’d love to try. Maybe you could teach me?”

“I’d love to teach you!” he said and reached over to take my hand. Our fingers intertwined as we walked over to the dart boards with our drinks in our other hands. I looked down at our linked hands and felt the electricity between us. I didn’t want to compare Stone to my only boyfriend, but it had taken Tim a long time just to hold my hand. It seemed so natural with Stone and me somehow. I wasn’t even sure if Stone was his first or last name, but I was too distracted by him squeezing my hand lightly as we approached the dartboard to ask him, and he began his instructions.

He showed me how to hold the darts and explained the rules of the game. Honestly, I wasn’t listening to the rules at all because I was mesmerized by the deep tone of his voice and the dimple that popped out of his left cheek.

“Are you ready to try, Red?” he asked.

I nodded and took the dart from his hand. I took a long sip of my liquid courage and placed my drink on the bar table. “I’m not really sure how to stand? Do you think you could help me?”

He grinned down at me and nodded. His big, callused hands fell on my shoulders and massaged them lightly as he positioned my body the correct way towards the dart board. His hands stroked down my arms, and when he lifted his hands from my arms, I already missed the contact. I grabbed the dart with my fingers the way he had explained. “Like this?”

“Good girl,” he said, and I melted at his praise. “Now, just relax and get ready to throw it. Pretend you’re throwing a paper airplane, and do not move your elbow. Release all your fingers at once.”

“Who knew throwing darts was so complicated?” I asked as I tried to relax my body.

He laughed, “I have been throwing forever. We have a dart board in my parents’ basement, and my brothers and I used to

challenge each other all the time. Oh, and don't forget to follow through. Go ahead now; give it a try."

"My grandparents and I played Monopoly or card games," I said as I relaxed my body, kept my elbow steady, and released the dart. I watched it as it hit the dart board near the edge, but it still hit the board. "It didn't fall on the floor!" I exclaimed.

"Well done, Baby!" he said as he lifted me up and spun me around. I loved the feeling of being in his arms and still had my arms around his neck. He gently put me down but took my hand and began rubbing the back of it with his thumb. The connection between us was intense.

"So, what else do you do for fun other than teaching random girls how to play darts?" I asked.

"You aren't just a random girl," he said softly. "I know you feel this connection, too."

I could feel my cheeks heat. "You know I do."

He reached over and tucked a loose hair behind my ear. "I like to run, play video games, play sports, drink beer, and teach beautiful ladies to play darts."

I laughed. "Oh, you're a smooth talker."

He let out a deep, sexy chuckle. "How about you? What do you do besides learn how to play darts from random guys who are so much taller than you?"

"Oh, nice; a short joke. I was waiting for that," I said and shook my head. "I love to bake. My grandma taught me, and I love making up new recipes and trying them out on my friends."

"I volunteer to be one of those friends," he said while rubbing his belly.

I laughed, "I also love to read and watch sports and learn how to play darts from handsome strangers that are way too tall."

"I love how you can spar with me and still be adorable." He took a step closer to me and was leaning down like he might kiss me.

“How about a real game?” his friend from earlier came over and asked.

Another friend stood with him and gave an apologetic smile, “Sorry, Stone. I tried to keep Dixon away as long as possible.”

“Hi,” I said. “I’d love to play with you guys. I need all the practice and assistance I can get.” I looked at Stone when I said the word assistance, and he winked at me.

“Red, these are my roommates, Cooper and Hayden.”

“Nice to meet you guys,” I said.

We played for the next hour or so. I was by far the worst player, but I got it on the board every time and did get better with every throw. Stone was the best and very competitive, but he didn’t seem to be upset by not having the best partner. I wasn’t sure who was buying all the drinks, but I found myself with a never-ending glass of tequila sunrise. It helped my confidence, and I began flirting with Stone even more. Soon, we had a small crowd around us watching our game. Cooper seemed to like the attention the most.

“So, if I get this bullseye, you have to buy the next round,” Cooper said with confidence.

“Fine, but if you don’t get it, you have to do all the dishes in the apartment and leave me and Red alone the rest of the night.”

“I like that bet,” Hayden said, and I agreed wholeheartedly.

“Oh, I think I do even more.” I reached up on my tiptoes to kiss Stone’s cheek and whispered in his ear. “You better win. I’m ready for some alone time.”

“Oh, baby, it’s in the bag.” He kissed my forehead and gave me another wink. “You’re my good luck charm!”

Cooper threw the dart, and it was close to the bullseye but not close enough. He groaned loudly.

Stone looked at me with a huge, cocky grin and got in his stance to throw the dart. It hit the middle of the bullseye, and the crowd cheered.

Stone came over to me and lifted me in his arms. I'm not sure who kissed who first or if it was just our magnetic chemistry, but our mouths fused together in the most explosive kiss I had ever had. I felt both of his hands on my ass holding me close to him. I tilted my head a little and felt his tongue enter my mouth and duel with my own. I wrapped my arms around his neck and toyed with the ends of his hair. We heard cat calls all around us, and I had almost forgotten we were in the middle of a public bar. I pulled away from his mouth and hid my face against his shoulder.

“Wanna get out of here?” he asked with a chuckle.

I looked up and into his beautiful green eyes, and I was suddenly nervous, “I've, uh, never... I've never had a one night stand before. I don't ever do this.”

He pulled me closer to him and said, “I had a feeling, and if you don't want to, I totally understand. I'd have to take a very cold shower after that amazing kiss, but...”

“Stone, I want to. I just wanted to let you know I'm not very experienced.”

“Thank fuck. I'll take care of you, Red,” he said and looked over at his roommates. “Stay here for a while, boys. And Cooper – you can sleep on the couch after losing darts. Bye, guys.”

“Have fun!” Cooper and Hayden both said, but I could tell they were preoccupied with some of the girls who had been watching the dart match.



One-night stands have good prospects (about 27%) of turning into a long-term relationship.

Do you live close?" I asked as I looked around once we got outside. "I think I'm that way but I'm not sure."

He laughed, "Yeah, we walked here so not far." He grabbed my hand, and we stumbled for a few blocks, giggling and flirting the whole way. I was glad we were walking because we both had way too much to drink to drive.

"This is me," he said when we stopped in front of an older brick building. It wasn't much to look at, but I wasn't going to judge him. He picked me up, bridal style, and carried me through the front door. As soon as the door shut, his mouth was on mine, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. We went through one room and through another door. He somehow balanced me as he shut the door and flipped the lock.

"Don't mind the mess," he said as he put me down on my feet and slowly wrapped his arms around my waist while laying hot kisses on the crease of my neck. I should tell him I didn't mind the mess, but I couldn't talk. I closed my eyes, and his kisses were sending shivers all the way from my shoulders to my toes. I could feel a tingle between my legs.

"We have a problem," he said with a very serious expression on his face.

“We do?” I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“Oh, yes, you are wearing way too many clothes.”

I actually began to giggle nervously and went to take off my shirt, but he grabbed my hand. “You don’t need to be nervous with me, sweetheart. Let me help you,” he said as he ran his knuckles on the skin of my stomach that was showing and slowly raised my shirt above my head. He threw my shirt on the floor and took an appreciative look. “I am one lucky guy.”

“I think you’re also wearing too much.” I reached for the hem of his shirt. He let me pull it up as far as I could and chuckled when I was too short to get it over his head. He took it the rest of the way off, and I noticed for the first time that he had tattoos I hadn’t noticed in the bar. His whole right arm was covered in a sleeve of different designs, and they spread over onto his chest. I completely forgot about the tattoos as I got a good look at his muscles. He practically had an eight pack, and I didn’t even know that was a real thing or not. I had only seen muscles like his on TV and didn’t know they existed in real life. He even had that sexy V that led down to the waistband of his pants. It made me wonder what he did for a living to be so muscular - maybe construction? I didn’t bother to ask because my fingers and lips had a mind of their own. I leaned over, kissed his abdomen, and rubbed my hands on his well-defined muscles.

“I don’t think my abs have ever been kissed like that before,” he chuckled, and I looked at him unsure. “Hey, don’t worry. I liked it, baby.”

He reached over and unclasped my bra, letting it fall to the ground. “Oh, Red, you are perfect.” He led me backwards until I felt the backs of my legs hit something hard. He leaned me back, so I was lying on his bed. He leaned down and took one of my breasts in his mouth. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feeling. He gave my other breast the same attention as his hands toyed with the button of my jeans. He kissed his way down my stomach and said, “Open your eyes, pretty girl.” I opened my eyes to see his green ones were hooded and full of lust. He kept eye contact with me as he slid my jeans down over my hips. I kicked my legs to get them the rest of the way

off, and he chuckled. He took his fill of my body and sighed at the sight of my black lace panties. The only thing he'd taken off was his shirt, so I tried to sit up to reach for his pants, but he gently pushed me back down.

“Let me take care of you first, baby,” he said with a kiss to my lips. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held him close to me. I rubbed his back as he kissed me and toyed with the ends of his hair. As he kissed me, he reached down and put one hand inside my panties. I sighed into the kiss as he rubbed his thumb on my clit. Moaning into the kiss, I felt one of his fingers enter me. His tongue toyed with mine as he added another. He moved his mouth from mine and peppered kisses down my neck and collarbone, a few on each breast, and kept moving down by body. He pulled my underwear down, and his mouth found my clit. I found myself shaking and feeling things I had never felt before. It felt strange but wonderful. Tim and I had sex, but it had never been like this, and Stone still had his pants on.

I suddenly felt the need to scream and moaned out Stone's name. My body shook under his mouth, and he never stopped pumping two fingers in me and sucking on my clit. A rush of heat poured out of my body, and I had to gasp, “Oh. My. God.” I was out of breath, and I hadn't even done any work! I felt him licking my folds and making appreciative sounds while I just lay there stunned and in total amazement.

“Are you doing ok there, Red?” he asked with a smirk as he leaned over me.

“I can't feel my bones,” I said but found myself smiling at him.

“Have you never had an orgasm before, sweetheart?” he asked as he rubbed his knuckles down my rib cage.

“I thought I had, but now I'm not so sure,” I said, still unable to move.

“You would know if you had. I am honored to give you your first.” He leaned down and kissed me again. I thought I would be repulsed by tasting myself on him, but I wasn't. It tasted tangy and had a warmth to it. I kissed him back and rubbed my

arms along his sides and down to his jeans. As we kissed, I tried to unbutton his jeans, but I just couldn't get them undone. He stopped kissing me and chuckled. Reaching down, he pulled his jeans and boxers down all at once. I stared mesmerized as his cock jutted out. I know I shouldn't compare him to my one and only sexual partner, but Stone is definitely a lot bigger, longer, and somehow, more beautiful.

"Like what you see?" he asked with a smirk.

"I do," I said honestly, "but I don't know if that will fit."

"Oh, baby, it will fit. I made sure you were nice and ready. Let me make you feel good."

He nudged my legs open wider and raised his body above mine. He leaned down and gave my breasts another suck as he lined himself up with my body. Then, he looked straight into my eyes as he glided himself in. "Red, keep your eyes on me as we become one. Oh, wow! You're so tight." I could see his muscles straining as he held himself over me.

"You feel so good," I moaned, leaned my head back, and arched my body into his.

He began moving in and out of me at a faster pace, and I started moving along with him. I reached up and scratched up and down his back. "Oh, you like, do you?" he asked while breathing hard.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," I chanted as he hammered into me. I felt that same warm feeling start to build up, and I reached down to grab his ass and pull him even deeper into me.

"Oh, yes, baby!" he called out. "You were so made for me!"

I screamed his name as I felt myself come all over his cock. He pulled out of me, and I was flipped over onto my stomach. He pulled on my legs so I was at the edge of the bed. "Baby, can you lift that beautiful ass up and put your weight on your elbows?"

I found myself doing what he asked and felt even more wetness when he said, "Good girl." He entered me from behind and commented on how much he loved my walls contracting around him. "Oh, she likes to be praised," he said

with a grin. “Good to know.” He plunged into me again, burying himself to the hilt in one thrust this time. “Man, Red, I don’t know if I’ll ever get enough of this tight, perfect pussy! You may have ruined me for all other women.”

“You’ve definitely ruined all other men for me!” I found myself saying as he grabbed a section of my hair and rode me into bliss. I couldn’t believe it when I felt the same build up for a third time. I had gone from never having an orgasm to having three in one night. “Oh, Stone! I’m going to come again! I’m so close.”

“Come for me, baby! Come with me at the same time,” he said as I felt him smack my ass and heard him grunt his release. I called out his name one last time and felt my eyes roll in the back of my head. I couldn’t even say anything as I felt him pull out of me, but I felt empty and missed him already. I felt a stickiness I had never felt with my ex, but I was too tired to contemplate what that could mean. My eyes grew heavy as I heard him go into the bathroom. When he came back, I was pleasantly surprised to feel a warm washcloth cleaning me up.

“Go to sleep, beautiful,” I heard him say as he lay down behind me and wrapped me in his muscular arms. “I’ve got you.”



TYLER

CHAPTER SIX

“Soup dumplings, sitcoms, one-night stands—good ones leave you wanting more.” —Eddie Huang

I had seen her walk in the bar the night before. I had been attracted to her shy smile, beautiful, long red hair, and toned body that was all in a very short, little package. My dad always said Stone men loved short women. I had never been attracted to a short girl before, and Aubree had been the opposite at five ten, so maybe it was time for a change. I knew I had to talk to her when I saw her sitting by herself for a while and only talking to the bartender. She hadn't looked around at all like she was waiting for anyone. When I saw her walk to the bathroom, I excused myself from the guys at the pool table and went in her direction. I have never before felt better about someone running into me than when she had. We had such a fun night, and I couldn't remember the last time I had such an enjoyable evening with a woman. I really wished my brothers had been there, but it had been great to get to know Cooper and Hayden better.

And, damn, that kiss. And the sex. She had been timid at first, but once she got comfortable, we fit together like she was made just for me. It had been amazing, and I didn't know sex could be like that. Usually, I was under so much pressure being compared to my brothers or from a girl like Aubree just using me for my possibility of being drafted. Red didn't know me at all, but it felt like we had known each other forever.

I sighed and could smell her sweet floral scent in the room. I reached over but realized the bed was empty. Where the hell was she? I got out of bed, pulled on my boxers, and went into the bathroom, but she wasn't there either. I still couldn't believe I had to bring her here to this pigsty of a room, but I didn't have extra cash for a motel room. That's when I noticed the note lying on my desk.

Stone,
I had a lot of fun last night. Thank you so much
for everything! I'll never forget you.
Red

I reread her note a few times before yelling, "FUCK!"

"What's wrong?" Hayden came into the room to see what was going on.

"She's gone, man, and I didn't even get her fucking name or number!"

"What? How is that even possible?" Hayden asked. "We spent a long time with her. Her name was..."

"Please, tell me you caught her name!" I exclaimed.

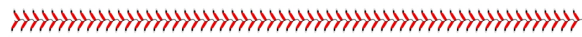
"Fuck, bro, you kept calling her Red or baby or shit like that."

Cooper came in, overhearing the conversation, and just doubled over in laughter. "I can't believe you didn't get her name! And you seemed really into her."

"I really was," I said, angry at myself. "We had a connection like I've never felt before."

"Fuck. This is too much "feelings" talk for so early in the morning," Cooper replied, rolling his eyes and making air quotes. "Are we going for a run, you pussies?"

"Let me get changed, and we'll go," I said as I folded up her note and put it in my bag.



Later that afternoon, I got to meet all the other coaches and players. Our head coach/manager, Adam McAlister, was in his first season as a manager and was only thirty-two. He told us all about his pro career. He made it to the majors as a utility player, knowing a lot of different positions, but only played a few games before the season ended. He talked about his decision that he was better off coaching instead of playing despite how much he loved playing the game.

“When I was playing high school ball, all the guys called me Mack, and it stuck, so if you want to call me Coach Mack, I have no problems with that,” he addressed all of us in the locker room. “My longtime girlfriend also wanted to get married and didn’t think she could make it as a major league wife. She wanted me to find a job where we could plant roots and all that jazz. I love Ashleigh more than I loved playing baseball, so, gentlemen, here we are. We got married, had our son Nico, bought a house here in Riverbend and plan to make this our home and raise a family. I want you guys to know that I will consider all of you family, and my office and home will always be open. If you and your roommates aren’t getting along, we have two extra guest rooms for now.” He looked down at his tablet, then over at some of the other coaches, and then looked at all of us. “Now, I know it will seem like something you only did in elementary school, and you’ll all probably groan, but I want all of you to go around and introduce yourself, then tell us where you’re from and your biggest dream.”

There were several groans, but as we went around the room, you could learn a lot about someone when they share their biggest dream. Many guys said they hoped to make it to the majors; some even had specific teams in mind.

Jude Fox, known for having a great bat but not being the best defensively, said his dream was to go to Disney World. That got a few laughs.

Cooper's biggest dream was to bang a girl at every ballpark we played at. We all rolled our eyes but laughed along with him. I was definitely rooming with a man-whore and could see myself taking Coach Mack up on using one of his spare rooms from time to time.

Hayden said his biggest dream was to get a Gold Glove, and there were a lot of nods in agreement. He said he prided himself on making quick plays at first base, and he had a lot of flexibility. I definitely respected that.

When it came to Ivan's turn, the bullpen coach, Benito Hernandez, offered to translate for him. Ivan said his dream was to bring his wife and child to America to watch him play and for them to be proud of him. It didn't matter if it was single A or in the majors.

After Ivan, it was my turn to introduce myself. I said the first thing that came to my mind, "I'm Tyler Stone from near Nashville. I'm a catcher, and my biggest dream is to throw out my brother when he tries to steal on me." Of course, the guys wanted to know my brother's name. I hated feeling like I was name dropping, but I was proud of Landon. He had been Rookie of the Year his first year, and this past year, he had received a Silver Slugger award. When I told them his name, a few of the guys murmured that we did look a lot alike.

"So, gentlemen," Coach Mack continued after we had all taken our turns. "I am really excited about this team! We have something none of the other teams have. We're starting from the beginning with a clean slate and have no wins or losses as a team." A cheer erupted around us at that, and our manager gave a bright smile that showed he liked our enthusiasm. "We also have something none of the other minor league teams have, something I asked the scouts to look for specifically." We all looked around at each other, wondering what he had asked the scouts to look for. "We have three switch hitters in our starting line up. I'm a switch hitter myself, and that was important to me." I felt my chest swell with pride because I knew I was one of the switch hitters he had mentioned. "Anderson, Stone, and Walker will be big assets to our team."

“You didn’t tell us you were an ambi!” Cooper whispered to me.

I just shrugged like it didn’t matter, but I knew switch hitters were a big deal. It also meant double the work.

“I wish I was ambidextrous,” Hayden said from my other side. “My high school coach tried to get me to hit as a lefty, but it was bad. I couldn’t even hit it off a tee.”

Coach McAlister quieted us all down, and I could tell he was about to get serious. “I’m really excited to see what talents every guy on the team has for us to put together. I’m going to have two practice schedules for the next few weeks until the start of the season. There will be a 6:30 a.m. practice for the players who feel they need to improve some aspect of their game. We will have fielding, batting, and specialty practice. We’ll be watching lots of film and scrimmaging.” Coach Mack paused for a second as a lot of murmuring was going on around the room. I had no doubts that my roommates and I would be at the early practices. Even if Cooper Dixon wanted to sleep in, we wouldn’t let him.

“There will also be a 1 p.m. practice for everyone. At that time, we will concentrate on the positions you want to play and find out what skills you are best at.” A few of the guys looked at each other and gave each other knuckle bumps and chin nods and mouthed ‘1 p.m.’ Coach Mack studied all our reactions and made some notes on his tablet. “By the way, I hope to see you all at 6:30 if you want to remain on my team. There are a lot of young men who would love to be in your position.”

I had to smile because I was really starting to like and respect our head coach.

After practice, I was exhausted but loved the feel of my sore muscles, and I was feeling really good about this team and the coaching staff. I lay in my bed, and for the first time that day, I thought of *her*. I resisted taking out her note and reading it again. Cooper was right. I was acting like a chick, but I really felt something for her, and I didn’t even know her name.

My phone rang on my nightstand, and I answered with a grin on my face, “Hey, Cart!”

“T! How is my favorite baseball player? Is life everything you dreamed?”

I laughed. “Well, we have a cooler instead of a fridge, we have an ironing board for a kitchen table, we have to wash dishes in the bathroom sink, and I’ll make about \$500 a month after room and board and everything is taken out. But my roommates are cool, even if one doesn’t speak English.”

“Damn, bro. That’s rough, but you’ve got this.”

“Oh, and I think I’m really going to like the head coach.”

“Manager, Tyler. Landon always said you call the head coach the manager in the pros.”

“Whatever,” I said with a shake of my head. “Anyway, Coach Mack is awesome. He reminds me a lot of our high school head coach, Coach Hudson.”

Cooper groaned, just like I knew he would. “Hudson was a workhorse and expected way too much from teenage boys. He was one of the reasons I knew I’d never want to go pro.”

I had to laugh. “And he’s the main reason Landon and I both decided to go pro.”

“Yeah, yeah,” my brother said. “Coach Hudson loved you both.”

“One of my roommates, Cooper, is a lot like you. You two would get along really well.”

“Alec and I were talking about coming up for opening weekend to visit and watch you play. Maybe I’ll meet him then.”

“Fuck, yeah, you better!” I said. “You’ll have to get a hotel room, though, because we have no space here, but I would love that. I’m guessing there’s no chance of Mom and Dad coming with you?”

“Mom wants to but doesn’t want to make Dad upset. He’s still angry.”

I groaned out loud. “Sorry if he’s taking it out on you at all.”

Carter actually laughed. “He loves me, bro. I’m the good son.”

I shook my head, even though he couldn’t see me. “I still don’t understand how you can like working there.”

“It’s alright,” Carter began. “It’s easy work, and I’m good at it. I did do something, though, and if you tell Dad, I’ll deny it.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “No chance of me talking to Dad anytime soon. I think your secret is safe with me, C.”

“Alec and I were at a tattoo convention in Nashville last weekend.”

“What did you get inked this time?” I asked as I absentmindedly rubbed my hand over my own ink. All three of us loved tattoos, much to our mom’s dismay.

“Well, I actually didn’t get any ink.”

“That’s crazy. Then, what did you buy that’s so secretive?” I wondered.

“A tattoo starter kit.” His voice was quieter, but I knew my brother well. He was unsure of how I would react.

“No shit! That’s awesome,” I exclaimed, honestly thrilled for him. “Anytime you want to practice, I’ll be your canvas.”

I heard Carter sigh in relief. “Thanks, Ty. I know Dad will be pissed if he thinks his last remaining son is leaving the shop, but you know I’ve always thought about trying this. I still plan on working with Dad. This would just be a side gig.”

“You’re a kick ass artist, Carter. I know I sure as fuck couldn’t tattoo anything on people, but I know you could. And fuck, chicks love tattoo artists. You’re gonna meet so many hot girls.”

“Speaking of, how are the chicks out there?” He asked.

“Well...” I said.

“No shit! You got laid already? I knew being an athlete had advantages.”

I shook my head and thought to myself how my Red didn't even know I was a baseball player. We hadn't gotten that far yet. I had no idea what she did for a living either. I knew she loved tequila sunrises, and that her grandma taught her to bake. I also knew she loved the color green, and a lightbulb went off in my head.

“Green!”

“What?” Carter asked. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Her last name is Green!”

“Ok...” Carter said, the confusion evident in his voice. “Did you get hit in the head with a baseball or something?”

“I gotta go, C. Talk soon.”

I walked into the common room to see Ivan looking in the cooler for something, and Hayden and Cooper were playing video games. “What's up, bro?” Cooper asked.

“Her last name is Green!” I said, excited to remember something.

“Is she from around here?” Hayden asked. “Green is a very popular last name.”

“No, she said she's new in town, too.” I said.

“Did she say where she's from?” Hayden wondered.

“I don't think so,” I said, as I looked down on the ground.

“For someone as into this chick as you say you are, you really didn't find out much about her.”

“Asshole.” Ivan said to Cooper, and we all laughed.

I pulled out my phone, typed a message into my newly installed translator app, and showed Ivan my phone. I don't know what had come over me, but I had to ask Ivan a question I thought I never would.

English ↔ Spanish

When you met your wife did you
know she was the one right
away?

Ivan read the translation and nodded, a big smile spread across his face “Si.” He typed something into his phone, then erased what he had typed and wrote something else. Then, he showed me his phone.

Spanish ↔ English

Hayden told me about your girl. You
find her. But you are here to play ball.
Don't let her be a distraction.

Ivan was wise beyond his years, and I nodded and patted his back. I'm sure having a pregnant wife in another country could be a big distraction for him, but I could tell whenever he was on the mound and pitching, he was focused on the game. He continued to type on his phone and turned it to me to see his translation.

Spanish ↔ English

When you find her you tell her baseball
has to come first. It sucks and it's hard.
Not fair to her, I know. If she
understands that then you can make it
work.

I would find her, but I would concentrate on baseball, too. We had six weeks until Opening Day for this brand-new team. I wanted to do well, so I could get called up sooner rather than later. But hopefully, after I saw my Red again. There was

something special about her. I just knew somehow she would understand baseball would come first.



One interesting fact about any job interview is that the interviewers decide if they want you working for them in the first few minutes itself.

The next few weeks were very busy. It was probably a good thing because I didn't have much time to dwell on Stone. I hardly knew him, but I already missed him. I missed his deep chuckle, his smile, and especially those dimples. I was still kicking myself for not giving him my number, but especially for leaving in the first place. You weren't supposed to miss one night stands, were you?

Autumn's fiancé, Nathan, and a bunch of his friends helped me change a butcher's kitchen into my baker's kitchen without too much work. They didn't seem to mind doing work as long as I had baked goods for them to sample and give me their opinions on. They seemed to really like the mocha scones I made. Nate's friend, Ayden, even said he didn't like anything coffee flavored but he liked those. I found the oatmeal AF cookies still on the plate, and it let me know that I needed to work on that recipe some more. The construction guys seemed to work harder if I promised anything chocolate. They said my chocolate croissants and mini chocolate peanut butter cakes were to die for. Autumn loved my vanilla honey bread the most, and I told her whenever she came in, I'd save her a loaf.

Slowly, my bakery was becoming what I had dreamed it would be. I still had a few more things on my to do list. I had

to add decorations to the walls and get small signs to show what each item was, but the main thing was to hire a part-time worker. I wasn't sure how the bakery would do in this small town and decided to hire one person now and possibly another part-time associate after a few weeks. I put an ad in the local newspaper and on the board in the library advertising for jobs, and I had four interviews lined up.

I sat at the cafe table and waited for the first interviewer to arrive. I looked down at my purple watch and noticed they were already twelve minutes late. Not a good sign when the job required early hours and punctuality. I sat there for a few more minutes when the door was flung open. A boy, obviously a teenager, came barreling through.

“Hi. I'm Cash Wehmeier! When do I start?”

I looked him up and down. He was wearing a shirt that was sleeveless with no sides that showed off his chest and his ribs. I was shocked for two reasons. One - it was definitely a shirt to wear to a gym or beach, not something for a job interview. Two - it was March in the midwest, and it was cold outside. I didn't want to come off as judgmental, so I motioned for him to sit down and gave him a chance.

“Hi, Cash, I'm Molly. What can you tell me about your job experiences?”

Cash pulled the cafe chair around and sat on it backwards, “Uh, I mow my neighbors lawn. Oh! And I dog sat for my aunt last summer.” He looked like an excited puppy himself with how he couldn't sit still in the chair and kept grinning at me.

I nodded. Everyone had to start off somewhere.

“Okay. What assets could you bring to a bakery?” I looked around at my white walls with blue and purple accents all around.

Cash looked around, too. “Well, I do have a nice ass. That's what all the girls tell me.”

I had to just blink at him. Did he really say that in a job interview? “Um, do you know what an asset is?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t mind hitting your ass. I don’t know why you keep saying ass hit, though. Hitting ass sounds so much better. I don’t even mind that you’re older.”

“Oh my gosh!” I had to cover my face with my hands. “Come back after you’ve looked up what asset means as well as basic job interview etiquette.”

“So, when do I start?” he asked.

“I have your number here.” I held up the info he’d given when he called about the interview. “I’ll be in touch *if* you get the job.” I made sure to emphasize “if” so hopefully, he would understand he was not guaranteed the job.

“See you later, babe,” he said and put his thumb and pinky fingers to his ear in the universal “call me” gesture.

I pulled out my phone and had to text Meadow about what just happened. While I was waiting for her response, I looked over the information about my next candidate. I really hoped it would go better. I felt my phone vibrate and picked it up with a smile on my face.

Meadow: OMG! Was he hot? Hire him! You need to get laid!

Me: EW! He was like 17. I am NOT hiring him

Meadow: Hmmm. Not legal. No fun. And I know my bestie. You’re holding out hope for STONE!

I wasn’t sure how to respond. He was always in the back of my mind, and I just didn’t understand it. I had only known him one night. Yes, it was an amazing night, but I felt like I had known him for so much longer. I was still mad that I couldn’t remember where he lived. While walking to his place, we had both been so drunk I hadn’t paid attention. In the morning, I was so nervous about leaving that I hurried out of there. I found my way back to the stadium after walking around in

circles and then found my apartment from there. I decided to change the subject.

Me: Do you think you might be able to come out here sometime soonish? I have a favor to ask...

Meadow: Girl! You know I make my own schedule. When do you need me and what for?

Me: I just love you! My walls are a little bare & I was wondering if you could take some pictures of my creations to hang on the wall. I'd pay you, of course.

Meadow: 1. Hell yeah! 2. You are NOT paying me! 3. I'll check my schedule & see you soon!

Meadow had gone to culinary school with me and majored in food photography. She did freelance photography for restaurants and grocery stores in New York and had a successful portfolio already. She was very talented! I was so excited for her to photograph my bakery items, and I knew they would be perfect to hang on my walls as decorations.

I heard a knock on the door and looked down at my watch. This next interviewee was early. That was a great sign. I quickly texted Meadow that I would talk to her later and that I would be paying her. I opened the door to a young woman with long blonde hair that was curled around her shoulders. She seemed a little younger than me but not by much.

"Hi, I'm Molly," I introduced myself and reached out to shake her hand.

"Hi! I'm Lillian Paddington, but everyone calls me Lilly Pad," she said with a sweet smile. I wasn't sure if I could call a grown woman Lilly Pad, but I made a note to call her Lilly. She was wearing a blue skirt that went just past her knees with

blue ballet slippers and a casual, white blouse. A very nice interview outfit. I was impressed already.

I once again gestured to the cafe table, and she turned the chair back around that Cash had left turned backwards and sat in it like a normal person would.

“I brought my resume with me,” Lilly said as she pulled it out of her purse.

“Great! Thank you!” I said as I looked over the resume. She had job experience at a movie theater. “Your job experience shows me you have customer service skills. I love that.”

“Oh, I just love movies. We got to see free movies. Do we get free donuts here?” she asked as she looked around.

“Um, we could probably work something out. At least a discount,” I said and hoped not everyone thought it was just a donut shop. I wanted to create more than just donuts. “So, other than customer service, what do you think your biggest asset would be for my bakery?”

Lilly thought for a moment and said, “I’m really quick at math! And that’s important when dealing with money.”

I nodded, “Yeah, that is a good skill to have.”

“Ask me a math question, and I’ll answer it super quick,” she said while bouncing in her seat.

I thought for a second, “Okay. Many of my cupcakes are \$3.50, and a full cheesecake is \$19.75, so what is the total of those two together?”

Lilly looked right at me and quickly said, “Five.”

I once again found myself just blinking at an interviewee and wasn’t sure what to say, “Um, that’s not the correct answer.”

Lilly laughed, “I know, but it sure was a quick answer. It was kind of a joke to show how quick I can do math.”

I just found myself nodding but wasn’t sure where the humor in that answer was or why she had done that. Was she

serious? “You know this is just a part time position for now, right?”

Lilly nodded. “Yes. I’m a college student, and I only have time for a part-time job, so that works perfect for me. I hope to be a social media consultant someday.”

I wrote down some information on her resume and felt like a deflated balloon. This interview had gone so much better than the first one, up until the math question.

“Well, I will be in touch,” I said while I pasted a smile on my face. “I still have a few more interviews scheduled.”

Lilly smiled at me nicely. “Ok, great!”

The next interview was with a woman whose kids had just left the nest and was looking for something to keep herself occupied. She wanted a job with more hours than part-time and said she would think about it, but I was sure she’d find something full-time that would suit her life better.

Up next was another college student named Janel Boyher, and I had hoped that she might be a good fit. She said she loved to bake for her family in her spare time and was actually thinking about going to culinary school after she got her general education requirements out of the way at the community college. I asked what she would like about the job, and she said trying the different baked goods. But when I asked what she might not like about the job, she said, “Dealing with people.” I then realized she wasn’t what I needed to hire at the moment. I let her know if I ever needed a baker in the future, I would give her a call.

Lilly appeared to be the best option, but I wasn’t one hundred percent sure she was the right person for the job. Out of all the interviewees, though, she had the most potential. I didn’t want to just settle for anyone for my bakery. I was about to lock the door and work on some baking in the back room when there was a knock on the door.

“I’m so sorry, but I’m not open yet. We hope to open in two weeks,” I explained to the young woman standing at the door. She was wearing a simple blue shirt and jeans. Her hair was

dark brown and up in one of those messy buns that looked simple but probably took a long time to get perfect.

“I just now saw your ad at the library. I know I didn’t apply or call to set up an interview, but I was wondering if you had time now. If not, I could come back another time.”

“I have a few minutes. Come on in. I’m Molly Green. Welcome to my bakery.”

“Hi. I’m Penelope Benton,” she said as she came in and looked around. “Oh, I love the colors! It looks so welcoming here.”

I smiled as I looked around the bakery at the accents of Raptor blue and my favorite color, purple, splashed around. I loved that she mentioned something positive about the bakery, something all the other interviewers had failed to do.

“Have a seat, Penelope,” I said and pointed at the same cafe table I had been using all day.

“I’m sorry I don’t have a resume or anything, but I really need a job, and this seemed perfect for me. I used to work at a coffee place. I’m not sure if you’ll even be selling coffee here, but I love making coffee drinks. I’m also really great at recommending drinks that pair well with baked goods.” She was rambling, most likely due to nerves, but I liked everything she was saying.

I smiled and looked over at my empty counter, where my espresso machine would be sitting as soon as it arrived. “Yes, I plan to sell coffee drinks, and I don’t have any experience making them, so that would be amazing if you could teach me, too. I had just planned on watching videos or looking up recipes to try.”

Penelope laughed. “I love trying new combinations of flavors. We could come up with special drinks to go with different baked goods that people haven’t tried before.” Her nervousness was going away, and I saw real excitement in her chocolate brown eyes. “That is if I get the job, of course.”

“You do know this is only part-time, right?” I asked, worried that she would say she needed more hours since she said she

needed work. I was really feeling like we clicked already.

“Yeah, I do. I also work at the diner down the street, so part-time would be perfect,” she replied, and I found myself sighing with relief.

“Do you ever bake?” I asked.

“I haven’t really tried, but I’m willing to learn,” she said, and I loved that response. “I love working with customers, so I could handle up here while you are baking in the back if needed.”

“How are you with cash handling skills?”

“I have to cash people out at the diner. I don’t know how your register works, but I’m good at entering the charges and giving back change. I’m not the best at doing math in my head, but I can figure it out on paper, if needed.”

“That’s pretty much what my machine does, too,” I said and was grateful she didn’t ask me to come up with a math problem.

We talked some more about the bakery and how it was similar to the diner and other job experiences she had. I really liked Penelope. I could tell that she and I would work well together. I suddenly found myself saying, “When can you start?”

Penelope got a huge grin on her face, “Are you serious? I can start tomorrow if you need me.”

I had to laugh. “That would be awesome! I am finishing up organizing everything and still have a few more deliveries coming in. If you want to help with that kind of stuff, you are more than welcome to start tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here bright and early, boss,” she said. “Thank you so much!”



The next morning, I woke up and ran to the bathroom to throw up. *No! No! No!* I thought to myself. I had way too

much to do and didn't have time to get sick. I sat on my bathroom floor, closed my eyes for a minute, and sighed. I was feeling a little better now that I had thrown up. I got up from the floor, brushed my teeth, and went on with my day.

Penelope showed up right on time and was a huge help. She was great at organization and quickly learned how to make fondant items for cupcakes and cakes.

We made tons of little, blue fondant Raptors for my Raptor cupcakes. Since the mascot is blue, I decided to make the cupcakes blue with white buttercream frosting, so the Raptor would stand out. I also wanted to make vanilla and peanut butter cake baseball cupcakes with vanilla buttercream frosting flattened down with the red laces done with my piping bag. I planned to make plenty of baseball items to celebrate the opening season of the Raptors.

"Once we get these done, I'm going to my AF kitchen to make these same cupcakes but without the peanut butter and using my special flours."

"Do you really think there will be a need for allergy-friendly baked items in this small town?" Penelope asked.

"I'm not sure," I said with a shrug. "But if I'm able to give one kid with a nut allergy or a person with Celiac Disease a baked good that they can eat without worry, it's worth it to me."

"Do you have an allergy yourself, or do you know someone close to you who does?" Penelope began putting the finished baked goods on trays to store in the fridge.

"Nope. One time, I gave a cute boy a hazelnut cookie and didn't know he was allergic to tree nuts. It really left an impact on me."

"Oh, he was cute, huh? He really did leave an impact."

I found myself blushing. "I was 11, Pen. He was my first crush. I'm pretty sure he was my first kiss, too, if you count a kiss on the cheek."

"You are too adorable!" Penelope said as she began to fill another tray. "It's totally up to you if it counts as your first

kiss. I think if he meant enough for you to have a second kitchen that is AF, then it counts.”

Penelope’s phone rang, and she looked at the caller ID. “Is it okay if I take this outside?”

I gave her a nod and finished putting the cupcakes on the tray. A few minutes later, she came back into the kitchen. She was ringing her hands together and looked nervous.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“I am so sorry. That was my sister, Shiloh, calling, and one of my kids has a fever.”

“I didn’t know you have kids. How old are they, and what are their names?” I asked. I also wondered where their father was, but I didn’t know her well enough yet to ask that kind of question.

Penelope reached for her phone and pulled up a picture of herself with an adorable little boy with a brown mohawk and a little girl with a round face and brown pigtails. “Camden is almost seven, and Peyton just turned four. They are my everything. I am lucky enough that my sister is taking online courses, and in exchange for living with us and free internet, she watches my kids for me.”

“I’m glad you have that support. Family definitely comes first. Go! You’ve been a great help today.”

Penelope looked relieved, “Are you sure? I am so sorry. I told you in my interview I would be reliable.”

“And you have been,” I said with a very serious tone. “Go take care of your child. You have my number, so if you can’t come in tomorrow, just let me know.”

“You really are the best boss!” she said and gave me a big hug.

I went back into my kitchen with an extra kick in my step because I was excited I found someone to work for me. I began organizing my pantry shelves, and I got really excited to use my brand new label maker. I spent the next few hours organizing and labeling everything.



TYLER

CHAPTER EIGHT

On Opening Day in 1907, the New York Giants faced off against the Phillies. When the Giants fell behind, fans began flinging snowballs onto the field, forcing the umpire to call a forfeit.

SMACK! The sound of the ball going right into the middle of my glove was still my favorite sound. Well, maybe my second favorite sound after hearing the sounds Red made in the bedroom. I had to shake my head as I threw the ball back to Ivan, who was currently on the pitcher's mound.

"You two are looking really good together," the pitching coach, Jason Snyder, said from behind me. "I was worried about how the language barrier would be, but I had a feeling the two of you rooming together would help."

"Thanks, Coach," I said while I lifted up my mask and gave Ivan a head nod. "We definitely vibe together. He's really good. Definitely the hardest thrower on the team but don't you dare tell Dixon."

Coach Snyder laughed. "I wouldn't dare." He looked at his watch. "McAlister's team meeting is in a few. We better head in."

I nodded and waved Ivan over to head down to the locker room for our head coach's meeting.

A lot of the guys were already sitting on the benches, so Ivan and I sat down next to Cooper and a few of the other pitchers.

“Well, team, tomorrow means Opening Day for our brand new team. We are a young team other than Stone, Cruz, and of course we have minor league veteran Dominic Anderson,” Coach Mack said. Dom got up and gave a little bow. That got some laughs. “We might not win all our games, but I know you boys are going to do your best. I was told by other MiLB coaches not to get attached to any of you because my dream is that you don’t last in this league very long. I hope to see all of you in the bigs someday. But while you are here, I do expect you to give 110%. If you don’t, there are tons of other players out there dying to play ball. Now, our social media manager, Lucy Adams, has a few words to say.”

“Hi, gentlemen,” Lucy said with a bright smile. “It’s good to see you guys again, and it looks like you’re ready to go.”

She was young and cute with big blue eyes and curly blonde hair. A few of the guys were definitely checking her out, even though she had been around all week. She had been taking videos of our practices and had interviewed us for social media content, asking us random questions like favorite food, favorite music, and favorite baseball player. One favorite question she asked was, “If you had a sister - who on the team would you not let her date?” Everyone on the team has answered with “Cooper Dixon.” Even Cooper said he wouldn’t let someone else’s sister date him. It was social media gold.

“I don’t know if you guys have noticed or not, but there’s a new bakery opening tomorrow to coincide with Opening Day.” A couple of the guys shook their heads. I had run past the business and knew what she was talking about because of the construction work and frequent deliveries, but I hadn’t realized it was going to be a bakery. “Well, the owner and baker herself reached out to me. I guess she’s a big baseball fan and wanted to make you guys something special. She has made a cake that she’s calling her “Raptor Cake.” It’s blue like our mascot, Rally Raptor, with a chocolate peanut butter filling since you

can buy peanuts at the ballpark. She wanted the Raptors themselves to have the first taste of the cake.”

I could hear several of the guys making appreciative noises. We didn't eat things like cake very often in order to stay in shape, but this was a special occasion. I didn't say anything, but because of my nut allergy, both to peanuts and tree nuts, I couldn't eat the cake.

“She also made a few peanut-free cupcakes in case any of you are allergic to nuts or don't like peanut butter. She even said she has a separate kitchen for allergy-free baked items, so no worries about cross-contamination.”

I couldn't believe a baker would go to all that trouble without knowing if any of us were allergic. I would definitely be stopping by to try more items and thank the baker.

Dominic Anderson, our second baseman, stood up and walked over to the cupcakes. “I don't have a peanut allergy, but I do have type 1 diabetes. Do you know anything about the sugar and flour used?”

“She actually said it was safe for that, too, and she used a sugar supplement, so it's diabetic-friendly as well.”

“They will probably taste like cardboard without all the good stuff,” one of the relief pitchers said.

I took a big bite of the cupcake and groaned, “Nope, it's amazing.”

Lucy grinned at me, and then said to everyone, “She didn't ask for any publicity or anything, but I wanted to give her a shout out. If you guys could all take a picture with the cake and send me some selfies or your thoughts on the cake, that would be awesome.”

We all crowded around the cake that said “Happy Opening Day Raptors. Good luck this season!” in red writing. We took some pictures, and then some staff members cut the cake and handed out pieces of the blue cake. Dominic and I took some videos and pictures together, talking about how amazing her special cupcakes tasted. We thanked her for the thoughtfulness and said how we would be visiting soon

“Those were the best cupcakes I’ve ever had,” I said as I finished off my second cupcake and walked over to hang out with my roommates.

“That was really good,” Hayden agreed, and I had to laugh at the fact that his tongue was now blue. “I wasn’t sure about blue cake, but it works.”

“She’s probably an old lady with blue hair,” Cooper said with a laugh. “But if she baked for me like that all the time, I’d get down on my knees and propose to her.”

“I’ll definitely be stopping by her shop and getting stuff for my family that’s in town,” Antonio Walker said.

“That’s a great idea. My brother is in town with his best friend, too. I’ll have to get them to stop there. He has a major sweet tooth.” I said.

“Ok, guys, after you have your cake, come back in here. I have posted the Opening Day roster,” Coach Mack announced after whistling loudly.

That got our attention, and we all walked over to the coach’s door to look at the roster.

Raptors Opening Day Roster

Order	Number	Player	Position
1	36	Antonio Walker	Right Field
2	24	Ian Baxter	Third Base
3	20	Jude Fox	DH
4	16	Ben Swanson	Shortstop
5	11	Hayden Scott	First Base
6	7	Tyler Stone	Catcher
7	60	Trent Brooks	Left Field
8	2	Dominic Anderson	Second Base
9	47	Jordan Woosley	Centerfield
	27	Ivan Cruz	Starting Pitcher

“Cruz! You! Buddy! You are the starter!” Each time I said ‘you,’ I punched him in the arm. I was so proud of him!

Ivan hadn’t looked at the list yet, and his eyes got big. He rushed to the door and turned around with the biggest smile.

“ME!”

“You deserve it!” I said, hoping he understood me. We gave each other a hug with slaps on the back.

“Camilia!” He said and held up his phone.

“Yeah, my man, go tell your wife!” I said and watched as he went off to find a quiet place to call her. I looked over at Cooper, who was looking at the list again. “Sorry, bro. I bet you’re the number two or three starter.”

Cooper just nodded, “I’m happy for Cruz, don’t get me wrong. My dad has just been hounding me to be the best. He won’t be happy.”

“Fuck him, Coop. You can only do the best you can.”

“Ooohh, that might be the best I can do,” he said, and I turned to see what he was looking at. Lucy Adams was asking our centerfielder, Jordan Woosley, some questions.

“Hell, no,” Hayden said. “I don’t sleep with people I’ll see at work.”

“Well, mini Cooper doesn’t care.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m going to go watch some more tape of the Delaware Ducks. If you guys want to grab some dinner with us, meet us at Fultons.”



Food is a necessity, and people will always need food to eat. Thus, the bakery business is considered recession-proof and one of the most lucrative and popular industries in the world today.

“Are you ready?” Penelope asked as she came into the kitchen of the bakery.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I said. “I just threw up again. Probably because of the nerves.”

“Oh, that sucks! Do you need to sit down or anything?” Pen took the tray of cupcakes out of my hand. “Let me help you.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” I said as I reached in the fridge, grabbed a bottle of water, and took a drink to try and calm my stomach.

There was a knock on the door, and Penelope went over to answer it. “I’m sorry, but we don’t open for another hour.” We had decided to open up the same day as the Raptor’s opening day, and since their game started at 3pm, I decided to start my grand opening at noon and stay open until four, so people could stop by on the way to the game.

“I know, and I’m sorry to bother you guys on opening day, but I wanted to wish Molly good luck and give her an Opening Day gift,” said a familiar voice.

“Autumn?” I asked as I saw my realtor peek around the open door. “Come in! Come in! Pen, this is ...”

“Autumn Rhodes. Yeah, we went to school together. Don’t forget it’s a small town, boss.”

“Hi, Penny. I didn’t know you worked here,” Autumn said as Nate walked into the bakery behind her, carrying a big box. “I am so sorry I didn’t get this here until today. I’ve been crazy busy, and I feel so bad that you can’t use it today.”

“Oh my gosh! Thank you so much!” I literally squealed when I saw the photo of the espresso machine on the box. “We’re having an afternoon start, so it works out fine. I can play with it tonight and then start using it tomorrow.” I gave Autumn a huge hug. “Don’t forget that you’ll get free vanilla lattes for life!”

“You’ll be sorry about that,” Nate said with a laugh as he headed towards the back corner of the bakery to put the heavy box on the counter. He looked around at my bakery with a huge grin. “It looks so great in here!”

On each one of the cases were signs that looked like baseball pennants to tell what the items were. There was a really big baseball sign above the case with my AF baked goods, which sat away from all the other cases. It let people know what special ingredients were used to bake the items and how they were prepared in a separate kitchen.

“Thanks,” I said with pride. “The walls are a little bare now, but I have ideas on how to change that.”

I looked through the front window and gasped. There was a line already out the window. I couldn’t believe it. “Oh, my gosh!”

Autumn and Nate both laughed, “Yeah, it’s around the block.

“But I don’t open for another hour. Why are all these people here already?”

“Have you seen the Raptor’s Fan Site?” Autumn asked.

“No... I haven’t even looked at my phone. Why?”

Autumn pulled out her phone and said, "Listen to these comments, and there are pictures to go with them!" She showed me a picture of the Raptors's team surrounding the cake I had sent them. There were several comments underneath from players that Autumn read out loud, "*So thoughtful..... Thank you!.... We're stopping by Batter Up! for sure..... Best Cake Ever..... Blue cake is now my favorite..... If you're headed to The Raptors game, make sure to stop and get a cupcake on the way over!..... They even have peanut-free and celiac disease friendly items that taste amazing!*"

"What?! Oh my gosh! They didn't have to do that!" I was not expecting that and couldn't believe it. Talk about free press! "I'm so excited they loved it! Wow!" I was suddenly feeling a little dizzy from the shock and all the late nights and early mornings getting ready for today. "I have to sit down. I'm overwhelmed."

"Are you okay?" Pen asked, speaking for the first time since Autumn and Nate came into the bakery.

"I don't know. I'm feeling really lightheaded."

"Have you eaten today?" Pen asked.

I nodded, "Yeah, but not very much. I have some peanut butter crackers in my purse. That sounds good right now."

Pen nodded and went to the back of the bakery, where my office and a small break room were. She came back with the crackers and handed them to me.

"Thanks," I replied, and after a few bites, I was already feeling better.

"Well, if you're okay, we'll be heading out for lunch before going to the game. I guess you won't be able to make it, will you?" Autumn asked.

"Not today," I said with regret, "but I'll make a game one of these days, hopefully sooner rather than later. I obviously love baseball."

"My parents have season tickets, so if you ever want awesome seats, just let us know," Nate offered. "Save me some pretzel cupcakes, will you?"

I gave him a nod to let him know I'd save his favorite cupcakes. "Thank you, guys. For everything!" I said and gave them both a hug. They went out the door, and I checked the time. It was now only a half an hour before opening time. I sat down to finish my crackers while Pen did a few last-minute things to get ready. As she was opening the rolls of change into the cash drawer, I sighed. "I'm sorry I'm not much help right now."

"Molly, just relax. This is your baby, and you need to be at one hundred percent. Are you feeling okay?"

I nodded, "I'm actually feeling a lot better now. Are we ready to open?"

Penelope smiled at me with a huge smile, "We're ready. You do the honors, boss."

I felt a surge of energy as I walked over to the door and turned the sign over to say OPEN. We had done all our preparations, and we were ready to go. "Hi, everyone, welcome to Batter Up!"

I took my place behind the counter, and Penelope smiled from the cash register.

"I'd like a raptor cupcake and a sprinkle cupcake for my sister," said a little boy with a raptor on his t-shirt. His little sister was eyeing the sprinkle cupcakes and jumping up and down, making her two blonde braids bounce.

"Oh, do you like the baseball Raptors?" I asked the little boy.

"No. I like the really real dinosaur raptors," he said very matter-of-factly.

I had to laugh as I boxed up their cupcakes.

"I'll take two apple fritters, too," their mom said.

I thanked her and handed the boxes to Pen.

Three hours later, the line was finally coming to an end, my cases were getting very low, and the tip jar was overflowing. It was a great feeling. "I need to refill these," I told Penelope.

“Let me do that. You’re the face of the bakery,” she offered.

“Thank you. Definitely grab more cupcakes and mini cakes. The blueberry bread loaves are very popular, too.”

“I’m not going to tell you I’m going to grab a blueberry loaf for myself while I’m back there.”

“I’m not going to mind!” I said with a laugh.

I heard the bell above the door and turned around. All the breath wooshed from my lungs. He was here! Stone was in my bakery! He was wearing a Raptors jersey and had a Raptors baseball cap on his head, as well as black athletic shorts. His hair was longer than I remembered, but it had been several weeks since I had seen him.

“Oh, my gosh, hi!” I said, and I knew I had a big smile on my face.

“Wow! Do you welcome all your guests like that? Talk about amazing customer service!” he said with a chuckle.

“No. Just you,” I said with a nervous laugh. Why was I nervous? This guy had seen me naked.

“Wow. What is so special about me?” he asked as he looked at the case of bakery items. “These look amazing. Did you make all of these?”

“I did,” I said proudly.

“I will take a half dozen of the Raptor cupcakes and three chocolate chip cookies. Those are my favorites. And I guess I’ll get three of the mini strawberry cheesecakes. Oh! And I need to buy out all your peanut-free cupcakes.”

“I know I told you my grandma taught me to bake, but I don’t think I got to the part in the conversation where I told you I was opening my own bakery,” I rambled while I boxed up his items. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot. I hope you don’t hate me.”

He looked at me with a tilt to his head and a frown on his handsome face. “I’m sorry, but I think you have me confused with someone else.”

“Wait, what? I would never forget you...” I proclaimed as I rang up his order and told him his total.

“No offense, but I’ve never seen you before. And I would remember your beautiful face,” he voiced as he slid his credit card in the card reader.

It felt like a ton of bricks were now sitting on my chest. I couldn’t breathe. He was all I had thought of for weeks, and he couldn’t even remember me? Talk about embarrassment. I couldn’t let him see me cry. I wouldn’t let him see me cry.

“Well, thank you for your order,” I said quickly. “I hope you enjoy it.”

I could tell he was very confused, and he just replied with a thank you of his own and walked out the door.

I walked into the kitchen and saw Penelope with her hands full of bakery trays.

“Are you ok?” Pen asked with a worried look in her chocolate colored eyes.

I took one look at her and burst into tears.

“What happened?” She asked.

“He.... Stone.... Here....” I managed to say between tears.

“He came in?” Penelope asked as she put down the trays, “What happened to cause these tears?”

“He didn’t remember me,” I said.

“The fuck? How could he forget you?”

“I don’t know, but I’m so embarrassed. I thought I meant more to him. Now, I’m glad I just left.” The sadness and embarrassment were quickly turning into anger. He had been the first guy I had opened up to in a very long time, and he didn’t even remember me.

“I’m so sorry, Molly,” she said as we heard the familiar ding of the bell. “I’ll go help the customer. Go wipe off your face and calm down for a minute. You don’t need him if he just has so many girls that he forgets you after only six weeks. You deserve better.” She reached over to grab the trays of food and

turned to me one more time. “When you’re ready, come back and be the amazing baker you are. We are going to sell out of all these items!”

I smiled through my tears and was so thankful for such an amazing new friend. “Thank you.”

Then, something that she said made me pause as she went to the front of the bakery. Had she said six weeks? No. No. No. I should have had my period a few weeks ago. I still hadn’t had it. The tears were coming back because I felt I already knew the answer.

“Moll! You have a special visitor,” I heard Penelope call out. “You’ll want to come out here and see.”

Was Stone back? Did he finally remember me and come back to apologize? I went through the door to the store front and stopped in my tracks.

“Meadow!!!” I cried and ran into the arms of my best friend.

She wrapped me in a huge hug and didn’t let me go for a long time. “Girl, you lied to me. The drive took forever! I would have been here sooner, but that was such a long, boring drive.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I couldn’t let my girl open her dream bakery without being here to celebrate her. Plus, look at these walls, Molly! You said you wanted me to take some pictures and what better way than on opening day!”

“I love you so much,” I said. “I don’t know how you do it, but you’re always here when I need you.”

“I love you, too, Moll. What’s with the tears, though?”

“Stone came in and didn’t recognize her,” Penelope explained as she was filling the cases with cupcakes.

“What the fuck?!” Meadow asked.

Penelope had to laugh. “My reaction, too. I think I like you.”

“Oh! I’m a horrible friend. Pen, this is my college roommate and best friend, Meadow. Mead, this is my associate, Penelope, who is amazing, and I couldn’t have opened my bakery without her.”

Meadow reached over and gave Pen a huge hug. “Any friend of Molly is a friend of mine.”

Penelope grinned. “I feel the same.”

I had to smile because even though Stone didn’t remember me, it looked like my long-time best friend and new friend were going to get along great.

“How much longer are you open for?” Meadow asked as she looked around the shop. There were a few customers sitting at the tables, but no one else was in line.

“Not too much longer,” I said. “What a day!”

“We did awesome!” Penelope said as she held up the tip jar that was overflowing.

“I’m so glad I brought a bottle of champagne! You have to join us, Penelope!”

“I’ll have to text my sister and see if she doesn’t mind watching my kids a little longer,” Pen said as she reached for her phone.

“Well...” I said and gave out a long sigh.

“Spit it out, Molly,” Meadow said, knowing me way too well.

“I might need to go to the store first,” I said and added, “I’m late.”

“Late for what?” Meadow asked.

“Late. *Late.*” I said with emphasis.

“Oh! No way!” Meadow yelled and caused a few of the patrons in the bakery to look our way. “I will go buy every type of pregnancy test they have available, and I’ll be back in time for closing.”

Penelope had to shake her head at how loud Meadow had spoken. “Now, the whole town is going to think either their new baker is pregnant or I’m having another kid without a dad.”



“How much time is left?” Penelope asked.

“Three minutes and twelve seconds,” Meadow declared as she looked at her smart watch.

“This is the longest five minutes ever,” Penelope groaned. “Can’t we look now?”

“I think we should wait the full time,” Meadow murmured as she was looking at one of the boxes of the many pregnancy tests that were sitting in front of her, face down on my bathroom sink. “But I’ve never done this before.”

“I’ve done it several times, and from experience, if it’s positive you’ll know right away. With Peyton, I could already see the plus sign as I was lifting the test up after peeing on it. There was no doubt.”

“Molls, are you okay?” Meadow asked as she came over and sat next to me on the lip of the bathtub.

I just shrugged, not sure what to say. “He didn’t even remember me.” I felt one tear fall down my cheek. “How am I going to do this?”

“You don’t even know if it’s positive yet,” Meadow said as she rubbed my back. I shrugged and sighed as I picked up one of the tests. “Hey! It’s not time yet!” Meadow shouted. I turned the test over and saw the very clear, big pink positive sign.

“I knew it was going to be positive,” I said quietly as Meadow and Penelope each picked up a different test and saw the same results.

“Molly, don’t cry,” Meadow whispered and pulled me into a hug. I hadn’t even realized tears were streaming down my face.

“You’re not alone,” Penelope declared as she came over and joined our group hug. “I’ve done this twice and all alone. We’ve got this together.”

“I’m so lucky to have you guys.” I said with a long sigh. I placed my hand on my still-flat belly.

“You know what,” Meadow said as she sat up. “I think you two should make some of the most popular menu items, and I’ll take pictures of you guys while you work. Then, I’ll work my magic, and you’ll have both candid shots and professional photos on your walls.”

“I love that idea,” I replied, thankful for the distraction.

“And then we can eat the items after you’re done taking pictures,” Penelope remarked with a huge grin on her face and stood up to go downstairs.

“My thoughts exactly!” Meadow said as she stood up as well and linked arms with Penelope. “By the way, blueberry bread better be on your list of items to make.”

“You know what, I think you’re my new best friend,” Pen said and had me standing quickly.

“Hello! What about me?” I asked as I watched them walk away without me.

“Come on, Moll. We can all three be best friends!” Meadow exclaimed and linked her arm with mine.

“You two are stuck with me now,” Penelope announced as we made our way down the stairs.

“We definitely need a best friend group name,” Meadow said with a raise of her eyebrow.”

“Peanut, Butter, and Jelly,” I suggested.

“Hmm,” Penelope thought, with a twist of her lips, “Maybe. We will need to think about this more.

“I know it’s cliché and not very original, but this has to be a sign!” Meadow said once we all entered the main kitchen. She held up a case of 3 Musketeers bars with a huge grin on her face.

I had to laugh, and it felt good after all the crying I had done that day. “Those were my Papaw’s favorite candy bars, and I was going to try to make 3 Musketeers brownies and cupcakes to honor him.”

“I think we found our nickname,” Penelope said as she tore open one of the candy bars, broke it into three, and gave us each a piece.



TYLER

CHAPTER TEN

Heckling has its place in sports as it provides an outlet for fans to fully immerse themselves in the game while supporting their teams from the sidelines.

“I have never been so happy to see this crappy apartment,” Hayden exclaimed as our bus pulled up to the stadium.

“I don’t know. At least the last motel had a microwave and mini fridge,” Antonio groaned from behind us.

“And roaches,” outfielder Trent Brooks added while visibly shuttering.

“At least we’ll have our own fans and won’t be booed,” our DH, Jude Fox, said with a heavy sigh. “That shit sucked.”

“Yeah, it fucking did,” Cooper said as he barreled past all of us to get off the bus. Cooper had not pitched well at all against the Seymour Pelicans. He had several wild pitches and even hit two of their players; one had been hit in the head and had to leave the game. The crowd had actually thrown food at him. It was horrible, and I felt so bad for him.

After winning our first two games, including the home opener, we lost the third game 13-5. I’m not saying it was only Cooper’s fault, but coach had our back up catcher, Neil Endicott, catch the game, and Cooper was mad about it. He wanted me to catch for him since we had been practicing

together. Cooper let his feelings explode all over the mound, and it was bad.

“Let him calm down. He’ll be okay.” Hayden said, knowing I was worried about our friend.

“I think we should go down and see if that bakery is open. I have been craving that cake!” Trent said.

“Oh, yeah. Let’s go.” I said. I could use something sweet to take my mind off the long road trip. “Maybe a Raptor cupcake will cheer up Cooper.”

As the group of us walked to the bakery, we definitely drew attention and even a few local kids asked for autographs. I signed my very first autograph to a little boy who told me he just started playing 8u baseball and wanted to be a catcher. I felt my chest puff out with pride and told him if he ever wanted catcher tips to ask me.

“That was so cool!” Jude exclaimed. “I hope signing autographs never gets old. I don’t ever want to be an entitled asshole.”

“I totally agree,” I said with a laugh. “That was really awesome to be recognized. That kid even knew my position.”

“Holy crap, now, that’s awesome!” Hayden said as we got closer to the bakery.

“What is?” Ian asked.

“Look at the sign,” Hayden said, pointing. We all looked up in awe as we took in the freshly painted white letters popping against the red brick building. “Batter Up!” was spelled out in neat, clear lettering, but the icing on the cake - pun definitely intended - was the exclamation mark. The owner’s creativity definitely extended beyond the kitchen. To capitalize on the baseball theme, they had the designer use a baseball and bat to make up the exclamation mark. After taking in the clever signage, the window display drew our attention down. “Where every dessert is a homerun!” was painted on the crystal clear glass, beautifully framing a tantalizing display of some of her sweet treats.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “The baker really is a baseball fan!”

“Damn. They are closed. It’s only open 7-3,” Antonio said with a scowl on his face while looking at his watch and realizing it was after 4 p.m. “Must be nice to only have to work a few hours.”

“Well, you’ve gotta think. It’s probably an old lady working here by herself,” I explained.

“How do you know she’s old? Have you come here without us?” Hayden asked with one hand on his hip and an accusatory glare in his eye.

“No. I don’t know why, but I see an old lady making all these delicious treats. My aunt is the baker in the family, so I think of someone like her,” I said with a shrug.

“You know, the last team I was on had a few neighborhood moms sponsor us, and they would bring us treats and feed us. Maybe this baker would sponsor us!” Neil said with a lick of his lips.

“I guess we’ll have to come back another time.” The disappointment in Trent’s voice was very evident.

As we were walking away, I saw a petite woman with red hair going into the bank across the street. “I’ll be right back.” I didn’t even bother to see what my teammates’ reactions were as I ran across the street. I heard a horn honk as a car almost hit me.

The door for the bank was closing behind her, and I quickly opened it. “Red! Hi!”

The woman turned around, but she was not who I had hoped to see. She was a little taller than she appeared from further away, and I could tell from up close that she did not have natural red hair. She smiled at me, but I felt deflated. “Sorry, wrong person.”

“I can be whoever you want me to be, stud,” she cooed while batting her eyelashes.

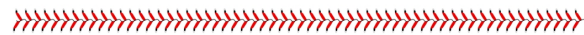
“No, thanks,” I said, walking back out the bank door and towards the apartment.

“Dude, what is your obsession with redheads?” Trent asked when I caught back up with them.

“He found this amazing woman with red hair but didn’t get her name or her number,” Hayden explained to them. “I met her, and to be honest, she was pretty awesome.”

“So you run after every redhead and almost get hit by a car, trying to find her?” Ian asked.

“I’m going to find her,” I said with false confidence. It had been a couple of months since I had seen her, and I was wondering if she had been just passing through.



The next day, I got to the stadium a few hours early. I was catching for Kevin Swick for the first time in tonight’s game, and I wanted to watch his last start as well as watch more film about our opponent. The guys all made fun of me because I liked to watch film with the coaches while we sat on the bus, but I loved feeling prepared. I was really learning a lot of things from our head coach. After an hour of watching film with Coach Snyder and Coach Mack, I went into the weight room. It wasn’t anything fancy with a few treadmills, a few lifting machines, two cardio machines, a squat rack, a wall lined with free weights, and med balls. I decided to do some cardio and got on the stair stepper. I gave a chin nod to our second baseman Dominic and our shortstop Ben, who were taking turns spotting each other on the free squat rack.

“How’s it going, Stone?” Dominick asked.

“Pretty good. Feel good about tonight.” I replied as I adjusted the difficulty on my machine.

“Good,” Ben said as he added more weight for Dom. “I’m really liking this team.”

Dom grunted, “Don’t get attached to anyone. We move up and down so much at this level. I came from the Crawford Lions, and I was moved up five times and kept getting sent back down. I even went up to Triple-A once, but I didn’t play.

I was fine getting traded because it was different from going up and down. I think I'm the oldest at 27 in this league."

"That really sucks," I said, "but it'll be worth it when we make it to the show."

"If we make it," Ben retorted. "Only about ten percent of players make it to the majors, so out of all of us on this Raptors team, only three of us will make it."

"That's shitty odds," outfielder Jordan Woosley sighed heavily from where he was getting off of the treadmill. "If I were a betting man, I'd say Keegan Tucker and Antonio Walker will be two of those three. Maybe Ian Baxter, too."

"Fuck, Baxter doesn't have the drive or the dedication to put in the effort," Jude Fox said from the corner as he did some stretches. "My money is on Stone."

"Really? Thanks, bro," I said, shocked, as I gave him a head nod.

"Never seen a player watch so much film and who really knows the players and opponents. You've got skills to back it all up, too. Your bro went first round in the draft, so we all knew he'd make it. I think you will, too."

"I appreciate that, but don't count out Cruz either. He's got real God-given talent and the drive, too," I said about my friend. "Any major league team would be lucky to have him as a starting pitcher."

Hayden and Trent walked into the gym, and I nodded at them. Hayden climbed on the elliptical machine next to me and began his own workout while Trent went over to talk to one of the trainers.

"Oh, Stone. I have something for you in my locker. I went to that bakery and picked up some nut-free cupcakes for you."

"Let's go!" I said. "Thanks, bro. My brother got me some on Opening Day, but I've been wanting another one."

"Cooper only had eyes for the brunette. Man, he was smitten and even asked for her number, but she said she was too busy."

Trent and Ben had to laugh about Cooper getting shot down.

Trent then added, “You should go. The other worker is a redhead, and we all know how you love redheads.”

“I will definitely stop by. So the owner isn’t some old lady after all?”

“Nope,” Dom said. “On second thought, maybe you shouldn’t go. You’ll start to date her, and we’ll all get fat from her bakery items.”

“It’s called moderation,” Hayden replied as he turned off his machine and walked over to the free weights.

After an hour in the gym, I showered and got into my uniform. I chatted with Swick for a few minutes to see how he was feeling, and then he and I went out to the bullpen to warm up for the game together. After warmups and the National Anthem, I was ready to play.

I was behind the plate, and after a few innings, I was already getting frustrated with the umpire. He was not giving Swick the strike calls he deserved, and I knew they looked good.

“Come on, ump! Open your eyes! That was a great pitch!” a female fan’s voice called from behind us. I felt a tingle go down my spine because I knew I recognized that voice. I couldn’t be sure it was *her*, but it sure sounded like her. I had to smile because I totally agreed with her. There was one thing about minor league fans: they were passionate.

Swick threw again, and the ump called another ball. The count was now three balls and one strike, but the batter should be out.

“Oh my god! Are you blind?!” that same feminine voice shouted, and somehow, I had no doubts that it was my Red. Thank god baseball requires wearing a cup. Without it, there wouldn’t be a single person in this stadium that wouldn’t be able to see exactly how I felt about her (or how my cock felt about her). We were in the middle of an inning, so I couldn’t turn around to look for her. I knew I would definitely prefer to hear that voice screaming my name rather than yelling at the

umpire. Swick threw the ball, and I was distracted and almost dropped it. I shook my head and had to concentrate on the game. The seventh inning stretch couldn't happen fast enough for my cock, the cup, and my eyes wanting to get a glimpse of her.

“You need a new job!” she called out, and I had to laugh to myself. She had to be a baseball fan if she was this passionate. I loved it! If that really was my Red yelling at the umpire, I knew she was perfect for me.

Finally, the next batter popped the ball up, and Dominic was able to catch it easily at second base.

I got up from my crouch and headed towards our dugout, but I found myself peaking at the seats behind home plate. Sure enough, behind home plate sat my girl. She had on a Raptor's t-shirt, and her hair was in two braids under a baseball cap. She was just as attractive to me now as she had been at the bar.

She wasn't looking at me but talking to her friend. I had to find a way to get her attention. She had to remember me. I watched her for a minute, but then the hitting coach called to me to go over some stuff since I was up fifth and could possibly hit this inning.

“What were you looking at?” Hayden asked after I was done talking to the coach.

“She's here!” I said. “Red is at the game!”

“Where?”

I pointed, and Hayden quickly peeked out of the dugout. “That must mean she's a local if she's here. Maybe she'll be around after the game.”

“Too bad they don't put our pictures on a big screen, or she'd know it's you.” Antonio commented as he overheard our conversation. We both looked up at the plain scoreboard that only said Home and Visitor. “I think in Triple-A, they have scoreboards that are more interactive for the fans and players.”

I nodded and tried to think of a way to get her attention as I looked back up at her. “That would be nice because then she

would maybe stay after the game and wait for me.”

“Maybe she’ll still wait after,” Hayden said optimistically.

“Gentleman! We’re supposed to be watching and supporting our team! Not checking out ladies in the stands,” Mack bellowed.

“We were seeing if there were any scouts,” Hayden said, thinking quickly on his feet.

“Uh-huh,” Mack said, without any bite to his words. “I don’t see any scouts near that redhead and her friends. We all know Stone has a thing for redheads.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Did everyone know I liked redheads?

We won the game 3-1, and I rushed through my shower and headed out to find a bunch of fans waiting to congratulate us on the win, but no cute redhead girl to be seen. Now that I knew she was a baseball fan, I had to find a way to get her attention.

“Maybe if we go back to Fulton’s, she’ll be there,” Cooper suggested as he came over to me. “Scott filled us in about you seeing your girl.”

“Let’s go,” I said. “It can’t hurt to try.”

She wasn’t at the bar. I didn’t see her in the stands during the next few home games, but she could have been in a different seat. Cooper insisted we keep trying Fulton’s, but none of us had a ton of money. The next three times we went there, my adorable redhead was nowhere to be found.



I looked out the window of the bus, but all I could see were the streaks of the rain drops. We had been on the bus for almost ten hours, and we were so tired of it. This was the furthest away game we had been to, by far, and we were ready to be home for a long homestand. It had been a good away trip, winning five games and only losing one. Our team was doing great and really playing well together.

I looked over at Hayden, who was asleep with his head on the window across from me. Cooper was in front of him and was playing a game on his Nintendo Switch. Ivan sat in front of me and was talking quietly on his phone, probably to Camila, who was getting closer to the end of her pregnancy.

Thoughts of Camila made me think of my sweet redhead. I don't know why I had such a connection to her, but I felt it immediately. It had been two weeks since I had seen her in the stands at my game, and I was still holding out hope of finding her. I rested my head against the window and thought about how I should be watching game film of the teams we would be playing next, but my phone had died an hour or so ago. As I looked out the window, I saw a small car on the side of the road and a woman who looked to be trying to change a tire by herself. She was kicking the tire and looked up as the bus drove by. I saw her eyes and the red hair that was plastered to the sides of her face.

“STOP THE BUS!” I yelled before I could think about what I was going to say.

“What the hell, Stone? Are you going to be sick or something?” Mack asked from the front of the bus. He said something to the driver, who proceeded to pull the bus to the side of the road.

“No, there is a woman out there, and we should help her. She's trying to change a tire in the rain.”

“Dude, they have AAA for that,” Antonio said with a laugh.

“Please, let me off to help her,” I said emphatically. I couldn't miss the chance to see her again, and it looked like she really needed help.

“We can call the local tow company if that would help you feel better,” the pitching coach said from the seat across from Coach Snyder.

“No. I need to help her,” I said and saw the guys straining their necks to try to see the girl and her car.

“You know what, Coach? This could be publicity gold. ‘Minor league player helps stranded local woman.’ We could

even interview her and have her throw out a first pitch. Women all over will eat that kind of story up,” Hayden announced as he stood up next to me in the middle of the aisle.

“You can go if you want, but we’re going to wait here for you,” Coach Mack said. “One condition, though - you have to wear a poncho. I don’t want one of my star players catching a cold and not being able to play. Try to hurry.”

“Thank you, sir!” I said as I put on the poncho one of the trainers handed me.

“Want me to come with you?” Hayden asked.

“Nah, I’ve got this,” I said. “It’s her.”



You have to loosen lug nuts while the tire is still on the ground.

I can't believe I got a flat tire during the middle of a downpour. Of course, it was the stretch of road that had no cell service. My papaw had taught me to be self-sufficient and how to change tires when I was in middle school, but that was twelve years ago. I got out the jack and wheel chock. I was able to remove the hubcap easily, but when I began to loosen the lug nuts, one of them just wouldn't budge. I tried to stand on the tire iron to help loosen it, but it wasn't moving.

As I kicked the tire because, of course, that would solve all my problems, a charter bus drove by. I sighed and looked up at the bus, watching as it passed me then carefully pulled over to the side of the road. I hated not being able to change my own tire, but I needed help. I waited a few minutes and wondered what the bus was doing.

Soon, the bus door opened, and a man exited the bus and began jogging towards me. He was wearing a blue poncho, and when he got closer, he made eye contact with me. I saw his green eyes and dimples, and I felt the same butterflies in my stomach that I had when I was eleven years old.

"Heya, Red," he said with a huge grin. "Need some help?"

"Stone?" What, now he remembered me? I didn't have time to process that because the rain was still pouring down, and

unfortunately, I did need help. “Yes. I can’t get this last lug nut off.”

He nodded and went over to the tire. “If you want to wait in the car, I can finish for you.”

I shook my head, “My papaw would roll over in his grave if he knew I waited in the car. I can help as soon as you get the lug nut off.”

He laughed, and I felt myself smile, too. I wanted to be mad at him for forgetting me, but having him near me caused my heart to beat faster, and hearing his laugh began to melt my anger. “I totally respect that,” he said and handed me a poncho from his pocket. “I had a feeling you’d say that, so put this on.”

“Thanks, but I think the damage has already been done,” I said as I put the poncho over my already-soaked clothes.

I watched as he easily got the lug nut off, and he gave me a smirk. “Thanks for loosening it for me.” This charming, sweet man was the one I remembered from the bar and one of the reasons I hadn’t forgotten him.

“No problem,” I said and handed him the tools he needed. I got out the spare while he took off the flat tire. I took a deep breath and asked the question I had been wondering about for weeks now. “Why didn’t you remember me?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked as our fingers brushed together when I took the tire iron from him.

“You came into my bakery and had no clue who I was, but now you remember me? I don’t get it.”

He stopped what he was doing and looked right into my eyes. He looked genuinely confused. “I could never forget you, Red. Shit, I should have done this when I got over here first thing. What is your name?”

“I’m Molly,” I said. “I’m guessing Stone isn’t your first name.”

“Hi, Molly. I’m Tyler Stone. It’s nice to meet you!” He took my hand and brought my knuckles up to his lips.

“Hurry the fuck up, Stone!” a guy yelled from the stairs of the bus.

“I guess you have to go,” I said, not wanting him to leave and still wondering why he hadn’t remembered me almost a month ago. “Thank you so much for helping me.”

“We’re a good team,” he said as I put the tools away in my trunk. Then, he put the flat tire back there, too. “Are you coming to our game tomorrow?”

I looked at him with a confused tilt of my head. “Game? What are you talking about?”

He laughed, “I saw you at the Raptors game a few weeks ago, and I’ve been looking for you ever since. I’m the catcher for the Raptors.”

“Oh my gosh!” I squealed, and then covered my face. “Please, tell me all the Raptors aren’t on that bus right now?”

He let out a loud laugh and nodded, “Yep. We’re on our way back from a road trip.”

“I know! You guys went 5-1 on the road. Good job!”

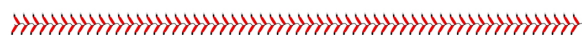
“You really are a fan!” he exclaimed with a grin.

“I really am, and to answer your question - yes, I’ll be at your game tomorrow. I don’t have a ticket yet, but I will be getting one now.”

I saw him sigh with relief. “Good. Stay after the game so we can talk? I think I have an explanation for not remembering you, but my coach is going to kill me already, so I have to go.”

“Ok,” I said. I stood on my tip toes and looped my arms around his neck as he pulled me in for a hug. I didn’t know his reason for not remembering me yet, but I could already feel myself forgiving him. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you then, Molly!” he called out as he jogged off towards the bus. “I’ll leave you a ticket at Will Call!”



Tyler Stone. I had a feeling Stone was his last name. Now I knew his name, but I was more confused than ever. Just a few weeks ago, he had come into my bakery and said he didn't know who I was. Then, tonight, he seemed genuinely happy to see me. He even went to the trouble of helping me change my tire.

I stood in line at the Will Call window at the stadium, and I couldn't believe I was going to a game alone. Penelope was spending time with her kids, and I even asked Autumn if she could go, but she was going venue hunting for her wedding. Meadow had offered to drive the eight hours to come to the game with me, but I told her I would be fine and would let her know how everything went.

I looked at the two tickets and shook my head. I was right behind the home dugout, and I would have a great view of all the players. I was nervous about seeing him again, but I couldn't wait until after the game so I could get answers and get to know him better.

I got a hot dog and a bottle of water and went down to my seats to watch batting practice. I pulled out my phone and texted Meadow.

Me: When do I tell him? I'm so nervous. What if he doesn't think the baby is his?

Meadow: If he doesn't believe you then he doesn't know you. Just tell him when you feel it's right.

Me: Ok. Oh! There he is. Oh he is so hot. I can't believe he's a baseball player!

I sent her a picture of Tyler stretching before batting practice. He was practically doing the splits! Not only was that impressive in itself but he was wearing his full catcher's uniform. I was definitely getting a nice view of his delectable ass. I smiled at her response.

Meadow: Oh, girl. Damn. ☐☐☐ He seems perfect for you but I want to know his reason for not remembering you. His excuse better be good. I don't think it was sudden amnesia or anything...

Me: You'll be the first I tell when I find out too. Oh, it's about time for the National Anthem. TTYL

During the fifth inning, Tyler stepped up to the batter's box after sending me a wink. I watched as the opposing pitcher tried to get him to chase two balls out of the strike zone. He finally threw a ball right down the middle, and CRACK! The sound of the bat hitting the ball echoed through the stadium, and the ball went soaring over the outfield fence.

"That was Tyler Stone's first professional home run!" the announcer called out as I was jumping up and down, cheering for him. I didn't even realize it, but tears were streaming down my cheeks. I was confused and emotional, but I loved baseball, and I was so proud of him.

"That was for you, Molly!" Tyler called out after he crossed home plate and stopped right in front of me.

"Stone! What are you doing?!" his coach yelled.

He just winked at me and continued into the dugout.

They won the game 9-0, and I stood outside the stadium with a few other fans where I was told the players came out. I had the biggest smile on my face. I only waited about twenty minutes before a few of the players came walking out.

"Molly!" I heard his voice before I saw him. "Hi!"

"Hi, Tyler!" I said and walked into his open arms. He wrapped them around me and kissed my forehead.

"Great game," I complimented and stepped back as he reached into his bag.

"This is for you," he said and handed me a baseball.

I shook my head emphatically as I handed him back the baseball. “I can’t take your first professional homerun ball!”

“Yes, you can,” he said as he put the ball back in my hand. “I want you to have it because you’re my good luck charm.”

“Tell me why you didn’t remember me,” I said bluntly, crossing my arms over my chest, almost as if I was shielding my heart.

“Can you tell me when it was exactly that I didn’t remember you?”

“Oh, I know exactly what day it was – Opening Day for your baseball team and my bakery.”

Tyler’s reaction wasn’t what I was expecting. He started to laugh. “Let’s go for a walk and talk.”

“Ok,” I said, accepting his hand and intertwining my fingers with his. I held his homerun ball in my other hand.

We walked in companionable silence away from the stadium and towards the outskirts of a park. “I need to make a phone call,” he said as he pulled his cell phone from his bag. He began dialing a number, and I had no idea what he was up to. He pulled me closer to his side so I could see he was making a Facetime call. Soon, a partial face came on the screen, but I couldn’t get a good look at it.

“Carter! Where did you get those cupcakes after my game when you came to visit? And what the fuck are you doing? I want to see your face.”

“Hold on a damn second, Ty. You’re going to get me killed.”

I could hear the sounds of a video game in the background, and Tyler looked at me and rolled his eyes. “Can you at least answer the damn question? Where’d you get the cupcakes?”

“Some new bakery that was just opening.”

Tyler breathed a sigh of relief like he had all the answers in the world, but I was still confused.

“And did you tell the most beautiful woman in the world that you didn’t remember her?”

Carter then looked up into the screen, and I gasped. He was a carbon copy of Tyler. His hair was a little longer and styled differently than Tyler’s, but they had the same green eyes and dimples.

“The woman working there was hot and flirting with me, then seemed upset that I didn’t know who she was, so, yeah, I guess.”

“Was this her?” Tyler asked and pointed the phone screen at my shocked face.

“Yeah! Hi!” Carter said. “Wait a minute. Is she Red or Pink or whatever fucking color you called her?”

I had to laugh then and turned to Tyler. “So, you didn’t forget me?”

“No, Molly. I’d never forget you,” Tyler said and pulled me closer to him. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head.

“He was wearing a hat and looked just like you,” I explained quietly as I looked up at him. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about,” he said and gave me a peck on the lips. Then, he turned his attention to his brother on the phone. “Carter, you’re a dumbass. We’re identical, ya know. You should have realized she was talking about me or even Landon. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Carter just shrugged with a sheepish look on his face. “I wasn’t thinking. Just figured I would have remembered her pretty face, but I didn’t. My bad.”

Tyler rolled his eyes, and I had to laugh.

“Well, it was nice to meet you...again” I said into the phone.

“You, too. Sorry for the confusion,” his brother apologized.

“Well, we have some catching up to do,” Tyler said. “Talk to you later, C.”

“Bye, T. Bye, Molly,” Carter said as he waved goodbye.

Tyler just hit the red button to end the call without saying goodbye and gave me another kiss that quickly deepened. I couldn't get enough of this man.

“So, you're an identical twin?” I asked as I came up for air and rested my head against his chest.

“Nope,” he said with a grin. “There are actually three of us.”

I had to shake my head. “Three of you? Oh, is that the Landon you mentioned?”

“Yep! I love how you pay attention.”

“I can't wait to meet them,” I said. “Any other siblings?”

“Yeah, we have an older sister named Julia,” he said. “I can't wait for you to meet them either. How about you?”

“I'm an only child, but I always wanted a sibling.”

“Your parents stopped with perfection, huh?” He flirted, but I couldn't look him in the eye and shrugged. “What did I say? I'm sorry, Molly. I was just joking around.” He stopped walking and turned to face me. He lifted my chin with his fingers to look into my eyes which were starting to tear up.

“You didn't know,” I said quietly.

“Didn't know what? We're walking, so we can get to know each other better. The good and the bad, sweetheart. I want to know you.”

“I was raised by my grandparents. My parents died in a car crash when I wasn't even five,” I said quietly because I didn't like talking about it.

“Me and my big mouth,” he declared. “I'm sorry, Molly. That had to be so hard.”

“I really don't even remember them. My grandma told me stories and showed me pictures, so I feel like I knew them a little, but I was so young. They did the best they could. My grandma taught me to bake, and my grandpa was a huge baseball fan and taught me to love and respect the game.”

Tyler nodded and said, “They sound amazing! Your grandma helped you with your business, and because of your grandpa, you are perfect for me!”

I had to laugh and loved that he knew the seriousness of the conversation but also could make me laugh, too. “I’ve never dated a baseball player, actually.”

“Well, I’m honored to be your first!” he said as he took my hand again, and we began walking around the park.

There weren’t many people around, and it was nice just being the two of us. I told him more about my mimi and papaw, and he told me about some of the trouble he and his brothers got into being identical triplets.

He also told me he was allergic to many things, including shellfish, tree nuts, and peanuts just to name a few. I couldn’t believe the guy I liked and was having a baby with would be able to safely eat from my AF bakery! Before I could tell him about my second kitchen, he twirled me around and said, “Do you know how excited I am that my girl likes baseball?”

“Your girl, huh?” I asked, as I looked up at him with a huge grin on my face.

“I really hope so. I know we don’t know each other all that well, but I really like you, Molly. My roommates would have my balls if they heard me talking like this, but I don’t want to go another day without telling you how I feel. I really like you.”

I reached up on my tip toes and gave him a kiss. “I really like you, too.”

“Oh, I could get used to that, baby,” he said, and at the endearment, I burst into tears. “Molly? Are you okay? What did I say now?” The concern in his eyes was so sweet.

“I have to tell you something.”

“Should we sit down?” he asked, and I nodded.

We stopped at a picnic table, and he gestured for me to sit down. I sat, and he climbed up behind me on top of the table

with his feet bracketed on either side of me on the bench. He began to rub my shoulders. “Ok, what’s going on?”

I sighed and turned to sit sideways, so I could face him better. “I’m just going to rip off the Band-Aid.”

“That’s the story of my life. Rip away,” he said.

I looked down at my feet, unable to meet his eyes, knowing it was the only way I could get through what I needed to say. “Um...,” I start, gulping in a deep breath, buying myself a moment for composure. “I-... I’m pregnant, Tyler. We’re going to have a baby.” The words rushed out of me, and before I knew it, he was off the picnic table and pacing back and forth. “I know we don’t know each other that well. I’m so glad I found you and was able to tell you. If you, um...” I looked at him and hated to say what I said next, “If you don’t want to be part of our lives, I understand. My business is doing well, and we’ll be okay.” I didn’t want to be a single mom like Pen, but the man in front of me did not look like he wanted to be a dad.

“When did you find out?” he asked quietly but still he didn’t look my way.

“The day your brother came into the bakery.”

“Wow.” He paced away from me, and then began walking towards me again. “Have you been to the baby doctor yet?”

I shook my head. “Being a new patient, I had to wait. I have an appointment a week from Monday.”

He nodded and began pacing again. He was pulling at the short strands of his brown hair and shaking his head. “Fuck. My dad was right. I’m a fuck up,” I heard him mumble, and I could tell he was no longer talking to me but himself. I remained on the picnic table because I knew this was a shock. I’d had weeks to process it all. “I can’t afford to be a dad. I have to concentrate on baseball. Girls really are a distraction.” He then looked at me and had very sad eyes. “I hate to ask, but it’s mine, right? I mean, I always use a condom. We used a condom, right?”

I closed my eyes to tamp down my anger at his accusation. “You’re the only person I’ve been with in a long time,” I said

matter-of-factly. “And, honestly, Stone, I can’t remember if we used a condom or not. We were both pretty drunk.”

“FUCK!” He yelled and pulled at his hair again. Without looking at me, he broke me with his words, “I can’t do this. Baseball has to come first right now.”

I nodded, got up from the picnic bench, and just walked away. I felt my heart breaking, not just for myself but for the baby growing inside me. I was proud of myself for not crying until I made it inside my bakery and shut the door. I realized I was still holding his first home run ball and I sat on the floor next to the front door and just cried.



TYLER

CHAPTER TWELVE

When you first take that pregnancy test and you're so excited to share the news of your pregnancy, you run to tell your partner. Though once you get there and share the words: I'm pregnant! something can happen inside their brains and the nicest things don't always come out.

“Bruh, what is wrong with you?” Cooper asked as he turned around in his seat in the locker room and looked at me. “The last few games were the worst games I’ve ever seen you play, and I wasn’t pitching, so you can’t use that as an excuse.”

I just nodded and groaned, “You were right; girls are a distraction.” We had just lost to a team that we should have beaten. We lost 3-1, but I went 0-for-4, with three strikeouts and one ground out. The worst part was there were several pitches I should have been able to nab in the dirt but rolled away and were counted as wild pitches. On our long road trip, we hadn’t lost every game because of me, but I knew I wasn’t playing my best. We had a homestand for a few more games, and I found myself distracted by looking for her in the stands. She had not been there. The guys had even mentioned going to see her at the bakery, but I chose to work out or watch film instead.

The coaches were not happy with me at all. McAlister had pulled me into his office and asked what was going on and what had changed. I decided to confide in him because I really looked up to him and respected him. “I got someone pregnant,

and I reacted badly when she told me,” I said as I hung my head down.

“I didn’t know you were even seeing anyone,” he replied as he got up from his desk. “What can I do to help? You can share your honest feelings with me, Stone. I won’t tell the guys.”

I gave a half-hearted laugh. “I’m not really seeing her... she was actually a one night stand, kind of, but I think I want her to be more. She means a lot to me. She was actually the woman I helped on the side of the road.”

“It can be scary, but if she made you want to jump off a bus with your team still on it to help her, she means more to you than you think. You should definitely let her know that what you said was out of shock. You’re a good guy, and I know you’ll be there for her and the baby.”

”I really think I did make a mistake with how I reacted.” This whole time since she told me, I have wondered if she was okay. I hardly knew her, but I missed her like crazy. That had to mean something.

“Then find her and tell her. I’ve learned honesty is the best policy,” Coach Mack replied. “Getting someone pregnant can be scary. Ash got pregnant a few weeks before our wedding and we were scared to death, even though we had been together awhile. But it has all worked out and I wouldn’t trade Ashleigh or my boy, Nico, for the world.” I smiled, thinking about his adorable four year old son that had come to several practices and liked to help his dad coach. I thanked him and left the office.

I shook my head when I noticed Hayden, Cooper, and Ivan surrounded my locker, along with Jude and Dominic. “What? Is this an intervention?”

“What happened, Stone?” Hayden asked. “You were on fire and so happy about finding Red. Then, you lost that spark. We have to get it back.”

“She’s pregnant,” I blurted out and sighed heavily. I sat down and covered my face with my hands. I had just told my

coach, so might as well tell my friends.

“Are you the father?” Cooper asked in shock.

“Yes,” I said simply. I never doubted that. I know I asked her, and it was an asshole thing to say. I regretted it the second it came out of my mouth.

I felt Ivan sit down next to me and bumped me to move over so he could sit on the bench seat. “Your girl pregnant?” His English was really coming along, and we had all been working with him on the long bus rides.

I nodded and looked at him, then at my two other roommates and best friends. “I don’t know what to fucking do. I hardly make enough to put food on the table for myself. I can’t help take care of a baby, and she even said her bakery was doing okay and knew I didn’t make much.”

“I help little, too. It hard,” Ivan said reluctantly. “But do what can. She sounds, um... word....um.... Comprensión.”

“What are you trying to say?” I asked.

“Comprensión is Spanish for understanding,” Jude said and then shrugged when we all looked at him in shock, “I dated a really hot Latina chick for a while and learned a lot.”

“She was really understanding,” I said. “I was an asshole to her. I told her I couldn’t do it. I fucking even asked if she was sure it was mine and if we used a condom. She answered honestly that she didn’t know if we used a condom or not because we were both pretty wasted.”

Ivan was shaking his head in disappointment at me, “She need support. She need you, and baby need you. Man up, asshole.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “I just was in shock, and I don’t know how I’m going to do this. Maybe my dad was right, and I should just go back to the auto shop and work as a mechanic. I’d be making more than I am here. I’m bringing the team down anyway after today’s game.”

“Fuck that!” Cooper declared loudly. “You had a few bad games because you’re mad at yourself for acting like a tool.

You gotta apologize to her and get her back.”

“No shit,” Dom said as he leaned up against my locker, “You had us stop the damn bus to help her out. You want to try and work it out with this chick.”

“I like her,” Ivan said. “You be good dad.”

“We all like her!” Hayden interjected.

“And her baking is amazing. You can’t let her go,” Cooper whined as he rubbed his stomach.

“I like her a lot,” I admitted. “But you are all going to call me a dumbass. I have her name now, but I still don’t have her number.”

“You really are a dumbass!” Cooper said and hit me on the back of my head. “What is wrong with you?”

“Ouch!” I complained as I rubbed the back of my head. “I was going to get her number that night she came to the game, but then she told me about being pregnant. I was in shock and completely forgot to ask her for it.”

“After being an asshole and a dumbass, you’re going to need a grand gesture to get her back,” Hayden said. “But we’ll help you think of something.”



When we got to the next motel, I decided to do a video call with both of my brothers.

“Hey, man! How’s it going?” Landon asked as he stood by a wall-to-ceiling window in his luxury hotel with the view of New York City in the background. I was sitting in my small motel with a cornfield as my view in the middle of Indiana.

“Well, I have something to tell you guys,” I said and took a deep breath.

“I know. You found your girl,” Carter said. “Remember, you interrupted my COD match. I was in the top two situation, you asshole.”

“I found her and lost her,” I explained. “But she’s not the only one I lost.”

“You had another girl?” Carter asked. “Dude, I really do need to play ball again.”

“Shut the fuck up, C, and let him talk,” Landon commented with a roll of his eyes.

I nodded my thanks to our oldest brother and said bluntly, “Molly’s pregnant.”

“Oh, shit, man. Wow,” Landon said, and I watched as he sat down and did the same nervous tell that all three of us had - he pulled at his hair. “And let me guess, you got all defensive and said shit you didn’t mean to say out of shock and lack of thinking.”

I groaned, “You know me too well.”

“You have to get her back,” Carter said.

“I know!”

“When you do, I’m going to be that baby’s favorite uncle.”

Landon laughed and shook his head, “Keep dreaming.”

“You guys are excited about being uncles?” I asked. I wasn’t sure how they would take the news, but I never thought it would go in this direction.

“Hell, yeah!” They both said at the same time.

“I want to be there when you tell Dad,” Carter said with mischief in his eyes.

“Yeah, he’s not going to take it well. I first have to plan on how to get Molly back. Then, I’ll tell Mom and Dad in person.”

“Grand gesture,” Landon said. “It always works in movies and shit.”

“No,” Carter disagreed. “You need to get to know her. Show her you want to start over and do things the right way.”

“I like that,” I said and couldn’t believe I was taking love advice from my bachelor brothers. “My guys here all

suggested a grand gesture, too. Maybe I could do a combo of both. A grand gesture of getting to know her.”

“That could work,” I heard another male voice say.

“Hey, Alec,” I said as Carter’s best friend’s face came into view.

“Hey, T,” Alec gave me a chin nod. “You know I have sisters, and they love that grand gesture shit in movies and books.”

I nodded and thanked them for their advice.

“Let us know how it goes, man. And congrats on being a dad,” Landon said. “I gotta get to bed. We have a day game tomorrow.”

“Night,” I said and disconnected the video call.

The next couple of games on the road were a lot better, and after talking to the guys and my brothers, I was feeling better about becoming a dad. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy, but I was going to do my best. We had a night game on Sunday and then a travel day on Monday, but we weren’t planning on being home until late on Monday. I talked with Mack about how Molly had a doctor’s appointment on Monday. I wanted to be there. He said if I paid for my own bus ticket, I could leave right after the game on Sunday.

I hated having to ask to borrow money from Landon, but he was more than willing to loan me the money. He even offered to have me fly if that would help, but the closest airport was a couple hours away, and it just made more sense to take the bus into the station right there in Riverbend.

I didn’t know what time her appointment was, and since I hadn’t gotten her number, I couldn’t text her to ask her. Luckily, there was only one doctor’s office in our small town, and it opened at 8 am. I was there when they unlocked the doors, even though I was exhausted after not sleeping well on the bus, but I had my phone, headset, charger, and a cup of gas station coffee. I sat and watched videos of the team we were playing starting tomorrow and looked up every time I heard the door open. Finally, at 10:42 a.m., an adorable redhead

walked in the door and went right up to the receptionist. I watched as she took the clipboard and sat down on the other side of the waiting room without even looking up.

“Molly,” I said hoarsely as I walked over closer to her and sat in the chair across from her. “Hi.”

She looked up at me, and her head snapped back, almost hitting the wall behind her. “What are you doing here?” she asked with a little bite in her tone.

“You said your appointment was today, so I took a Greyhound back after the game last night, and I’ve been here since they opened.”

“But you were in Minnesota,” she said, blinking like she couldn’t believe I was here. It gave me a little hope since she knew where our team had been playing.

“I was on the bus all night,” I explained and held up the empty coffee cup. “I’m exhausted, but I wanted to be here for you.”

“I haven’t heard from you in thirteen days,” she said, and I noticed for the first time that her eyes were puffy and red. She probably had been crying a lot and not sleeping well. I felt like an even bigger asshole. “Why now? You know what? Nevermind. We’ll be fine without you, Stone. Thanks, but no thanks. You said you couldn’t do this.”

“I was a dumbas- I mean a dumb idiot, and I made a terrible mistake,” I said as I realized there were people in here, including a few small kids in the waiting room. “I wanted to call you, but I forgot to ask for your number,” I said while ringing my fingers together. “Please, forgive me, Molly. I’m so sorry!”

“My bakery has a landline, ya know. With technology these days, I’m sure you could have contacted me if you had really wanted to.”

“Shit. I didn’t think about the bakery,” I rubbed my hands over my tired eyes and groaned at myself. I was officially the dumbest asshole ever.

She looked down at the clipboard and began filling it out again. I just sat there as she finished the information and turned it into the receptionist. She had a few words with the receptionist, and she came back to her seat with slumped shoulders.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Nothing you can help with,” she said quietly and looked defeated.

“Molly, I really am sorry for what I said. Can we please start over? I want to be part of our baby’s life, and I want to get to know you better. I was in shock and wasn’t thinking clearly. Please. Give me a chance.” Molly looked up, and I saw tears welling up in her blue-green eyes. “Please.”

“Molly Green,” a nurse from the office door called out.

“I heard what you said,” she stood and went with the nurse. “I really just need some time to think. You broke my heart, Tyler.”

I watched as the door closed behind them. I felt my stomach stink.

“Flowers,” a woman near us said. “My husband knows flowers will always work when I’m mad at him.”

“No. That’s not good enough,” another woman chimed in. “Flowers just die. Find out what she’s craving and get her that. For me, it’s spaghetti with milk duds.”

“Oh, man, I thought I was bad,” another pregnant woman said. “I crave cottage cheese and mustard.”

“That is bad, too,” I found myself saying out loud, and the man sitting next to her nodded emphatically at me.

“Jewelry, brother. It always works,” he suggested.

“Or chocolate,” the first pregnant woman who had suggested flowers said. “Chocolate and flowers.”

“How long do you think she’ll be in there? Should I wait for her?”

“My man, she asked for space. When she comes out here and sees you still sitting here she might get even more angry. These pregnancy hormones are a real bitch.”

His wife rolled her eyes and glared at him while rubbing her very pregnant belly. “You try carrying a baby for over nine months, Anthony. You wouldn’t make it.” Her anger then turned into tears. “You just don’t appreciate what I’m going through growing this baby of yours.”

Anthony nodded at me and mouthed ‘see what I mean?’

“Good luck,” I said to him and started walking towards the receptionist.

“Sweetheart, we can stop at Lilly’s Pad and get you some fresh flowers for the nursery.”

“Oh, Anthony. That would be lovely. That is the best florist around.”

As I got to the receptionist, she was smiling. “It’s our only florist around. Some of these hormonal women really are funny.”

I just shook my head and shrugged. “Hey, uh, is Molly Green okay? She looked upset after she talked to you before. Is there anything I can do?”

She shook her head and sighed, “I’m sorry, but I can’t divulge any information about the patients. If it’s any consolation, I’m rooting for you.”

“Thanks,” I said as I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. It was a text message from Cooper.

Cooper: We just got back. You get your girl yet? Bring her to Pizza Palace.

I waved to the receptionist and left the doctor’s office to give her the space she asked for. I headed over to the Pizza Palace to talk to my guys. It was time to come up with a plan to win her back.



A grand gesture, as the name implies, requires something more demonstrative. Physical effort and/or a sacrifice of time, money, or pride are key, as is the element of surprise.

“Why am I such an idiot?” I asked as I filled the front case with chocolate, plain, and almond croissants. “First, I don’t give him my name or number, and then I ruin the mood by telling him I’m pregnant. Finally, I told him I needed space; then I was devastated when he wasn’t still in the waiting room when I finished my appointment.”

“First off, I’m super proud of you for telling him you were pregnant. Some people wouldn’t bother telling a guy that they had a one-night stand with,” Penelope paused in her thought, and I saw her eyebrows furrowing and saw a hint of sadness in her brown eyes before it was gone. “You were hurt, and I still want to throat-punch him for what he said, but I am glad he apologized and is coming to his senses. I don’t think he’s gone for good, and if he doesn’t come around soon, we know where he works.”

I had to laugh. “I love that you call him playing baseball ‘work’.”

Penelope shrugged as she filled the espresso machine with the beans, “Well, it’s true.”

“I know he works hard,” I said with a sigh and began filling the nut-free case with blueberry and strawberry scones. “Did I

tell you he has a nut allergy?"

"No way! Maybe, somehow, you knew you'd get with a guy who had a nut allergy, and your nutty ways made you buy a place with two kitchens."

"I really am nuts," I said with a giggle. "Who knows, but I'm really glad I have items that are safe for him to eat."

"Ready to open?" Pen asked as she walked to the front door.

"Yeah, I think so," I said. Tuesday morning seemed to be a busy morning since we were closed on Monday, and people wanted their caffeine and morning sweets.

"Well, hi," Penelope said as one of Tyler's teammates I recognized from the bar the first night and from the ball games came through the door.

"Hayden, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, hi, Molly. I know you asked my boy for some space, and he's been trying to be respectful of that. He asked me to come in and find out what your favorite color is."

"Purple," Penelope blurted.

"Pen!"

"Thanks, Pen," Hayden said with a grin at my assistant. "Ty's favorite color is blue. And for what it's worth, he's an amazing guy. He's not only a good friend but the best teammate. He studies other players and works out twice as much as the rest of us on the team. He's going places."

"I know he's very talented," I said with a sigh. "You're a good friend. Can I get you any baked goods or coffee?"

"I think I'll take one of those chocolate croissants and a black coffee, please."

"Do you, um, think you could give Tyler something for me?" I asked as I pulled the strawberry scone out of the nut-free case that I had just filled.

Hayden's grin widened, "I will. My guy's not totally in the dog house, is he?"

I saw Penelope shaking her head in my peripheral vision and just rolled my eyes. “Whose side are you on?” I asked her as I tried, but failed, to give her an intimidating glare.

“Yours, Moll,” she said with a shrug. “Nice meeting you, Hayden.”

“You, too. See you ladies later.”

A few other customers came in after he left, and I was busy helping them when I didn’t even notice a guy wearing a Raptor’s jacket was at the counter.

“Hi, can I help you?”

“Hi. I’m Jude Fox and I’m one of Stone’s teammates. This is for you.” He handed me a bouquet of various purple flowers, including hydrangea, carnation, daisy, and lily.

“Oh my gosh,” I said as I brought the flowers up to my nose and smiled as I took in the sweet, fragrant smells. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, uh, he wants to know... hold on a sec,” Jude said as he dug into the pocket of his jacket. “Do you prefer a bath or a shower?”

“Getting a little personal, aren’t you, Fox?” Penelope asked as she was putting together another customer’s order.

“I, uh, no. I’m just doing what Stone asked me to. I told that asshole I didn’t want to do this, and I would be horrible at it.”

Penelope and I both started laughing. “Thank you, Jude. You’re doing a great job. I prefer baths. Especially after standing on my feet all day baking and taking orders.”

He nodded and high-tailed it out of the bakery without even ordering anything.

About half an hour later, another Raptors teammate came in holding a small gift bag. “Hi. This is for you,” he said. “Stone wants to know if you prefer manicures, pedicures, or massages?”

“Wow, you didn’t even have to look at your note,” Penelope commented. “Good for you.”

The player shrugged. “I have four sisters, so I know all about nailcare.”

“I would probably say pedicure since the hot towels they put on your legs while they paint your toenails sound amazing right now.”

“Yes!” Penelope agreed. “That really is the best part.”

“Do you think I could order four cheesecake danishes? Fox was an idiot and forgot to order food. Stone said he wanted to give you business, too.”

I nodded with a small smile, boxed up his danishes, and thanked him.

“What’s in the bag?” Penelope asked.

I pulled out a small bag of Epsom salt with a note taped on the bag.

Molly - I wanted to get you a bath bomb because my sister loves those, but I read that they aren't good when you're pregnant. These salts were similar and pregnancy-safe, so I hope they help you relax. -Ty

“Honey, you better not let him go,” a customer who overheard what we were talking about said. “He’s a keeper.”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face while I served customers.

The gift for the pedi/mani/massage question was a gift certificate to get a pedicure at the local nail salon. Throughout the day, several other ball players came in and asked chocolate or vanilla (I answered chocolate and was given an assortment of chocolate candy bars), summer or winter (I answered summer and was given flip flops), Batman or Superman (I said Spiderman to be silly and was given a little stuffed Spiderman).

“I love that he’s using a grand gesture to not only try to win you back but also to get to know you better,” Pen whispered to

me between customers.

“I can’t believe he’s doing this all for me,” I answered with a sigh.

“You’re worth it, girl,” Penelope exclaimed.

I blushed and shrugged then asked a question that had been on my mind, “Is it bad I’m really glad he’s doing all this? I wanted to forgive him yesterday but also wanted to still be upset. Now, I have a big reason to forgive him.”

Penelope just laughed at my admission as four of the Raptor players came in together. A few of them looked uncomfortable, but one asked if I liked pizza or pasta.

“Pizza,” I replied as I sat down a large tray of assorted mini cakes to add to the cases.

“Okay,” the shortest player on the team, that I recognized as Dominic Anderson, said and looked down at his piece of paper. “So, what are your favorite toppings?”

When I told him I had been craving meat lovers, he nodded in agreement and then looked into my eyes. He tilted his head to the side and said, “You know what, look really familiar.”

“Probably from coming to the games!” the first ball player said with a roll of his eyes.

“That’s probably it,” Dom said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Another guy took the list out of his hand and asked, “Do you prefer fettuccine or penne noodles?”

“Swanson! How dumb are you?” he swatted him in the back of the head and pointed at the list. “She said pizza. You have to ask the next pizza question.”

“Oh,” Swanson said and looked up at me. “Sorry, Missy.”

“Molly. Her name is Molly!” Dom corrected him with a shake of his head. “Just give me the damn paper.”

“It’s ok, Ben,” I said to the shortstop and handed him a snickerdoodle cookie. “You tried.”

“Thanks for this,” he said with a huge grin and took a bite of the cookie. “How’d you know my name?”

“She’s a super fan, remember?” the first ballplayer, I recognized as starting pitcher Keegan Tucker, said, then continued with an impatient sigh. “Anyway, do you prefer thick or thin crust? And what kind of pop would you like to drink with it?”

“Oh, thick crust sounds amazing right now. Thanks, Keegan. And I’m limiting how much pop I drink, so water or lemonade would be good. Oh, yeah, strawberry lemonade sounds so good.”

Penelope and I were enjoying this way too much and laughing along with a few of the customers. “They better get me some pizza, too,” Pen stated with a laugh. “This is a lot of fun.”

A little while later, the bell over the door chimed. I had to laugh out loud when I heard Pen’s stomach growl, and she called out, “That better be pizza.”

“I’m not pizza, but we could bring one over in exchange for cookies,” a familiar male voice said.

“Hi, Nate!” I exclaimed and went around to hug the guy who had helped transform my bakery. “Where is Autumn?”

“She’s doing her thing and has an open house on Livingston Road today,” he explained.

“She’s good at her job,” I said and turned to see two of Nate’s friends behind him, who had also helped with the renovating. “Hi, Ayden! Hi, Craig!”

“Hi, Molly!” Ayden said with a huge grin and gave me a big hug, lifting me off the ground. He was a good-looking guy with gelled-back, dirty blonde hair and kind gray eyes. He wasn’t as tall or muscular as many of the baseball players that had been coming in here all day, but he had a solid build. You could tell from his tan that he worked outdoors a lot with the construction crew and that his muscles were from working at the job sites. I could tell a group of girls who had been

complaining earlier that I couldn't make frappuccinos were watching him from their table.

"What can I get you guys?" I asked as I went back to my side of the counter.

"Well, I want a few chocolate croissants and two snickerdoodle cookies. Yours are the best ever!" Craig exclaimed with a rub to his bigger belly.

"Coming right up," I said with a smile.

"I'll take a full loaf of A's favorite bread. Shit, I can't remember what kind she wanted. Let me text her to find out," Nathan stammered.

"Honey vanilla bread," I said as I pulled the bread from the case.

"That's it!" Nate exclaimed. "Thanks, Molly!"

"That shows you how good she is at her job. I could never remember people's orders," Ayden complimented with a wink in my direction.

"What can I get you?" I asked Ayden. He didn't come in often enough for me to know his regular order.

"Well, I would love to take you out on a date," Ayden said with confidence. I heard the girls at the nearby table groan in jealousy.

"Fuck, bro, get here now," I heard another familiar male voice say from behind them in line. I looked over at one of Tyler's friends and recognized him as a guy who came in the bakery every once in a while. I knew I recognized him from somewhere but couldn't remember where.

"Hi, Cooper Dixon!" I called out with a huge smile when I saw who was talking on the phone. I was also avoiding Ayden since I wasn't sure what to say to him.

"Hey, shorty!" He replied as he pressed the end call button on his phone and dropped it into his pocket. "You are the girl from the bar, the tire incident, and you work here! What are the odds?!"

“That’s me!” I said with a grin.

“Hey, beautiful,” Cooper said with a lopsided grin as he looked down at Penelope. “Can I get your number yet?”

Penelope rolled her eyes, but she also had a blush in her cheeks. “No, but I can get your cinnamon roll and coffee with vanilla creamer.” She knew his order, which was an interesting development.

I turned my attention back to Ayden and asked him what he wanted to eat from the bakery. He looked around the cases and pointed at a cinnamon roll, too, before asking if I could make a frappuccino. The girls at the nearby table began complaining again and let him know that I couldn’t make those.

“Sorry, I have espresso drinks, so I can do mochas, lattes, americanos, and macchiatos. I also have iced coffee or regular coffee,” I explained as I pointed to my beloved espresso machine. “If you’re not a coffee drinker, I have hot chocolate, tea, and bottled soda and water.”

Ayden decided to order a hot chocolate, and I began making his drink. He was still talking to me when I heard the bells above the door again. I think he was describing a perfect first date to take me on, but all I could see was the gorgeous man entering the bakery with two pizza boxes in his arms and a grocery bag with drinks hanging from his hand. His green eyes locked with mine, and everything else faded away. It also helped that he was a head taller than Ayden, so my view wasn’t blocked.

“So, Molly, what do you think?” Ayden asked me. Hearing my name snapped my thoughts back to the man standing right in front of me.

“Think? Um, think about what?” I asked, feeling my face turning red.

“I was asking if you had plans Saturday night. I really want to take you out. I’ve been meaning to ask for a while, but my job has kept me out of town.”

I looked from Ayden’s hopeful eyes up to Tyler’s green eyes, which were sparkling as he watched our exchange. All

Tyler did was give me a lift of his eyebrow and a shrug of his shoulder. Did he not care if I went out with another guy? I was totally confused. What had been the point of all his teammates coming in today?



TYLER

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pregnancy can do strange, beautiful, and wacky things to your hormones and your body! Changes such as food cravings and aversions can be quite normal.

The look of confusion on Molly's adorable face told me everything I needed to know. She didn't want to go out with this short ass that any more than I wanted her to go out with him.

"He's definitely a *pendejo*, brother," Ivan whispered in my ear as he followed me into the bakery.

I wasn't exactly sure what insult Ivan was calling him, but I grinned over at him. It sounded a lot worse than asshole. I would ask him later for the translation.

"Hi, Strawberry Shortcake!" I intentionally walked around the competition and set the pizza boxes down right in front of him. "I brought you lunch."

Her eyes shot up to mine, and she got a huge blush on her adorable face. "What did you just call me?"

"Strawberry Shortcake. It fits you perfectly," I explained with a grin and took a lock of her strawberry colored hair in my hand. "Strawberry hair, and I'm not sure if anyone has told you before, but you are just a little short."

"Oh my gosh! No one has ever mentioned that!" she exclaimed with a big grin. "Someone else called me

Strawberry Shortcake years ago, and it brings back good memories. I really like that nickname.”

I wanted to find out more about these memories, but I was interrupted.

“Excuse me, friend,” the guy who had been trying to ask Molly out said with a glare at me. He scooted the boxes away and leaned his elbows down on the countertop and looked right at my Molly. “I’m sorry this jerk is being rude. I could take you to a fancy restaurant for lunch if you want.”

“You should go with him, Molls,” I found myself saying. “My boys and I can help Pen watch the bakery.”

“I... what?” Molly asked, and her eyes darted from me to the douchebag in front of her. “I... but you brought pizza.” She ran her fingers through her long, beautiful hair and pulled at it. I inwardly gloated that she had the same nervous tell as my brothers and me. She really was the perfect girl for me.

“The rest of us can eat the pizza.”

“Dude, what the fuck are you doing?” Cooper hissed in my ear.

“Yeah, what my new friend said,” the absolute zero with no chance said excitedly. “We should definitely go out!”

“You know what, I’m glad you said that, *friend*,” I said and put my arm around his shoulders. “Because if you’re going to go out with Molly here, we’re going to be getting real close. For at least the next eighteen years.”

I saw the minute realization dawned in her beautiful, blue-green eyes and a sheepish smile formed on her lips. I watched as she bit down on her bottom lip, probably to keep from laughing or saying something to ruin this momentous occasion.

“What do you mean?” the pansy asked as he tried to step out of my embrace.

“Well, Molly here is pregnant with my baby, and I may have been an asshole at first,” I turned my head and made sure to lock eyes with Molly, so she knew I was talking to her. “But I

am going to be in their lives and heavily involved. I'm going to be the best dad ever."

"Pregnant?" he croaked out. "You're pregnant with his baby?"

Molly nodded, looked right at him, and confirmed, "Yes. Yes I am."

"Oh, uh, well...uh...you know what," he looked around. His friends shrugged and were no help to him. He looked around the cafe for what, I'm not sure. "I think I have plans...I, uh, forgot...I, uh, have a date already with Kinley over there." He glanced over at a table filled with young, college-aged girls. They were watching this whole scene unfold, and with the mention of one of their names, they all burst into giggles and began swatting at a blonde at the end of their table.

I watched as he walked away and looked down at Molly's sweet face. "Sorry if I ruined that for you. If you want to go out with him, I can apologize."

Molly just shook her head and laughed, "And waste all your efforts from today?"

I had to laugh and tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear, "We can't let that happen."

"I guess all guys have an adverse reaction to hearing a girl is pregnant."

"Hey! Not all guys assholes," Ivan said with a laugh.

Molly smiled at my friend and nodded, "Are you a dad, Cruz?"

I loved that she was a big enough baseball fan that she knew my teammates names and seemed to know some things about them.

Ivan nodded, "Soon. I very happy to have baby girl." He pulled out the most recent picture of Camila on his phone to show her.

"She's beautiful!" Molly said. "Congratulations."

“Gracias,” Ivan said and stepped away so that I could talk to my girl.

“I’m excited, too,” I confirmed. “I was just shocked, and I’m so sorry, baby.”

“I know you are,” Molly said as she smiled up at me. She began walking around the counter towards me. She wrapped her arms around my waist and put her head on my chest. Even with her being so short, it still seemed like she fit perfectly in my arms.

“You know, I had more ‘get to know you’ questions planned,” I admitted as I wrapped my own arms around her and pulled her even closer to me.

“Well, maybe if we go on a date, you could ask me more,” she said almost shyly. God, she was cute.

“Molly Green, are you asking me on a date?” I asked with a little flair of dramatics.

“I think I am,” she replied and looked up into my eyes. “Tyler Stone, will you go on a date with me?”

“I would be honored,” I said and leaned down to kiss her sweetly. I intended for it to be a quick peck on the lips, but she deepened the kiss this time. Cheering erupted around us, but I didn’t care at all. Our kiss was interrupted when her belly growled. “Our baby is hungry. Can you take a break now to eat some pizza?”

Molly looked over to Penelope, who just waved us away. “You’re the boss,” she said with a smile. “Go eat!”

“You should have a few pieces, too,” Molly replied.

“Girl, I already did while you two were giving each other heart eyes.”

“Yeah, we didn’t save you much,” Cooper said with a laugh. “Sorry, bro.”

I rolled my eyes at one of my favorite teammates and took the box of pizza that still had a few slices left. I took Molly’s hand in mine, and we walked over to the cafe table in the back corner.

“Oh my gosh. This smells....” Molly said as she took a deep breath and looked down at the table while she held onto her stomach, “horrible.”

“What? I thought you told Swick, Brooks, Baxter, and Endicott that you were craving meat lovers pizza.”

“I was,” she replied quietly. “But now, the baby wants pineapple pizza. I’m sorry, Ty. I know you don’t have a lot of money, and you got me what I had wanted. I can just make a sandwich in the back. I’ll be fine.”

“Nope. What my baby wants, my baby gets,” I said as I whipped out my phone.

I dialed a number I knew by heart and smiled as I heard, “This is Pizza Palace. Darren speaking. Is this for carryout or delivery?”

“Hey, Darren, it’s Tyler Stone. I need to order a small pineapple pizza as quickly as you can get it.”

“I can have that ready for you in 15 minutes, Mr. Stone,” Darren, the owner of the Pizza Palace said with a chuckle. “Did your lady not want meat lovers anymore?”

“Do they have fried pickles?” Molly asked me with excitement in her blue-green eyes. “And maybe potato chips? Oh! Could they drizzle ranch over it after it’s cooked? Ohhhh, yeah,” she added with a moan, “that sounds amazing.” Her moaning about pizza made my dick twitch in jealousy.

Darren chuckled through the phone, “A pregnancy craving pizza of pineapples, fried pickles, and potato chips coming right up. And I’ll put the ranch on the side to drizzle when she’s ready, so it doesn’t make the pizza soggy.”

“Darren, you’re the best. Thank you!” I exclaimed.

“I have three kids under the age of four at home. I know how pregnancy cravings are,” Darren explained. “You ball players spent enough today on pizza as it is, so this pizza will be on the house. Consider it a baby shower gift.”

“Thank you so much, Darren!” I said. I told him Cooper or one of the guys would be by soon to pick up the pizza and

disconnected the call. "It will be ready in fifteen."

"Thank you, Ty. You must think I'm crazy!" Molly said with sincere appreciation. "Let me go get some money for the pizza."

"No worries, baby," I said with a grin. "The owner said the pizza is a baby gift."

"That's so nice of him!" she exclaimed. "Let me get money for a tip for him then."

"No need, Shorty," Cooper said. "I got a tip for him, and I'll be back in a flash with your pizza."

"Thanks, Coop!" Molly said, and I heard her belly rumble again. "Hurry."

Molly and I both laughed, and I put the bottle of pink lemonade and the small gift bag I had been holding onto the table.

"What's this?" Molly asked as she unscrewed the cap of the lemonade and took a drink. "Oh, man, this is the perfect drink."

"I'm glad that craving didn't change," I teased.

"Hush!" Molly said with a giggle. I had remembered how much fun she was to joke around with at the bar, and that was something I really liked about her.

"So, this gift here was going to be the last gift given to you today, but we kind of got interrupted," I explained as I handed her the small gift bag.

"Can I open it now?" she asked, practically bouncing in her seat.

"No, you have to wait until the official baby shower," I said with as serious a face as I could make.

"Okay," she said with a shrug like it didn't matter to her all of a sudden.

I let out a loud chuckle and shook my head. "Of course, you can open it now."

She let out a giggle and began pulling at the tissue paper. She pulled out the tiny piece of clothing, held it up, and began to sob.

“Oh, fuck, baby!” I quickly got out of my chair and kneeled down beside her. “I wasn’t sure if you would like it or not. I know it’s boy colors, and we don’t know if our baby is a girl or a boy yet, but -” my speech was cut off by her wrapping her arms around my neck and placing her lips on mine.

“I love it so much!” she cried. “This is the first gift for our baby!”

“What is it?” Penelope asked from over the counter.

Molly grinned through her tears and held up the tiny onesie that was in Raptor blue. It had the Raptor logo and said ‘My favorite player is my daddy.’ on it

“That is so perfect!” Penelope said as I got up and went back to my seat. “I’m a little bummed I didn’t think about getting that for you.”

“It was my idea!” Cooper said after he walked in the door holding Molly’s pizza. It smelled disgusting. Pineapple does not belong on pizza, and no one was going to change my mind. If my girl wanted pineapple pizza, though, I wouldn’t complain.

“It was not!” I said with a roll of my eyes at my friend and turned to Molly. “I’m really glad you like it.”

“I really love it,” she remarked as she pulled out a slice of pizza and took a big bite. Melted cheese and sauce stuck to her lips, but she didn’t seem to mind. She took another big bite and sighed. happily. “This is amazing.”

“Here’s the ranch,” Cooper said as he put the cup of ranch on the table.

“Oh! This will make it even better!” Molly dipped the pizza in the ranch and took another huge bite. Ranch was all over her mouth, and I just shook my head. She took a napkin and wiped it off and took another bite.

“So, we need to take care of a few more things before I have to go get ready for the game tonight,” I said as she ate. She gave me a nod to keep talking since her mouth was full. “Number one, I need your phone number.”

She hit her palm over her forehead in disbelief. “I can’t believe we still haven’t exchanged numbers! Here, put your number in my phone and text yourself then you’ll have mine. My hands are too greasy to do that right now.”

I added my number to her phone and made my contact name “My Man” then texted myself. I saved her contact as “My Girl” and smiled at her, making sure my dimples popped out since I knew she liked that so much.

“You’re officially ‘My Girl’ now.” I said as I showed her my phone, “It’s in my phone, so it has to be true.”

She grinned and laughed when she saw my contact name in her phone. “And you’re ‘My Man!’”

“You’ll be at the game tonight, right?”

“You couldn’t keep me away,” she said and closed the pizza box. She stood up and climbed onto my lap. She cuddled against my chest, fitting perfectly against me. “I’m not sure if I’ll be able to stay the whole time since it’s a night game, and I have to get up so early. I do need to talk to you about some baby stuff, and I need to figure out a good date for us.”

“Any plans tomorrow? It’s an off day. I have practice, but my evening is free.”

“I have two or three dates scheduled with other guys, but I guess I could cancel them for you.”

“You better not have dates with other guys,” I said with a growl and laughed. “Don’t worry about the date. I have something planned already. Be ready at 6pm tomorrow night.” I looked at my watch and groaned. “I really hate to cut this short, but I have to be at the stadium for batting practice in 20 minutes.”

“Thank you again for everything today. It’s been a day I will never forget.”

I leaned down and kissed her soft lips. “I’m glad you forgave me. You’re my good luck charm, Molly.”

That night, I played an awesome game and threw out two opponents trying to steal second base. My coaches were super excited and knew I had been working out my arms and throwing extra hard to catch stealers. I was happy it was working.

I also loved seeing Molly in the stands. I guess Penelope couldn’t find a babysitter since she was sitting alone, but a couple times I checked on her, she was talking with the people around her. Around the sixth inning, she made sure to get my attention and blew me a kiss goodbye. I wish she could hang around after the game, but I knew she had an early morning.



TYLER

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Some company executives took the Kitchen Aid mixers home to test them out, but no one knew what to name the new invention until an executive's wife called the appliance "the best kitchen aid I've ever had."

The next day, I arrived at the bakery at 5:57. Practice had gone longer than I thought it would. I took a fast shower and was glad I still made it before six. I sent her a text to let her know I was there, and she said she'd meet me downstairs in a minute. I half expected her to be like my ex, Aubree, and say she was ready to go but still be in the bathroom for at least another half an hour. However, before I was able to knock on the door, it opened, and my breath was stolen away. She was wearing a light blue sundress with little white flowers all over it. She had a jean jacket over her shoulders, and her hair was loose around her shoulders in soft waves.

"You wore my favorite color," I breathed as I pulled her into a hug.

"I'm so glad you noticed." She smiled, almost shyly, and reached up to place a kiss on my cheek.

"These are for you," I said and handed her a bouquet of purple lilies.

"Oh my gosh, they are beautiful! Thank you, Ty! Come in, and I'll look for something to put these in."

I followed her into the bakery kitchen and took it all in. It was immaculately clean with different size containers for flour, sugar, and other dry ingredients. Stand mixers in varying colors lined the cabinet against the far wall. Only Molly would have a rainbow of mixers.

“Red is for cookies, blue is for pies, white is for different breads, and yellow is for cakes,” she explained as she saw where I had been looking. I watched as she grabbed a Mason jar for the lilies and put it in the middle of the island. “Would you like a tour before we leave?” I told her I would love one. She told me how this was the main kitchen, and I wasn’t sure what she meant by that. Did she have more than one kitchen? She opened the door closest to her and gestured for me to check it out. In the pantry, I saw lots of different baking ingredients including chocolate chips, several more types of flour, sugars, and even several types of cereals. I had to laugh because the top two shelves were empty.

“I can’t reach them, so why use them?” she explained with a laugh and a shrug.

“I could buy you a step stool,” I offered, and she laughed as she walked back towards the main kitchen and pointed out a regular step stool and a small ladder with several steps.

“I still need these sometimes,” she laughed.

“My pint-size girlfriend, ladies and gentlemen,” I said, wrapping her in a hug, “You’re adorable.”

“I like being called your girlfriend!” She took my hand to lead me through another door. “Now, this is why I purchased this location. It originally was a butcher shop, but the wife did some canning and made lots of jams. She used this separate kitchen, so she didn’t get in her husband’s way.”

“Wow. Do you make your own jams?”

She laughed at that. “Nah. But I do buy the widow’s jams and use them in my pastries.”

“That’s awesome and really smart,” I exclaimed and loved how she used local items for her own baked goods. It was great marketing and great for the community.

“I’m glad you think so,” she said proudly as she pulled me into a smaller kitchen. It was just as pristine, and I saw three more stand mixers in various colors on the counter and had to chuckle. “Does that mixer company sponsor you or something?”

“Nah. They are just the best. When I was having the kitchens remodeled, I found a few bakeries that were closing and got some equipment from them. I actually found a few online for really good deals.”

“Very thrifty, as well,” I said as I looked at the shelves and noticed words like ‘allergen-free chocolate chips,’ ‘gluten-free flour,’ ‘organic whole wheat pastry flour,’ and ‘canned pumpkin made in a peanut-free facility.’

“Welcome to my AF Kitchen as Penelope calls it. This is where I make all my allergy-friendly products. That way, there is no chance of cross-contamination.”

“Marry me?” I blurted as I dramatically got down on one knee. “You are my perfect woman. You love baseball, you have a second kitchen for allergy-free baking, and it doesn’t hurt that you are sexy as hell and a great kisser.”

“Oh my god! Get up!” She cried while giggling and using all her strength to try to help me get back up on my feet. “You’re crazy.”

“Nah. My dad said he knew my mom was the one within five minutes of meeting her.” I stood up, pulled her against me, and held her tightly in my arms. I did not want to let her go.

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes. “Wow. That’s awesome. My parents were rare, too. They began dating in middle school, and my dad actually wrote in her eighth grade yearbook ‘To the Future Mrs. Green.’ They were together all through college, even though they went to college in different states. That’s one reason I have faith that we could make it if you get called up.”

“It means a lot to me that you have faith in us. I love that your parents helped with part of that.” I kissed the top of her

head and felt emotions inside me I hadn't felt in a long time, if ever. This girl really was something special.

She grinned, and then I heard her stomach growl. "Ugh. That's embarrassing," she said with a little blush to her cheeks.

"It is after six o'clock. Let's get going and have dinner. I hope you don't mind; I packed us a picnic."

"That sounds perfect!"

She took my hand as we walked out to the pick-up truck I borrowed from one of my teammates.

"This thing is huge!" she marveled. "And no running boards..."

I had to laugh. I hadn't thought about her needing running boards to get up in the truck, but in a way, I was thankful because I opened the door and lifted her by her trim waist into the truck.

"Thank you," she sighed with a grin and leaned over to give me a quick kiss.

As we drove to a nearby lake, I held her hand, and she rested her head on my shoulder. It felt so natural and right.

With my ex, Aubree, she would have never thought a picnic in a pick-up truck would be a good date. She wanted fancy restaurants and dates at a local place that had karaoke for minors. I needed to stop comparing Molly and Aubree because they were as different as night and day. The only similarity was their hair color.

"You know I've always had a thing for redheads," I told her as I squeezed her hand and turned off the main road onto the side road leading to the lake.

"Oh, yeah? Well, then, I'm thankful for being a redhead." She twirled a piece of her red hair with the hand that wasn't holding mine. "I've always had a thing for guys with green eyes."

I had to laugh and squeezed her hand. "Well, I'm glad I have green eyes then!"

When we pulled up to the lake, I jumped out and hurried around to help her get down from the truck so she wouldn't hurt herself. Really, I just liked having her in my arms. I pulled her down from the seat and twirled her around, loving the sound of her giggle.

"This is so beautiful!" She exclaimed as she walked to the front of the truck to take in the view of the lake surrounded by big trees. A gravel path wound around the lake, and a sign close to us advertised fishing was allowed but no swimming. "I guess that rules out skinny dipping."

I let out a loud chuckle and rubbed her shoulders. "It just means we can't get caught."

"I've never been skinny dipping," she admitted. "But it might be a little cold in the water this time of year."

"Are you cold?" I asked.

She leaned her body back farther and sank into me. "No, I'm good. I'm just saying the water would be cold."

I nodded and kissed the top of her head. We sat and watched as a few ducks swam around

"Are you ready to eat?" I asked.

"Let's see what you brought."

I pulled out my makeshift picnic basket from the bed of the truck that included a small cooler and a laundry basket. "Sorry, it's not anything fancy."

She just laughed. "It works for me."

I pulled out bottled water, ham, three types of sliced cheese, grapes, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, cucumber, onion, and string cheese from the cooler. Then, I pulled out two types of bread, different condiment bottles, paper plates, and knives from the laundry basket.

"I wasn't sure what you would want on your ham sandwiches, so I bought a variety of stuff to make our own."

"That's really sweet. I'd like ham with lettuce, swiss cheese, and a little mayo, please." She started grabbing stuff and began

putting together her sandwich as I worked on mine. “You won’t judge me if I have two sandwiches, will you?”

“Not at all. You’re eating for two, remember? Plus, I like a girl who can eat.” I could never understand why women ordered just a salad when they went on a date.

She looked over at me as I prepared my sandwich with ham, dijon mustard, lettuce, tomatoes, and all three types of cheese.

“That’s a lot of cheese,” she said with a laugh.

“I work out a lot, so I can eat a lot,” I shrugged.

“Me too,” she said with a giggle as she patted her growing belly.

“Well, you are eating for two,” I said with a laugh, as I got up and grabbed a blanket from the truck. We sat down and ate together while we talked about our day. We even enjoyed some quiet time and watched nearby ducks swimming around. It was so easy to be around her and felt like we had known each other forever.

“Oh! I almost forgot. I made dessert to bring! You inspired it, actually.”

“I inspired it? What is it?” I asked excitedly.

“I’ve been experimenting with a recipe all day trying to make it perfect,” she said as she went to the passenger side of the truck. She brought out her large purse and inside was a small insulated lunch bag. She opened it up to reveal a small container with strawberries and a ziploc bag filled with two small white biscuits. “You’ll have to let me know what you think of it, honestly.”

“You made me strawberry shortcake!” I said with a huge grin, loving that she used my new nickname for her. “Let’s eat it in the bed of the truck.”



June 14th is National Strawberry Shortcake Day.

Tyler led me to the back of the pick up truck where there were several blankets and pillows.

“You really thought of everything, didn’t you?” I asked.

He shrugged but had a grin on his face. “I asked the guys for some suggestions, and my sister, too.”

He helped to lift me up into the bed of the truck and we laid down several blankets to make a bed and leaned against the pillows together. He pulled me close to him, and I found my head settled against his shoulder.

“This is really nice,” I said as he rubbed my back. “But if we don’t eat the dessert soon, it will need to go back to the little cooler thing.”

“Well, I’m thinking we won’t need the little cakes,” he said with a mischievous grin.

“So, you just want to use my strawberry sauce?” I asked with a raised eyebrow and butterflies dancing in my belly.

Tyler looked all around us, then reached for the straps of my dress and pulled them down. I looked around nervously, and he assured me, “Don’t worry. We’re all alone. If you’re at all uncomfortable, we don’t have to do anything, but we are on a gravel road and will hear anyone coming down the road before they’d be able to see us.”

“What did you have in mind? Eating the strawberries off me?”

“You know me so well, already,” he said with a grin and sat up to get the container of strawberry sauce. He opened the lid and dipped his finger in it. He brought the finger to his own lips and groaned. “Oh, holy shit. This is amazing. Don’t change anything in the recipe.” He gently pushed me back against the pillows. Taking another swipe of sauce, he wiped his finger across the top of my breasts and then down between them.

“I’m glad you like it.” I began to giggle as he leaned down and followed the trail of strawberries with his tongue. My laughter quickly turned to moaning. I pulled the top of my dress over my breasts and down to my waist. I had never been more grateful that I bought a dress with a built-in bra.

“Oh, hell, yeah!” Tyler said and took a bigger portion of the strawberries in his hand and massaged them onto my breasts.

“Oh my gosh, this is going to be so sticky,” I squeaked but closed my eyes. “But so worth it.” He then took my right breast into his mouth, and I could feel his tongue licking all around while he sucked on my nipple. I felt my head tip back, and I just enjoyed all the sensations happening inside me. I thought I would feel exposed, but I found myself getting wetter just thinking of doing this out in the open.

Right as Tyler was latching himself to my left breast, I felt his phone vibrate in his pocket.

“You can get that if you need to,” I said but made sure my voice was disappointed enough for him to know I really didn’t want this to stop.

“Whoever it is can wait,” he said after he pulled off my breast and gave me a wink. He then licked around my areola and actually bit the tip.

“Fuck!” I cried out, not expecting the pain and the pleasure. I knew my panties were definitely soaked now. He was about to scoop up more strawberries when I asked him to make sure to save me some. “I could, I mean if you want, I could use

some, too, for your pleasure..." I felt my face getting red, and I couldn't look him in the eye.

"Baby, you are my perfect girl," Tyler said with a huge grin and pulled me in for a kiss. "If you want to use some of the strawberry sauce on me, I am all about that, but I don't expect it." While he was kissing me, I pulled at the button of his pants and unbuttoned it.

"You weren't joking, were you?" he asked with a smirk.

"I would like to try," I admitted as I placed my hand down the front of his pants to feel how hard he was.

His phone went off again in his pocket, and since my hands were right there, I reached into his pocket with my available hand to grab his phone.

"What the fuck?" Tyler asked when he saw Cooper's name flashing on the caller ID. "Cooper knows where I am right now. That ass."

"Was it him who called earlier?" I asked.

Tyler shrugged and checked his recent calls list. "Oh, shit. Coop and Hayden have both called a few times."

"Answer it," I demanded. "If he's calling again so soon, there must be something he needs."

"I'm really sorry," Tyler said as he pressed the button to accept the call. "This better be important." He began to pull at the strands of his brown hair while he listened to Cooper talk.

I decided to sit up and give him some space. I pulled my dress back up to cover my exposed chest and had to cringe about how sticky it was. Maybe Tyler and I could enjoy some time together in the shower to clean up. I busied myself with opening a bottle of water from the cooler and taking a few sips. Soon, Tyler hung up the phone and looked at me with a worried glance and a heavy sigh.

"Is everything okay?"

"Ivan got a call from his mother-in-law. Camila's in labor, and he's freaking out." Ty jumped out of the back of the truck and began pacing around.

“He should be there with her,” I expressed, feeling horrible for Ivan and Camila.

Tyler nodded and motioned for me to sit at the end of the truck bed with my legs dangling down. He then placed his head on my stomach and took a deep breath. “I hope I’m here when you go into labor.”

“You better be since I’m due in the off-season, and you’d have no reason not to be there.”

“I’m so glad about that. You hear that little one? Your daddy will get to be there.” He then pulled me into his arms and brought me down to my feet. Tyler kissed the top of my head and said, “It literally kills me, and I hate to cut this date short, but Ivan is my closest friend on the team. Cooper said he’s losing control. Ivan is a starting pitcher and never loses control.”

“Of course! I totally understand,” I said honestly. “You’re a good guy, Tyler Stone.”



After a lengthy good night kiss, Tyler dropped me back off at the bakery. It was only a little after seven o’clock, and I had taken a nap earlier in preparation for a long date night. I wish there was something I could do for Ivan and Camila and thought maybe I could send her a bakery box of goodies to cheer her up.

Before baking anything, I knew I needed a shower. I was all riled up and discarded my soaked panties into my hamper, wishing Tyler was joining me in the shower. I took a quick one, only needing to wash off the stickiness left from the strawberries. Afterwards, I toweled off and put on a pair of comfortable yoga pants and an oversized t-shirt.

I found myself back downstairs. My Mimi always knew I was stressed when she would find me baking at night. I remember one time in high school, I was having a lot of trouble in a math class, and she woke up to the kitchen filled with muffins and tons of pieces of scrap paper all around the

room where I had been studying for the math test. I not only aced the test, but my teacher loved the basket of muffins I had given her to put in the teacher's lounge.

I looked around my bakery kitchen, walked to the pantry, began mindlessly grabbing flour and sugars, and began filling my stand mixers with different ingredients. I would make a variety of my favorites. Then I went into my AF Kitchen and began making some of Tyler's favorite crumb cake bars and chocolate chip muffins.

I just realized I hadn't even told Tyler about what happened at the doctor's office. I was worried he would be upset again, and I just wasn't sure how to tell him. I began to throw my own worries for myself and Camila into my baking.

I lost track of time, and before I knew it, the back door was swinging open as Pen walked in. I couldn't believe I had been baking all night long.

"What in the world is going on here?" Penelope asked as she took inventory of all the baked goods all over the kitchen.

"Have you ever heard of stress baking?" I asked as I pulled out another tray of muffins out of the oven and slid a tray filled with bread pans in its place.

"Oh my gosh. Did the date not go well?" Penelope asked, rushing over to my side.

"No, I mean yes," I commented and let myself sit down for the first time that night, beginning to realize how tired I really was. "It went great. What time is it anyway? Why are you here so early?"

"I'm here at my normal five in the morning, Molly," Pen said, clearly shocked. "What time did the date end? And what are you stressed about, babe?"

"It's five? I've been baking for... I don't even know how many hours. Holy shit." I finally let myself look around the kitchen. There were piles and piles of baked goods on every countertop, and I had a feeling the AF kitchen would be about the same. "Ivan's wife went into labor, and Tyler ended the date to go be with his friend."

Penelope sat next to me and rubbed my arm, “That’s really great of him, but that doesn’t explain the stress-baking.” I hadn’t told anyone what the doctor said, and now, I wanted to tell Tyler before anyone else. It wasn’t the only thing stressing me out, but I had to tell Penelope something, so I went with one of the lesser stressors.

“I really like him, Pen, like a lot. I might even love him.”

“Wow! And I think he likes you, too. He might even love you, too. I’ve seen how he looks at you.” She chuckled as she began putting baked goods into containers. “But...”

“But I’m scared. What if he gets called up, and I’ll be left all alone? I think of poor Camila all alone in her country while her husband is here, hardly making any money. Now, she’s in labor. Ty and I talked about how my due date isn’t until the off-season, so I’m thankful about that, but I’m scared, too.”

“Well,” Pen began as she held up one finger. “First off you won’t ever be alone. You’re stuck with me for life.” She then added a second finger. “And secondly, I hate to say it, but your boy is a damn good player, and I think the likelihood of him getting called up is pretty high.” She held up a third finger.

“I know, I know. Thirdly, it’s his dream and going to the majors is what he’s working towards. I want him to achieve his dream, but I’m just getting to know him, too. I’m being selfish.”

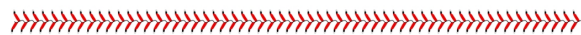
“Molly, you may be a lot of things but selfish is not one of them. Wanting to spend time with your new boyfriend is very reasonable, especially since he’s the father of your unborn baby, but I know you and your love for baseball. When he gets called up, you’ll be happy for him.”

I nodded and rested my head on the small space of the kitchen island that Penelope had just cleared. “I know I will, too, but I already miss him, and he hasn’t even been called up yet.”

“Molly, go upstairs and get some sleep. Being on your feet all night couldn’t have been good for the baby. I’ll open up myself.”

I nodded and slowly raised my head. “You should do a sale on all this. Anyone who has a ticket stub from a Raptors game or has Raptors attire on can ‘buy one, get one half off’ or something. I think I’m going to give Ivan some of the proceeds. If we make enough, maybe he could fly home? I have no idea how much a plane ticket is or if the league will even let him go home, but they have to, right? If not, then he could send it to Camila for diapers and baby clothes or whatever she needs.” I really was tired if I was rambling so much.

“See, Moll, not a selfish bone in your body. Go get some sleep, and I’ll make sure this stuff gets sold.” Penelope gave me a big hug and pushed me towards the stairs to my apartment.



The sun shone brightly in my eyes, and I looked around my room, very confused. “Oh my gosh! I’m late! Why the hell did Penelope not wake me up?” I said to myself as I quickly jumped out of bed and rushed to the bathroom. I rubbed my face and saw sleep lines all over my face when I looked in the mirror. I found my phone and saw that it was 9:23 a.m., and the bakery opened at 6:30. How could I have slept so long? That’s when I remembered my all-night baking spree and Pen sending me to sleep when she arrived. Four and a half hours wasn’t much sleep, but I was now wide awake and ready to go. I had a business to run and would have to sleep later.

I walked into the bakery and was shocked by the line. Usually, Friday was a busy day, but the line went out the door. I was also shocked to see Lilly, one of the people I had originally interviewed for Penelope’s job, at the cash register. Cash, the teenager that had hit on me during his interview, was boxing orders and grinned over at me.

“Heya, boss lady!” he said.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty!” Penelope said while she was adding whipped cream to a caramel mocha. “I hope you don’t mind, but I had to call in reinforcements. Their numbers

were in your computer, and they were both available right away. I did call a girl you interviewed named Janel, but she said she was only interested in baking, and since you did enough of that last night, I figured we didn't need her today."

"Thank you," I said in awe and a little speechless. "Where did all these people come from?"

"The power of social media," Lilly answered with a grin. "Do you know who Kim is? I know she comes in everyday around 8:45, before she opens her store."

"Yeah, a strawberry scone and a coffee with two creams and two Splenda," I said. "The owner of The Lilly Pad flower shop." I looked around to see if one of my favorite regular customers was in the shop.

"That's my mom. I'm who the shop is named after," she said proudly.

"What a small world," I said. "Your mom is the sweetest."

"Well, she is the one who gave your baseball player the purple flowers the other day and said it was one of the sweetest things ever."

I walked over to the register and began checking customers out as Lilly talked. It seemed like she couldn't multi-task very well, but I was appreciative of her coming in.

"He really did good," I smiled, thinking of the awesome day and couldn't believe it was only a few days ago.

"Anyway, Phoebe over here was telling my mom all about raising money for one of the players who is having a family emergency, and Mom said she wanted to help. She said she's going to give 10% of her profits to the player and had me put it on the flower shop's social media page."

"That is so awesome of her!" I said and looked at Penelope and mouthed, "Phoebe?" Penelope just shrugged her shoulders with a smile and whispered to me, "She might not be the brightest, but she's good with social media and really sweet."

I nodded and saw on top of the counter was a big glass jar. I walked to the other side where the customers were lined up

and saw in Penelope's handwriting:

**Help one of the Raptor players with a family emergency.
If you are wearing Raptors apparel
or can show a Raptors ticket stub,
you can buy one, get one 1/2 off!
Thank you!**

The jar was overflowing, and there were several five, ten, and even twenty-dollar bills in the jar. I felt tears well up in my eyes. The community was really coming through for Ivan, and they didn't even know which player needed help or why.

"And that's not all," Lilly exclaimed. "I do social media for Sugar Scoops Ice Cream Parlor and The Bookshelf used bookstore. I talked to their managers, and they agreed to let me post on their sites and to make donations as well. They will give a percentage from today's sales too."

"Wow. I had no idea social media could do all this," I exclaimed as the line was still out the door. I was now glad I had plenty of baked goods to sell.

"I know you didn't hire me for the store, and I have no hard feelings," Lilly said while she waved her hands around. "But if you wanted to hire me to do your social media, that's what I'm going to school for." I was glad that social media had nothing to do with her math skills.

"I would definitely be interested in that," I responded and waved at a few regulars who were coming in the door. I saw one of my favorite regulars was about to order from Cash, so I began to make his coffee how I knew he liked it. "Hi, Dr. Sebastian. How are you?" I asked.

Dr. Sebastian was the only doctor in town and was very well-liked. Every day, he came into the bakery for a small black coffee and a blueberry muffin. He never changed his order and always sat at one of the tables to do the newspaper crossword puzzle while he ate. He definitely was a creature of habit.

"Ms. Green, may I have a word?" he asked.

“Of course,” I said and went to sit with him at the cafe table as soon as he paid for his order. “I am so sorry the line was extra long today.”

“Oh, dear, that’s not the problem,” he responded as he took a sip of his coffee. “Do you know my last name?”

“Isn’t it Dr. Sebastian?” I asked.

He let out a chuckle, “No, that’s my first name. My full name is Sebastian Campbell.” I nodded and wondered if his last name should mean something to me. The only Campbell I could think of was the soup. “As in Campbell Field, home of the Raptors,” he said when he must have noticed I wasn’t connecting the dots. “I own the Raptors.”

“OH!” I exclaimed. “Oh. I am so sorry, Dr. Campbell. I should have asked if it was against the rules or something to raise money for a player. I just really wanted to help.”

He held up his hand to stop me. “No, no. It’s your business, and you can do what you want with your money. I don’t even want to know which player is having a family emergency, but I think it’s very commendable what you are doing and that the community is coming together to help. I would like to match whatever amount you are able to pull together. This is strictly off the record, and if anyone finds out I donated, I will deny it because it would be favoritism, but I want to encourage this. This is exactly why I wanted to build a stadium in this small town.”



TYLER

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

You should move in together when you feel that this step is symbolic of becoming more committed to each other.

It had been a long night talking with Ivan. He had been ready to just leave baseball to go to his family. Camila was the one to talk him out of that. She said she was surrounded by her family and wasn't alone. We could all tell she would rather have him there and was trying to be strong. I knew that if that was Molly in a different country and about to have our baby, I'd do anything to get to her.

"How is he going to pitch today?" Hayden asked as we were jogging together the next morning.

"He'll find a way. He's a professional," I said with confidence.

"How'd the date go yesterday? Other than having to cut it short?"

"That part sucked, but she's amazing. My ex would have scoffed about having a picnic for a date, but Molly loved it. She's so easy to talk to, and we have this special connection."

"That's good, man, since you'll be tied together for at least eighteen years."

I shook my head but had a grin on my face. "I don't think it will be a hardship. I think she's it for me."

"Wow. You know already?"

“They say when you know, you know. And it doesn’t hurt that the sex was amazing, too,” I had to add.

Hayden laughed. “You’re a lucky asshole.”

“Well, what about you? You’ve got a girl,” I responded to him.

Hayden stopped jogging and put his hands on his hips as he paced around. “We broke up.”

“What? Why? I’m sorry, man.”

“I guess the distance was too much for her. She’s in college and wants to have the whole experience and everything. I don’t blame her. It just sucks.”

“When did this happen?” I asked as we resumed jogging.

“A week ago. You were busy being an asshole to Molly, and now with this crap with Ivan, it didn’t seem as important.”

“Dude, Scott. I’m a lousy friend. I’m sorry, bro.”

“No worries, man. I’m glad you got your girl back, and now, we have to figure out how to help our man, Ivan.”

We finished our run, got back to our apartment, and went in to take showers. Ivan was on the phone with Camila, I guessed, so I cradled my arms together in the motion of rocking a baby with a questioning look, and Ivan shook his head. I checked my phone and was a little surprised there were no messages or calls from Molly. I really hoped she wasn’t upset about cutting the date short. She seemed understanding, but I still felt bad. I decided to send her a text.

Me: Missin you! I’m sorry again about having to cut the date short. The next date will be a lot better! I can’t wait to see you tonight at the game! ♥

I stripped off my clothes and threw them in the laundry basket against the wall. I shook my head as I saw a pile of Cooper’s clothes sitting next to the basket instead of in it. I got in the shower, and all my thoughts were consumed by my adorable redhead. I really wish she had been able to come

back with me last night or I had gone to her place. I put my hand on my already hard cock while thinking about her, and I closed my eyes imagining it was her small hands pumping me. I envisioned her sink to her knees in front of me, and her mouth taking the place of her hands. I put my hand on the tile wall and found myself moaning, “Oh, Molly. Yes!” I wished it was her bringing me close to my release and not my own hand. I could almost hear her calling my name.

“Ty?” My imagination was really active, and I could swear her voice was inside my bathroom. “Can I join you?”

“Molly?” I opened my eyes, and there she stood at my shower door with a grin on her face as she was already taking off her shirt. “Holy shit, baby. Get that sweet ass in here.”

“Were you moaning my name?” she asked with a smirk.

“Maybe,” I said without any embarrassment.

“Good, because I don’t think I would have liked hearing you moan another girl’s name,” she teased.

“There is only you, baby.”

She quickly shed the rest of her clothes and stepped into our tiny shower. I was never more grateful for her being so tiny. I took a moment to appreciate her flawless, pale skin covered with perfect little freckles, and my gaze traveled over her breasts, which already seemed to be bigger. Getting your girl pregnant definitely had multiple benefits. My gaze stopped at her stomach. “You have a little belly!” I said with a huge grin.

Molly covered her stomach with her hands and groaned, “I know! Don’t remind me.”

“Don’t you dare cover up your baby belly!” I said and grabbed her wrists. I dropped to my knees in front of her, wrapped my arms around her, and held onto her perfect ass. I placed my lips on her stomach and began talking to our baby, “Hi, little one. You’re already making your presence known. Make sure to let your mama know that she is beautiful with a flat stomach or with a little belly, and she will be gorgeous when you grow so big that it will look like she swallowed a watermelon. I can’t wait to see that!”

“A watermelon?! Seriously, Ty! I do need to talk to you about something, but I don’t think a shower is the right time.”

“Ok, after the shower then,” I said before saying one more thing to our baby. “I’m going to give your mommy some much-needed attention. I don’t know if your ears or eyes are developed yet, but please cover them and ignore what’s happening next.”

She giggled, and I felt her relax under me. I took the opportunity to move up a little and began to suck on her tits. I gave one attention with my mouth and used my hand to massage the other one and tweak the hard nipple. “These taste good, but they definitely tasted better with strawberries on them.” As she giggled, I let my other hand roam down her growing belly and into the oasis between her legs.

“Oh, Tyler!” my girl called out in a long moan as I entered one finger into her and then another.

“I love that you’re always wet for me,” I said after I released her breast and looked up into her hooded, blue-green eyes.

“Only for you,” she panted.

I rose up slowly to capture her mouth with mine as I let my fingers fuck her quickly. The pad of my thumb found her clit and rubbed back and forth. She was squirming against me, and I kissed her deeper to quiet her moans. I soon felt her come around my fingers, and I peppered kisses all over her face and down her neck. “You’re so beautiful when you let go.”

Her chest was heaving as she clung to me. “You need a bigger shower,” she said with a laugh a minute later. “Lucky for you, mine is bigger.” She began to trace my tattoos with her fingers. “You really do love baseball,” she remarked as her fingers glided over the tribal inked clouds that looped around a catcher’s mask, a baseball glove, a bat, and a baseball on the inked sleeve of my right arm. She rubbed her hand over my knuckles that read the numbers 7, 2, 9, and 9.

“I’ve always been number 7, Landon has always been number 29, and Carter was number 9,” I explained. “Do you have any ink?” My eyes roamed all over her beautiful body.

She nodded and lifted her arm to point to several dates on her ribcage. “The date my parents passed away, my papaw’s death, and then my mimi’s death. There is plenty of room for happier occasions, like when our baby is born, and who knows what our future will bring?”

“Hell, yeah,” I said with a smirk as she turned her attention to me and looked down at my hard on. Then, my dreams came true, and she brought herself down to her knees before me. “Fuck, yeah, baby.”

She smiled up at me with a shaky smile, “Yes, now, it’s your turn. I, uh, well, I”

“You don’t have to, baby.” I ran my fingers through her hair. I would be disappointed if she didn’t fulfill my earlier fantasy, but I would survive.

“No, I want to,” she began quietly as she eyed my cock in front of her. “I’ve just never given a blow job before.”

“Well, I feel honored to be your first,” I said with a soft smile. “Just trust your instincts and go slow. The only thing I ask is watch your teeth. And for the first time, I won’t come down your throat. I’ll tell you when I’m about to come, and then I would love more than anything to mark those beautiful tits of yours.”

She nodded and nervously touched the precum on the tip. She then put her finger in her mouth and moaned, “Oh, it tastes good.”

“That was the second fucking hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” I breathed. “The first being watching you come.”

She smiled, wrapped her lips around my cock, and began to take it into her mouth. I felt a scrape of her teeth and winced.

“Watch the teeth, baby.”

She quickly pulled off me and looked up at me with worry in her eyes, “I am so sorry, Tyler.”

“It’s ok, babe. It felt so good. Just pretend it’s a giant lollipop. You can use your hands, too, if you want.”

“A lollipop? So I can lick you?”

“Hell, yeah, you can. He’s all yours to enjoy. Lick, suck, pull, grab, whatever you feel, Molly. You can’t go wrong.”

“Except for using my teeth,” she scolded herself and was concerning herself too much with what she was doing wrong.

“Baby, just enjoy yourself. And if you aren’t, we can try again another time.”

She nodded and put her hand around my girth. Using her fingers, she felt the ridges and grooves. I decided to help her a little by putting my hand over hers and helping her squeeze and move up and down my length. She was soon pumping me on her own, and then she placed her plump lips around me and pulled me in. I could feel her tongue moving back and forth, and I had to place my hands on the tiled wall and close my eyes. “Oh, fuck. Yes, baby. Just like that. Holy shit, you’re a pro.”

My words seemed to spur her on, and she took me deeper and began to pump her hands faster. She began to gag and pulled herself off me, breathing heavily. She looked up at me, and while still keeping eye contact, she took me back in her mouth as far as she could. She let her tongue swirl around, and with her eyes watching my pleasure, I knew I was going to come fast.

“I’m going to come, baby. Lean back on your bottom, and show me those beautiful tits.” Molly followed my directions eagerly, took me out of her mouth with a pop, and sat back with a huge smile on her beautiful face. I took myself in my hands and pumped a few times. Loads of cum shot out all over her chest and some form of caveman in me felt like I was marking her and making her mine. I had never felt that before, but I knew then I was never letting this girl go. I was breathing heavily along with her and pulled her up to stand as I rubbed my cum all over her chest.

“You’re mine, Molly.”

She nodded and grinned at me. “You’re mine, too, Tyler. That was the coolest thing ever watching you lose control. And it was me doing it. It felt so empowering.”

I had to laugh. “Now you know why watching you come is so amazing. That’s how it is supposed to be. We’re meant to be together.”

I pulled the blue loofa off the hook, poured my soap on it, and lathered it up. I hated having to wash my cum off her, but I knew I had to be at the stadium soon. I took my time washing around her boobs and gave extra attention to her pussy. She took the loofa from my hands and washed my chest and abs before taking her time with my cock and balls. I was starting to get hard again but tried to ignore it. I found myself reciting batting averages and on base percentages in my head to distract myself.

“Do you have any shampoo?” she asked as she looked around the small shower.

“No. This is all-in-one, and I use it for body wash and shampoo.”

“Oh my god. Men have it so easy!” Molly looked horrified, then laughed. “If this is going to be a regular occurrence, I’m going to have to bring my own body wash, shampoo, and conditioner over here.”

“Bring whatever you need. You’ll probably need your hair dryer and whatever other girly stuff you use,” I said to her as I turned her around to wash her back. “Or better yet, can I just bring my awesome all-in-one bottle to your place?”

Molly laughed and said, “That sounds like a better idea. I do have a bigger shower, and it’s not as messy.”

“Yeah, Cooper isn’t known for his cleanliness,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

“Speaking of Cooper, you know I love him and all the guys, but at my place, it’s just me. If you’d like to come stay with me whenever you want, I could give you a key. I also have an actual fridge, an oven, and a bigger bed.”

“Molly Green, are you asking me to move in?” I asked and turned her around to look at me.

“I think I am,” she said as she bit her bottom lip. “If you want. Do you think we’re moving too fast?”

I shook my head and kissed her lips. “Not at all. I would love to move in.”

The water began to get cold, so we quickly rinsed off. I wrapped her in my towel, then dried myself off as she got dressed.

“I also have more than one towel,” she added with a laugh.

“Way to rub it in,” I chuckled as I rubbed the towel over my body before putting on a clean pair of boxers. We went to my room, where I finished putting on my jeans and a blue polo shirt.

“Can you wear jeans when you go to the stadium?” Molly asked as she was putting her long red hair into a messy bun on top of her head.

“Yeah, our coach likes us to wear a collared shirt to look nice, but jeans are okay. When you get to Triple-A or the bigs is where you have to wear a suit when you come and go from the stadium.”

I pulled on my sneakers and linked our fingers together to go out to the main room.

“Have fun in there, kids?” Cooper asked from the couch. He was wearing his bright orange collared shirt. He didn’t own any collared shirts before, so he went out and bought the cheapest, most outrageous one he could find. He now has five of the same shirt.

“Yet another reason for you to move in with me,” Molly said with a squeeze of my hand.

“Move in?” Cooper asked. “Holy shit! Things just got real.”

“Um, Dixon, they got real when she got pregnant,” Hayden said with a chuckle.

The door suddenly flew open, and Ivan came charging in. He looked around and zeroed in on my girl. “Molly! No!” He exclaimed and thrust his phone out at her.

“What’s going on?” I asked Ivan while I looked from him to my girl.

“You know this?” he asked me while waving a white envelope in front of my face.

I shook my head, “No, man, I have no idea about anything.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t know,” Molly admitted while she read what was on his phone and began typing a reply. She was typing quickly and seemed to have a lot to say. I looked over at Hayden and Cooper, but they were both as baffled as I was and had no idea what was going on.

“I thought your English was getting better, Cruz,” Cooper said. “You haven’t used that app for a while.”

“Important,” was all Ivan said as he watched Molly typing out her response. She handed his phone back to him. He read it carefully and then slumped into the chair closest to him.

“What is going on?” I asked. “Ivan, are you ok?”

Ivan handed me his phone, so I was able to see their conversations and read the English parts of both.

Spanish ↔ English

**Molly! What is this? This is too much. I do not need or want charity. Take back your money now. I will not accept this.
NO!**

It is not charity. The community came together to help one of its own. The Raptors are a big part of this community now, and my store, the flower shop, ice cream store, book store, and others came together to give you this money. I don't know if your coaches will let you go home or not but if they do I hope this is enough to get you there and back. If they don't let you go back you can send it to Camila for diapers, formula, baby clothes, and whatever else she may need. You are Tyler's best friend so you're my friend too and I couldn't sit and watch you worry about your wife. I hope you can be with her.

I looked over at Molly, who was just watching for my reaction, and I knew at that moment that I was madly in love with her. I didn't want to be the first one to say it because I knew she was already wondering if it was too fast to move in together, and I didn't want to scare her.

“You did this?” I asked, and Ivan handed me the check with a large sum of money.

“Not alone, but I was up all night stress baking. I figured all the stuff I made while trying to think of ways to help could go towards helping your friend. Penelope helped a lot, too.”

Hayden got up, took the phone from me to see what was going on, and then passed the phone to Cooper.

I pulled her close to me and hugged her tightly. Soon, Ivan stood up and hugged her from the other side. Cooper and Hayden joined in on the hug, too.

“Gracias,” Ivan said with tears in his eyes. “No one ever do this for me.”

“You're welcome,” Molly said with tears in her own eyes now.

“Are you going to be able to pitch tonight?” I asked Ivan, and he gave a watery laugh.

“Yes. Maybe then five days off until the next start.”

“That is so awesome,” Hayden said. “I hope Mack lets you go.”

“We can go with you,” Cooper offered. “We can help explain everything.”

Ivan smiled and nodded, “Please come.”

Molly gave Ivan one more big hug. “I can’t wait to hear what he says. I hope after your win tonight, we can all take you to the airport.”



According to psychologists, childhood crushes are a normal part of our social and cognitive development, where children start to understand their emotions and learn how to process love and attraction.

I stretched out in my bed and felt a warm body next to me. I squealed and wrapped my arms around his muscular body. “Tyler!”

“It’s too early,” he mumbled sleepily against my hair. “But, hi, baby. How are you?”

“What time did you get in?” I asked while I leaned over and kissed his shoulder, then his jaw, and finally, his lips.

“We got in about 11:30 last night,” he said in between kisses. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. Oh, how I love waking up next to you.”

He had been on a four day road trip, and even though we talked and texted all the time, I missed him like crazy.

“Cruz sent me some new baby pictures.”

“Oh! Oh! I have to see them! Where is your phone?” I asked and reached over his body to grab his phone off the side table.

“Woman, it’s too early for this!” he said with a laugh and swatted my butt.

Ivan had won the game he pitched five days earlier, and his coaches let him have a week of paternity leave. He had not made it in time to see his daughter's birth, but he was there for Camila, and she was so appreciative of everyone in the community. Valentina Molly Cruz had weighed seven pounds even and was perfect in every way. I still couldn't believe they gave her my name as her middle name, but I felt honored and hadn't expected that.

"Oh my gosh!" I squealed as I saw the newest picture Ivan sent Tyler of him in a chair with a beautiful baby girl sleeping on his chest. He had the biggest smile on his face. "Why didn't you send me this one?"

"He sent them after you went to bed last night." Tyler said and pulled me down on his chest. "Do you have to get up now? Can't you just call in sick and stay in bed with me all day?"

"I wish. I can spend a little longer with you, though," I said and snuggled into him with my head under his chin. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. "Things are even busier now that Lilly is doing more social media posts for us. I'm glad I hired Cash, but I might still have to hire someone else, too."

"A growing business is a great sign of success!" Tyler said. "I'm proud of you, baby."

"Thanks," I said with a smile and kissed his jaw. "I'm actually thinking about promoting Penelope to manager."

"She would be great. Then, you could come to more of my games!"

I had to laugh, "How did the game go yesterday?"

"Like you don't know," he said with a chuckle. "I love that you bought the package to listen to the games on your phone."

"Well, maybe I was busy and missed it."

"Where is my girlfriend, and what did you do with her?" Tyler asked as he tickled my side.

“Your girlfriend can’t believe you threw out four guys trying to steal second base. That has to be some kind of record.”

“Not even close,” he said with a chuckle. “The record is held by a player from the late 1800s who threw out eight in one game.”

“Holy shit. That’s a long time to hold a record! Maybe you’ll break it someday.”

“Not likely since guys don’t try to steal as much, and a lot has changed about the game in over one hundred years,” Tyler said while stroking my back.

“Did you always want to be a catcher?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I always got along with everyone and liked learning everything about baseball. My first Little League coach called me a sponge because I wanted to know about every rule in baseball, what pitch every pitcher was best at throwing, and finally, all about the pitchers and batters on other teams. I couldn’t remember math times tables, but I could remember the pitches certain players couldn’t hit. Those are important when catching because you give the pitcher suggestions on if they should throw a curve or a fastball.”

“That’s really awesome,” I said in awe of this man.

“So what foods are you allergic to, so I’ll know for the future?” Tyler asked as I looked at him with furrowed brows. I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. “You obviously know I’m allergic to nuts, but I’m also allergic to shellfish and insect stings.”

“Wow. That’s a lot,” I said. “I’m lucky and not allergic to anything that I know of.”

“Really?” He looked shocked. “But you have a whole second kitchen for allergy-free baked items. I figured you were allergic to as much, if not more, than me.”

“There was an incident many years ago when I gave a cookie to some boys I had just met, and one of the boys had an allergic reaction. I felt so guilty, but the boy was so sweet and understanding about it. We spent the afternoon just talking, and I’m pretty sure he was my very first crush. It had an

impact on me, and I wanted anyone with allergies to feel comfortable eating at my bakery. My best friend is lactose intolerant, so I make sure to make things she can eat as well, and I work on different recipes so they taste as close to the original item as possible. Meadow always said she hit the roommate lottery.”

“What was this boy’s name? The one you had a crush on?”

“I was too shy to ask, but his brother’s called him ‘T,’” I said, and I squeezed his bicep as a tease. “Are you jealous? It was a long time ago. I was like ten or eleven.”

“T as in Tyler,” he said as a statement, not a question.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said and had to laugh. “I guess I’m really bad at getting guys’ names. I didn’t get your name when we first met.”

“I’m not much better because I called you Red.” He wrapped his strong arm around me and pulled me even closer. “I think you’re going to need to call Penelope and promote her to manager right away.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“More than anything,” I answered honestly.

“We’re taking the day off.”

“I can’t just take the day off,” I replied with a laugh. “And neither can you. You have a game tonight.”

“Call Penelope. She can open without you. I know you’ve done it enough on your own. While you call her, I need to make a few phone calls.”

“What in the world is going on, Ty?”

“Just call Pen, and maybe Cash or that other girl can come in. Once I’m done with my phone call, you’re not going to want to go into work.”

I looked at him confused, but I did trust him.

I pulled out my phone and watched as he went out to the family room to make his own phone call. I wasn't sure who he was calling at 5 in the morning. I at least knew Penelope was awake and getting ready to come to work.

"Hey, I'll be there in a few minutes!" Pen said in lieu of a greeting.

"I have a huge favor to ask," I said.

"What's up?"

"Do you think you could open the bakery on your own? Everything is in the walk-in ready to go."

"Of course!" she said with confidence. "But you've never missed a single day at the bakery. Are you okay?"

I walked out into the family room to hear Tyler's side of the conversation.

Tyler was saying, "I know, man, but you seriously owe me..... Yes, you do! You made my girl cry and think I didn't remember her."

"I'm okay, but something has come up, and I promise I will tell you everything." *Once I knew what was going on*, I thought to myself. Tyler was talking to his brother very early in the morning for a reason.

"I got you, babe," Penelope said.

"You're the best!" I exclaimed and then just blurted out what I had wanted to talk to her later today about. "Do you want to be promoted to manager?"

"What? Are you fucking serious?" Penelope asked, and then I heard another voice before Penelope groaned, "Yes, Peyton. I'll put money in the swear jar."

I had to laugh, "Good morning, P! You're up early, young lady."

"Hi, Molly!" I heard Peyton say into the phone.

"I would love to be manager," Pen said. "But I need to give the diner a two week notice. They were the only ones who

gave me a chance when I was fifteen and pregnant with this brat's brother.”

Peyton laughed, and I could hear her say, “I’m not a brat!”

“Of course!” I said. “I respect that.”

I looked up to see Tyler leaning against the open door and smiling at me.

“Pen, I’m going to let you go. If you need help today, call Cash or Lilly. Good luck, and thank you again. Oh, and go ahead and hire Janel on a part-time basis, if that’s okay with her. I think she’d be a great addition.”

“I’m guessing she agreed to be manager.” Tyler said.

“She was so excited. She’ll be perfect for the job,” I explained to him.

“I just got off the phone with Coach Mack. I explained that something came up and asked if I could miss morning practice as long as I would be at warmups and be ready for the game tonight. He said I’ve worked harder than any other player on the team, so he figured I’d be okay missing one practice.”

“Wow. That’s awesome. Was Carter pissed that you called him so early?”

He gave me an adorable lopsided grin, “I love that you knew I was talking to Carter. Speaking of my brother....” He came over and sat next to me on the bed and took a deep breath. “This first crush of yours ... did his brothers look just like him?”

“Um, I’m not sure. He did have two brothers who also played baseball. I’ll be honest that I only had eyes for him. It’s so silly, but when we locked eyes, I felt butterflies. I remember making fun of some of my boy-crazy classmates for getting butterflies around cute boys, and then I understood what they were talking about.”

“I have one more question for you, Molly,” he said very seriously.

“What’s that?”

“Did this take place at the Little League World Series?”

“How did you know that?” I asked quietly and just stared at him because I felt like I had been struck by lightning.

Tyler pulled out his phone and handed it to me. On the screen of his phone was a picture of three little boys and their mom in front of the ‘Welcome to the Little League World Series’ sign made from hedges.

“My papaw took this picture,” I said in a stunned whisper. I looked into his grass-colored eyes and saw so much passion and love. “You’re T.”

“And you’re my Strawberry Shortcake. You were my first crush, too,” he admitted and leaned down to give me the sweetest kiss. I wrapped my trembling arms around his neck and held on tightly to him. I couldn’t believe it was him. No wonder we had such an instant connection. I loved the feel of our tongues sliding against each other, and I moaned in appreciation. He pulled away from me and leaned his forehead against mine. “I can’t believe I found you. You’re the reason I’ve always been obsessed with redheads.”

I had to laugh, “And I’ve been obsessed with making allergy-free baked goods.” I kissed my way down his jaw and back up to his mouth.



TYLER

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Turns out, falling in love does not take as long as we think. It is proven that you can fall in love in as few as four minutes.

I couldn't believe it was her. No wonder we had such a connection. I couldn't wait to tell Landon and Carter because they had teased me like crazy after the Little League World Series about being the first of us to have a girlfriend. Julia had pointed out that one afternoon together and not getting her name and number meant she wasn't a real girlfriend, but my brothers still liked to tease me. Now, here she was in my arms. I could hear the faint chime of the bakery's bell from here, and I was glad she was able to take the day off. Waking up next to her had been amazing, and I had never slept better. I leaned down and kissed her small baby bump. "Hi, little one," I said. "I'm very glad to hear that you're not giving your mommy morning sickness anymore."

"I really love when you talk to our baby," she said quietly and sat up a little in bed. "And, yes, I'm so glad I don't have morning sickness anymore."

"Hey, little baby, can I tell you a secret? I think I'm falling in love with your mommy."

I felt her heart beat faster, and her breath hitched. "Tyler," she said in almost a whisper. "You love me? Really?" When I nodded and kissed her belly again, she pulled me up to her and kissed my mouth. "Because I love you, too."

“Damn it, did our baby already rat me out?” I asked, and she giggled the most adorable little laugh. She kissed me slowly and wrapped her arms around me. “I’m so glad you love me, Molly, because I really have fallen for you. I love you so much.”

“I love you so much, Tyler. I was scared to tell you. My grandma always told me when it happened, I would know, but I didn’t want to be the only one who felt that way.”

I barked out a laugh. “I was scared to tell you, too, because I thought we were moving too fast.”

“I’m scared, too. I just don’t know how I’m going to afford the ultrasound. The receptionist said it could be anywhere from \$200 to \$800 cash, depending on if they discover anything that needs a second look, and if it’s twins, my doctor said it will probably be on the higher end of the price range.”

I sat down on her couch and pulled her to sit on my lap. “What do you mean having to pay cash for an ultrasound? Doesn’t insurance usually cover that?”

She looked away from my gaze and down at her hands that were now rubbing her belly protectively. “Please don’t think less of me,” she said with a pleading tone.

I quickly wrapped my arms around her tightly. She fit perfectly against me, and I used my left hand to gently lift her chin to look at me.

“I know I fucked up when I got mad about the pregnancy, but I could never think less of you for anything. I love you. I could be traded or called up anytime without warning, and for this relationship to work, we have to be one hundred percent honest with each other. We might get into fights, but if we’re not honest, there is no way this will work.”

She sighed heavily, and her eyes began to get watery. “Well, I’ve been meaning to tell you this for awhile, but I didn’t know how. You know how I said I had to tell you something in the shower...”

“Oh, I remember that shower,” I added with a huge grin and then got serious because of the look in her eyes. “I remember

you saying you needed to talk about something. Then, all that stuff you did for Ivan came up, and I guess that talk never happened. What's going on, love? We can figure this out together."

"I'm an idiot and got small business insurance, but I didn't get personal health insurance." She continued to ramble, and a tear fell down her freckled face. I took my thumb and wiped it away before I stroked her arm to try and comfort her. "I looked at the price of Cobra, but it's insane. I haven't even decided if I want to find out the sex of the baby yet. I know back in the day, they had kids without knowing the sex, and it was okay. But I want the option. Plus, I want to make sure it's healthy and everything. "

"We should get married," I blurted out.

"What?!" She asked, her blue-green eyes huge as she looked at me in shock.

"We might get shit wages in the minors, but they want us healthy and give us amazing insurance. If we got married, you'd be covered under my insurance."

Molly was quiet for a minute, and I realized my mistake. No girl wants a proposal of marriage just because of insurance. My girl was a romantic, and it shocked me how suddenly I realized I did want to marry her. And not because of insurance. She was my little Strawberry Shortcake. She was my Molly.

"I'm fucking this up," I said, lifting Molly in my arms and standing next to the couch. I gently set her down on the ground, and I got down on one knee. I took her hands in mine and looked up to see tears falling down her cheeks.

"I don't want to get married just because of insurance," she admitted with a shake of her head and a loud sniffle.

"I told you, I'm fucking this all up. I know we just said we loved each other for the first time and found out why we are so connected this morning, but I see us heading towards marriage." I rubbed the back of her hands with my thumb as I shook with my own nerves. "Maybe neither of us planned it to happen this soon, but here we are. Molly, we're having a baby

together, so we're going to be connected together forever. I love you and want to marry you. Being on my insurance and not having to worry about that anymore is just a bonus."

She still had tears coming down her cheeks but asked, "You really want to marry me?"

"I'm sorry I don't have a ring or anything," I said with a nod of my head and kissed her hands.

Molly nodded her head. "I would like that. Yes, I'll marry you, Ty." Then she pulled me along with her to our bedroom with a big grin on her face. She let go of my hands and started digging through her top drawer. She pulled out a jewelry box and lay it on the bed where I was now sitting and watching her. In it was a ring with a small diamond. "We can use my mom's engagement ring. She would have loved you, Ty. I don't have many memories of her, but my grandma told me she just wanted me to be with someone who loved me and took care of me. You providing insurance really does take care of all my concerns."

I took the ring out of her hand and got back down on my knee, "Molly – I don't know your middle name -"

"It's Nicole, my mom's middle name, too."

"That's a beautiful name, just like you! Okay, Molly Nicole Green, will you do the honor of marrying me and being my wife?"

"Yes!" she said with a huge grin as I slid the ring on her finger. It was a perfect fit, and I loved that her mom was a part of it. She jumped into my arms. I had to laugh and was thankful for all my time in the gym because I was able to catch her easily as I pulled her in for a deep kiss.

I pulled out my phone to see how getting married in Ohio would work, and Google was very helpful. "Check this out," I pointed out with her still in my arms. "Marriage appointments must be made in person at the Circuit Clerk's office. The couple can obtain a marriage license sixty days before their wedding, but there is no waiting period, so they can get married the same day the license is issued. Marriages are

performed at the courthouse on Mondays and Fridays from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., excluding legal holidays.”

“It’s 9:47 right now. Today is Friday, right?” Molly said, looking at the clock on her bedside table.

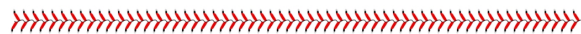
“Yeah, it is. Let’s do this!” I found myself saying.

“Do you want to invite any of the guys or anything? I’d want to include Penelope, but she’s downstairs running the shop. Oh, man. Meadow should be here. And your brothers, sister, and parents.” I could tell she was starting to get nervous since she was rambling.

“All I need is you,” I said as I pulled on my jeans and gave her a wink. “We can have a big wedding in the off-season once the baby is here and include all our family and friends.”

“The baby can be part of the ceremony!” Molly cried with a far off look in her eyes as she rubbed her stomach.

“Definitely.” I said with a huge grin, “Now, get dressed, babe. Let’s go get married!”



Fifty-three minutes later, we stood hand-in-hand as we waited on the judge. We had been lucky, and only one other couple was there to get married before us. I held the marriage certificate in my hand, and Molly fiddled with the small, white gold bands we purchased at the jewelry shop on our way to the courthouse. They were basically costume jewelry, but I knew I would save money to buy her a proper wedding band that she deserved.

Molly couldn’t find a white dress in her closet, so she was wearing the next best thing, my home jersey in white with blue accents. It looked like a dress on her and hung down to her knees. She also wore white leggings underneath and blue flip flops. Her hair was in what she described as an Elsa braid, all on one side hanging over her shoulder. She couldn’t have looked more perfect to me. I stood in my jeans and also wore my jersey, but I chose to wear the dark blue jersey with white

accents. I am sure we looked like cheesy baseball fans, but it was perfect for us.

The doors opened, and the couple in front of us came out. He was in a nice suit and even had on a top hat, and she was wearing a very frilly wedding dress with a lace veil. They had several witnesses with them, including a woman openly bawling.

“Congrats.” Molly and I both told them, and they nodded their thanks.

“Mr. Tyler Elliott Stone and Ms. Molly Nicole Green?” a clerk asked.

“That’s us,” Molly said with a smile and squeezed my hand.

“Right this way.”

The judge took our certificate and asked if we wanted standard vows, or if we had written our own. We chose to do the standard vows. I held her hand and couldn’t look away from her eyes as we went through the very simple ceremony.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride,” the judge announced and then turned to me. “My best marriage advice is that May seventh will be a day you don’t ever want to forget, son.”

I leaned down, Molly stood up on her tiptoes, and I kissed my wife. I couldn’t believe I had a wife. “I love you, Mrs. Stone.” I dropped down on my knees and kissed her belly, “And I love you, Baby Stone.”

“We love you!” Molly said and pulled me back up for another kiss. “I can’t believe I’m Mrs. Stone.”

“Here is your paperwork that you will need to mail if you plan on changing your name for the DMV, social security card, insurance.” The clerk said as she handed us a manilla envelope. She then handed us a small white envelope that said “Newlyweds” on it. Inside were several coupons for local places such as a massage, getting nails done, family pictures, a hotel room, and for a romantic dinner.

“Could you take our picture?” Molly asked the clerk.

The clerk smiled and took Molly's phone and snapped several pictures. We did different classic wedding poses and had huge grins on our faces. "I have to say I'm glad you guys chose to wear jerseys with your wedding date on them."

"Oh my gosh! I didn't even realize that!" Molly shouted with a laugh as she rubbed her hand on the number seven on my chest. "Today really was perfect!"

"And to put your last name on them, too. So creative." The clerk said as she took a few more pictures of our backs as we held hands. The clerk didn't have to know that they were my game-worn jerseys.

"I am so happy I'm your wife," Molly said as she leaned her head on my shoulder.

"I really am happy it's you, too," I leaned my head over on top of her head and said. "I'm the luckiest man to be your husband!"

As we walked hand-in-hand out of the courthouse, I asked her, "So, are we going to tell people or keep this a secret?"

Molly bit her bottom lip and shrugged, "I don't know. I think Pen and Meadow will be pissed that they weren't invited."

"Same for the guys and my brothers. And oh my gosh, Mom will be devastated," I said. "Maybe we better keep it a secret."

Molly nodded, "How about we tell people we got engaged?"

"I like that idea. It would also mean you could still wear your mom's ring," I said with a kiss. "I'm going to have to tell HR and probably my coaches, but I know they will keep things quiet."



The biggest trending video in the 2022 Major League Baseball season doesn't feature a home run, an amazing pitch or a great defensive play. It features a player getting hit in the butt by a pitch.

The Three Musketeers Group Chat

Me: Hey besties! I have something to ask you.

Meadow: Oooohhh I love the group chat name!!! What's up, Molls? You know we've got your back!

Pen: Molly - I opened the bakery alone today & became your manager. You know I'd do anything for ya.

Meadow: Shut up!?! Manager! You go, Pen!!! Great decision, Molls!

Pen: Thx!!! I'm so excited. I gave my other job a two wk notice. They were sad to see me go but happy for me too. I even get to hire people! I'm so honored, Molly!

Me: You really are gonna be the best manager ever!

Meadow: So, what happened today where you had to have Pen open the store alone?

Me: Well, that goes w/ what I want to ask you both.....

Pen: What is it?

Me: I would love to ask you in person but since Meadow is far away, I figured this was the best way.

Meadow: Just ask us, Molls! I have a photoshoot in 10. You're killing me!

Me: Ok, ok sorry. So Ty and I spent the whole day together. It was the best day ever. He's so amazing.

Pen: I worked my ass off so you could get laid?! And for you to rub it in?

Meadow: P! Don't distract her! What does spending the day with your sexy man have to do with asking us something???

Me: Well... Would you guys be my bridesmaids?

Meadow: OMG!!! YES!!! But how the hell are you engaged before me?! Ahhhhh! This is so exciting!!!

Pen: Holy Shit! I just got to Campbell Field. Tell me you're here already.

Me: I'm here already. 😊 Watching batting practice.

Meadow: One of you better send me a pic of the ring!

Me: We'll send you a pic. He used my mom's ring! ☐

“OH MY GOD!” Penelope screamed, causing several fans and even a few players, including Tyler, to look over at us. The excitement of him being my secret husband made my face turn red and my heart beat faster. He began walking over to us as Penelope got to our seats. Penelope looked at Tyler and pointed at him. “You’re a smart man for locking her down. You better be good to her!”

Tyler laughed from the field and gave me a panty melting smile that included his dimples. “I’m a lucky man, that is for sure. Love you, Mol.”

“Love you, Ty,” I shouted and then blew him a kiss.

“You proposed?” Cooper asked, standing next to Tyler. “Holy shit, man. Why didn’t you say anything?” Tyler said something to him that I couldn’t hear, but Cooper had a huge grin on his face. “Do I get to be your best man?”

“Dude, if anyone on the team will be his best man, it would be Cruz,” one of the pitchers said. “Congrats, Stone.”

“Thanks,” I heard Tyler say. “I do have two brothers, so they will probably be my best men.”

“Do you have any ideas about dresses or anything yet?” Penelope asked.

“We haven’t even talked about when or anything. It all just happened this morning.” I was glad that we were keeping it a secret that we were already married. Penelope and the guys would lose their shit if they knew they were down the road when we got married and weren’t included.

“See you after the game, fiancée,” Tyler said with a wink as he walked over to take batting practice.

“Good luck, Hub-honey!” I said, almost slipping and calling him hubby.

While watching the game, I Facetimed Meadow so she could see the ring, and then she and Pen began planning my wedding together. I just sat back as they talked with a huge smile on my face.

Soon, Tyler came up to bat, and I stood up to cheer him on. He had a good eye and didn’t swing at a few of the balls, but he did take a big swing that would probably have gone out of the park, if he had made contact. The count went full, and Tyler swung at the next pitch and fouled it off. He then fouled off another that the catcher almost caught, but it went into the stands, not too far away from where we were sitting.

“Great job staying alive, Ty!” I called out.

“What do you mean by staying alive?” Penelope asked. She didn’t know much about baseball, and I loved that she still came to games with me.

“If he fouls it off, it doesn’t count as a strike, so he has another chance to hit the ball, hence staying alive,” I explained.

“Oh, okay,” Pen nodded.

The next pitch hit Tyler right in the ass. He flinched, so I could tell it hurt, but he threw his bat and jogged to first base.

“You’re lucky, pitcher, that my man has buns of steel!” I called out.

Some fans around us had a good laugh at that.

“So, because he got hit, he gets to go to first base?”

“Yeah, exactly,” I said with a grin. “Look at you – learning all about baseball.”

“Why is Cooper sitting out there and not with the rest of the players?” Pen asked.

I looked and sure enough, Cooper was sitting in the bullpen. Ty hadn’t said anything, but my guess was they had moved Cooper to be a relief pitcher instead of a starter.

“Maybe he’ll do better in relief?” I asked out loud, mostly to myself.

“What is relief?” Penelope asked.

“When the starting pitcher has pitched too many pitches, a relief pitcher goes in and takes over for him.” I explained.

In the ninth inning, we were winning 4-2, but it was still too close of a game. Cooper came out of the bullpen, looking confident and strong. “Oh! They are trying him out as a closer! This could be great for him.”

Penelope didn’t ask what being a closer meant, waved me off to be quiet, and watched Cooper pitch. I had to grin at how serious my friend was when she watched this certain pitcher.

Cooper was able to strike out the side and closed out the game. He had his first save, and I was very proud of him. “Good job, Coop!” I yelled loudly. I turned to my friend and coworker. “I think you should ask him to celebrate after the game.”

“You think I should?” Penelope asked. “My sister is watching my kids tonight and said to stay out as late as I wanted. Are you going to come?”

“Oh, no, I have my own celebration.” I said and could feel my face heating up.

“Good for you,” Pen said. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll land a baseball boyfriend, too.”

“Good luck to you!”



I paced our bedroom and looked at my phone again. I reread the text Tyler had sent thirty-four minutes ago.

Tyler: I’ll be home as soon as I can. Gotta see the trainers 1st. Can’t wait to see you, baby! I love you!

There was a knock on the door, and I knew he had a key and had been able to get in the building and up the stairs, so I wasn’t sure why he didn’t just come inside. I opened the door to find my husband holding a bouquet of daisies.

“I just realized we didn’t have flowers at the wedding. I was walking in the park, saw these daisies, and they made me think of you. I know they aren’t from Lilly’s Pad or anything, but...”

“I love them!” I interrupted him, stood up on my tiptoes, wrapped my arms around his neck, and leaned in for a kiss. “Thank you.”

I took his hand and led him into the kitchen to look for a Mason jar. I began filling it with water and asked if he wanted to sit down.

“That would be a no. It hurts my ass to sit down.”

“Oh my gosh. I didn’t even think. Is there anything I can do to help you?” I asked as I placed the hand-picked daisies in the water. I brought the white petals up to my nose, inhaled deeply, and smiled.

“Well, do you have any Epsom salt? I iced it after the game, and the trainer thought it would be okay but suggested an Epsom bath to ease the pain and inflammation.”

“I actually still have some from the bag you got me since I couldn’t use a bath bomb.”

“I forgot about that!” Tyler said with a grin. “Would you come help me wash my back?”

“Oh, I would love to help you,” I said and placed the daisies on the middle of the island, taking Tyler’s hand.

We walked together into the bathroom, and I turned on the water for him. “How do you want the temperature?”

“My trainer said to make it as hot as possible to keep the swelling down,” Tyler said as I nodded and turned on the hot water with a little of the cold. I put my hand under until I got it as hot as I could stand it. “Oh! I forgot the bourbon in the kitchen. He also said there’s an old remedy his grandpa told him about. Rubbing whiskey into the bruise helps it heal faster. I told him I would much rather my girl rub it in than him.”

I told him I would get the bourbon, and when I came back to the room, Tyler was already shirtless. I walked over and stroked his chest, loving the feel of his muscles under my palm. He didn’t have an ounce of fat on him and had a glorious eight pack. I brought my hands lower and put my fingers in the waistband of his shorts. I began pulling down his shorts and boxers all at once. He stepped out of them, and I looked up to see him gloriously naked while I was still fully clothed.

“Baby, you’re wearing way too much,” he complained as he pulled me up and began unbuttoning his jersey that I was still wearing.

“Be careful. You’re taking off my wedding dress,” I said with a giggle. “I may never wear this one again.”

“It is very special,” he agreed as he groaned when he realized I had nothing underneath.

“Tell me you didn’t go to my game like this?”

“Oh, no. I can’t go braless anymore. Look how big the girls are getting!” I pointed out. “I took my bra off as soon as I got

home. I'm going to need to get a bigger bra soon and maternity pants, too."

Tyler had to laugh when he saw that a rubber band between the eyelet of my jeans was secured to the button to hold the edges together. "Why didn't you just wear those leggings to the game that you had on earlier?"

I shrugged, "I didn't want to get them dirty."

Tyler didn't say anything else and instead leaned down, took the rubber band off the button, and watched as my jeans fell in a pool to the floor.

"Damn, I was hoping you wouldn't be wearing underwear either," he said as he pulled my panties down and let them join the pile on the floor.

He turned off the water before the tub overflowed and began to put his foot in the water. "Damn, Molly, are you cooking lobsters?"

"You said it was as hot as you could stand it," I said. "And you know what Phoebe from *Friends* says about lobsters."

"Joey was the best on *Friends*. Phoebe was always Julia's favorite character. I can't remember what she said about lobsters."

"She said that it's a known fact that lobsters fall in love and mate for life."

Tyler looked down at me with a grin and climbed in the hot water, "Then, I'll be your lobster."

"Hold on!" I said and ran into the closet in the bedroom. "Crap! I can't reach it."

Soon, there were strong hands wrapped around my waist. "What do you need me to get?" he asked with a chuckle.

"I have a travel neck pillow up there. I figured you might be able to sit on it in the bathtub, so your ass would be more comfortable."

"I like the way you think," he said and easily reached up and grabbed the pink and purple travel pillow.



TYLER

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The director of The Sandlot really wanted the friendship between Scotty Smalls and Benny Rodriguez to seem genuine, so he made the two actors start rehearsing together for a few weeks before the other kids even arrived on set.

We headed back into the bathroom, and I let her lead the way, so I could watch the sway of her hips and the roundness of her amazing ass. She might be getting a small belly, but her ass was still plump and perfect. I had to reach over and slide my hands over her ass as I climbed into the bathtub. She set the pillow on the bottom of the tub, and I sat myself on the pillow. I reached out my arm and helped my girl into the tub.

“Oh, it is warmer than I thought,” she exclaimed as she slowly sank into the water and sat between my spread legs. When she lay her back against my front and lay her head against my shoulder, I had one thought: home.

“Are you comfortable, my lobster? I really am glad we made the decision this morning to get married,” I said as I kissed her shoulder blade.

“Was that really only this morning?” Molly asked with a contented sigh. “But this does feel right.”

“You know one thing that would help my ass feel better?” I asked with one eyebrow arching.

“Let me guess? Wedding night sex?”

I had to laugh; she knew me so well. “I was actually thinking more along the lines of wedding night making love.”

“Oh, yeah?” She turned around in my arms so we were chest to chest. “And what will make it ‘making love’ and not just ‘sex’?” She put up her fingers in the quotation gesture and then laid her hands down and wrapped them around my neck.

I grinned down at her. “Well, first, we’ll lather up and get nice and clean. I will probably make you orgasm at least once here in the tub with my fingers before laying you out on our bed and kissing and loving every single inch of you. Then, I will glide into you with our eyes connected and slowly show you how much I need you, want you, and love you.”

Molly’s eyes were half-hooded with passion as she nodded eagerly. “Yes, please. I want all of that.” She moaned as my fingers found her pussy, and even in the water, I could tell she was wet for me already. “Oh, yeah. Oh, Tyler. Oh. Oh. I. Oh. I love you. Yes. Right there!”

I had to smirk at the sounds of her moans that were just for me. I loved this woman with everything I was, and I would show her just how much tonight.

It didn’t take long for her orgasm to cause her body to vibrate above me, and soon, her head was laying on my chest as she came back down from the high I had just given her. I reached for the loofa and her lavender soap and began washing her back, arms, and taking extra time around her plump ass.

“Hmmm. I could get used to this,” she said as she kissed my jaw.

“You deserve to be pampered,” I said as I turned her gently around and began massaging the body wash into her breasts and over her growing stomach. She continued to kiss down my neck as I washed her. She then sat up, took the loofa and washed my neck and chest, and then took her time washing my abdomen and my cock.

“Careful,” I said without any bite. “I don’t want to come until I’m inside you.”

“Well, then, let’s dry off and get to bed,” Molly said with an anxious grin.

“Baby, we are going to take it slow tonight.” My cock twitched at her pout. I couldn’t wait to be inside her, either. “We only get one wedding night.”

Molly nodded and then leaned up and kissed my lips. “We’ll see how slow you can go once we get started. When I wrap my legs around you and you feel my heat, you won’t be able to go slow, love.”

“Challenge accepted,” I stated, smiling widely, causing my dimples to pop in my cheeks.

One thing known about baseball catchers was the fact that we could be patient and had to know how to anticipate how the ball was going to be thrown. I could anticipate all my girl’s needs and would soon have her melting in my arms.

We got out of the tub together, and I wrapped her in the towel from the rack. I grabbed another towel and quickly dried myself off. Before she was even dry, I grabbed her in my arms and carried her bridal style to the bed. She squealed and giggled as I dropped her on the bed, and I had to laugh as she bounced a little.

The towel came undone from her body, and I began to kiss every inch of her, as promised. I started at her toes and worked my way up her legs, kissing her hips and up her ribcage, making sure to give her tattoos some extra attention. I found myself taking extra time feasting on her right breast before continuing up her neck, lips, cheek, eyelids, and her forehead. Then, I began the trek backwards down the left side of her body and had her squirming. “You’re ridiculous,” she panted. “Kiss me down the middle. Please, Ty.”

“Oh, I like that begging, baby. The middle, you say?” I looked into her eyes and gave her a cocky grin. I kissed her in the center of her forehead and down her nose. I lingered on her lips, and my tongue delved in for a duel with her tongue for a bit. Then, I kissed the tip of her chin and in between her beautiful breasts, causing her to giggle. I kissed down her stomach and even stuck my tongue inside her navel. She

laughed and swatted at my head and pushed me downwards. I chuckled and kissed down towards her mound by veering to the side and kissing around it.

“Tyler!” she moaned, and I could barely make out what she said next. I’m pretty sure it was, “I said the middle.”

I chuckled again and kissed on the other side of her inner thigh as she tried to move her center to my mouth. I brought my lips to the juncture of her legs and found her slick and wet. I lapped at her folds with my tongue and loved hearing her little whimpers as I put my arm over her stomach to limit the amount of thrashing she was doing. My girl, I mean my wife, was good and ready for me. I enjoyed the taste of her on my tongue and tried not to grin when I bit around her clit and she screamed something which may have been my name.

I pulled myself up and over her and began to feast on her breasts again, reveling in how much bigger they already were. I brought my hand back down to her center and entered her with one finger. I soon added a second finger and loved the feeling of her walls tightening around my fingers. My cock twitched and couldn’t wait to feel the same feeling.

“I need you, Ty,” Molly moaned, and I raised my head to look into her eyes. They were half-hooded and filled with passion. “I need you and only you.”

I pushed myself up and kissed her lips. “You have me.”

I brought my tip to her entrance and saw that her head was thrown back and her eyes were closed. “Molly. Look at me, baby.”

She brought her head up and looked at me with a lazy smile on her face, “I love you, Ty.”

I entered her slowly and brought my hands up to stroke her cheek as I filled her. “I love you so much.”

“You’re mine forever,” she declared as she reached her hands up and wrapped them around my neck.

“For-Ev-Er!” I said with a laugh, imitating Squints from *The Sandlot*.

“Oh my god! You’re crazy!” Molly cried with a laugh. “We’re in the middle of making love, and you’re quoting a kids’ baseball movie.”

“It’s my favorite movie,” I explained as I pulled out of her, then eased myself back in. I started off slowly and kept eye contact with my wife the whole time as I filled her completely and then pulled out again and again.

“Harder, Ty,” she screamed as she leaned up and nipped at my jaw.

“My pleasure.” I thrust in hard and deep.

“Oh, yes!” she cried out and moved her arms from my neck to reach around my back. She didn’t have long nails, but I felt them as she scratched and held on. She met me halfway with every thrust and moved her body to try and get me as deep as she could. I loved that she didn’t just lay there.

“Fuck, yeah!” I cried as I entered her hard and fast before punctuating every thrust with a single word. “I. Love. Being. Your. Husband. You. Were. Made. For. Me.”

“I’m close, Ty. Oh my gosh!” she cried out.

“Come, baby. Come on your husband’s cock.” I felt her tighten around me, and then I felt her soak my cock and balls. She lay back against the bed, spent. “Oh, no, you don’t. No sleeping yet,” I said as I pulled out of her and turned her over onto her stomach. “Put that perfect ass up as high as you can.” She did what I asked, and I rewarded her with a resounding slap that caused her ass to jiggle.

“Oh, Ty!” she cried out in pain and pleasure.

I entered her again and wrapped her beautiful red hair around my right fist. With my left hand, I held onto her chest and set a grueling pace. I could feel her close to coming again and grinned to myself. That would be four orgasms so far in one night.

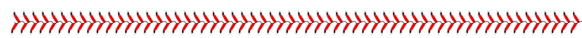
“I. Need,” Molly began to say, and I took my hand from around her breasts and brought it down to where our bodies met and rubbed her clit. “Yes. That,” she cried. “Yes.” She then let out a scream as her body began to shake harder than it

ever had before. I let myself go and released into her. I thrust a few more times and then pulled out and found myself falling next to her.

“I can’t move,” Molly said breathlessly. “I have no bones.”

“No need to move,” I replied as I curled around her small body. “I’ve got you. Go to sleep, baby. I love you, wife.” .

“Love you, husband,” she said softly, and then all I heard were her quiet snores. I had to chuckle, and before I knew it, I was fast asleep, too.



“I fucking told you,” Keegan Tucker said as he sat on the back of the dugout seats after pitching in the fourth inning and took a deep breath. “I told you I’m the best.”

I just nodded and got out the tablet to familiarize myself with the next few batters. I had studied this team but always liked to double-check for updated stats. Tucker was doing an awesome job pitching today, and I wanted to keep it going. He was cocky, and I didn’t usually catch for him because of that. Coach Mack asked me to work with him today.

“How ya feeling?” Hayden asked me as he grabbed his bat, getting ready to go on deck.

“Fine. Why?” I asked while still looking at the tablet. “Watch this pitcher’s fastball. Wait for the slider.”

“Got it, bro,” Hayden said but never answered why he asked how I was. I let it go and continued to look at the next few batters Tucker and I would face together.

“Think he’ll go the distance?” Ian asked me as he looked at the tablet in my hand.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Do you think Tucker can finish out the game?”

“What’s his count?” I asked about the number of pitches he had thrown.

“Only 47.”

“And in the fourth?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s kicking ass.”

I nodded but shrugged off what he was saying. “The next batter usually hits the ball hard to the left, so make sure to be ready.”

Ian nodded and grabbed his glove as the bottom of the inning ended.

I kept my eye on the tablet between innings, and everyone seemed to keep away from Tucker and me. He was uncharacteristically quiet and in the zone after the sixth inning.

Coach Snyder came over and sat next to me. “Do you think he can go longer?”

I loved that the pitching coach was asking my opinion on his pitcher.

“Yes,” I said with confidence.

Snyder nodded and didn’t say anything else but gave Coach McAlister a nod.

“Stone, you’re up,” Mack said a few minutes later.

I nodded and grabbed my helmet.

“You’ve got bases loaded. We need a run, son.”

I nodded and was surprised to find the bases were loaded. I hadn’t been paying attention to the score at all and looked up to see it was still 0-0. I looked over at the hits and wiped my eyes. “Is that for real?”

“We’re not talking about it,” Coach Snyder commented.

I nodded and went up to bat. I hadn’t looked at the scoreboard or in the stands during the whole game until now, but I found myself looking up to where I knew Molly was sitting, and she gave me the brightest smile. “You’ve got this!” she called out. “Just a single, Ty. You don’t need to swing for

the fences.” I loved how much she knew about baseball, and I tipped my helmet to her.

We had only been married for ten days, but I felt like it was the best ten days of my life. When Aubree had wanted me to propose to her right out of high school, I always got a sick feeling in my stomach and hated the thought of being tied down. With Molly, it just felt right. When I was at away games, I missed lying next to her in bed, but we fell asleep while Facetiming together. I knew we could make this work.

I took a few practice swings and listened to the crowd groan when Baxter struck out swinging.

I walked up, and there was a mound visit. I sighed, stepped back, and gave Hayden, who was on third base, a nod. I watched as they changed pitchers, and I had a feeling I knew who they would bring in. The right-handed, hard-throwing pitcher came to the mound from the bullpen and took several warm-up pitches. I knew he relied heavily on his fastball and could throw a decent curveball. I would wait for my fastball. He threw a curve first to see if I would chase it, but I watched the ball pass by. He then threw the fastball right down the middle. I swung but a little too late. Fuck! I wasn't going to get that pitch again. Soon, the count was full, and I knew he would throw that fastball again. I watched the ball, swung the bat, and heard the beautiful sound of the wooden bat making contact with the leather of the baseball. I began to run to first base as I watched the ball soar to the outfield. For a minute, I thought it might go over the fence, but it bounced and went into the stands for a ground rule double. We were now up 2-0. I stood on second base and pointed at Molly. Then, I looked over in the dugout where all our team was cheering and saw Tucker raise his fist to me in appreciation.

During the eighth inning, Tucker did allow one base on balls, but he got the remaining batter to pop up to Swanson at shortstop. Everyone gave Tucker space in the dugout, and I continued to check stats on the tablet and monitor how I felt he was pitching. He was definitely in the zone, and before I knew it, he struck out the last batter with a changeup. I was on my

feet running out to him as soon as the pitch was called a strike.

“A no-hitter!” I cried and slapped him on the back. “Fucking awesome, man!”

“What?” Tucker asked as he looked up at the scoreboard in disbelief. “No way!”

“You kicked ass,” Baxter said and gave him a huge hug. “I didn’t realize it was a perfect game until the sixth.”

“That one fucking walk,” Tucker said with a shake of his head.

“Fuck that. You still got a no-hitter!” Hayden said.

The crowd was on their feet chanting Tucker’s name, and I was so happy for him.

Back in the locker room, I quickly showered and was ready to hug my girl and get back home. I was putting my shower stuff back in my locker when Coach McAlister came out of his office. “Tucker. Stone. I need to see you both.”

I looked over at Keegan and shrugged as we both walked into the office.

“Go ahead and close the door,” Coach Mack said, so I shut the door and took the seat next to Tucker.

“Gentleman, I just got off the phone with Steve Henderson. Do you know who that is?”

I looked at Tucker, and we both shook our heads.

“He’s the manager of the Kentucky Lightning out of Bristol, Kentucky.”

“They are Double-A, right?” I asked.

Mack nodded. “Yes. The Cyclones’ catcher got injured. They had to pull the catcher from Triple-A, so Reynolds from Double-A was called up. They also called up one of their relief pitchers, so they had a few spots open. He heard about the game tonight and wants both of you to join them on their road trip. You’ll be skipping right over High-A. I’m proud of you both. You have two hours to pack up to be on the next

available bus. You'll meet up with them in southern Kentucky to play the Plainville Rams. Tomorrow is a day game, which is why you have to leave right away. Make sure to get plenty of sleep on the bus." He got up and patted us both on the shoulders. "I will miss you both, but congrats, gentleman. You're moving up to Double-A."



Because players are not often moved back & forth from their major league parent club as often as it happens in Triple-A, the rosters of Double-A teams tend to be more stable. That helps create a better relationship between the team & its fans.

I walked up to the players entrance to wait on my man. I still couldn't believe I had witnessed a no-hitter, and Tyler had scored the only two RBI's in the game. I really liked this team. A few cleat chasers were standing around the entrance along with some friends and family members. I recognized Adam McAlister's wife, Ashleigh, and waved hello to her. She was holding their young sleeping son, Nico, in her arms. I had to smile, thinking that would be me before I knew it.

The doors soon opened, and a bunch of the guys came out. I gave Hayden and Ivan big hugs and asked where Tyler was.

"Mack called him into the office along with Tucker. It was a closed-door meeting, so who knows what that means," Cooper explained as he came over and lifted me up for a big hug. "Hi, shorty."

The doors opened again, and Tyler and Keegan came out together. I would be embarrassed later, but I found myself squealing, and I was so excited to see him that I jumped into his arms.

"Well, hello beautiful," Tyler chuckled as his lips found mine, and he pulled me even closer and wrapped his arms

around my bottom.

“Damn, man, get a room,” Cooper yelled from beside us.

I pulled away from him just a little and grinned. “I could get used to this.”

“About that...” Tyler said, and I saw a hint of worry in his eyes.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “You had such an awesome game!” I had no idea what could cause that look in his eyes.

“Hey, fellas!” Another male voice entered our little group. It was his head coach, McAlister. “Did Stone and Tucker tell you the good news?”

“I was just about to, sir,” Tyler said as he gently put me down on my feet.

“What’s goin’ on?” Hayden asked.

“These two have been called up to Double-A!” his coach announced proudly.

I felt something in my chest when I looked into my husband’s eyes. There were a lot of feelings going on inside me. I could tell he was watching my face closely to see my reaction. I felt a tear run down my cheek, but I jumped into his arms again. “Oh, Tyler! I’m so freaking proud of you!”

All his teammates surrounded us now, too, giving him hugs and congratulations.

“When do you guys leave?” Cooper asked. “We definitely have to celebrate this, bruh!”

“They leave in just a few hours, Dixon,” their coach said with a very serious voice.

“A few hours?” I said, and the pride in my chest seemed to deflate. I had just found him, and he was leaving already? Tyler saw the change in my demeanor and pulled me close.

“One day at a time, baby. We can do this,” Tyler whispered in my ear, so only I could hear him.

I nodded and looked up at him, unable to hide the tears falling down from my eyes. “I really am so freaking proud of you. I’m just going to miss you so much.”

“So, if I said I’d walk away from all of this to just be with you...”

“Tyler Stone, don’t even think about that! This is your dream, and you’ve worked so hard for this. Like you said - we’ll take it one day at a time.”

Tyler leaned down and kissed the top of my head. “You are so perfect for me.”

“Well, looks like we have some packing to do.”

Two hours later, we arrived at the bus station. I watched as Ty gave his friends and teammates bro hugs. They were each giving him congratulations and advice. When he got to Ivan last, there was no guy type of hug for him. They wrapped each other in a tight hug, and you could just see the bond the two of them had.

He then turned and looked at me. He wasn’t even ashamed of the tears pooling in his green eyes as he walked over to me. I found myself beginning to cry again at the sight of his tears. “You’re going to get sick of how much I text you all the time.” He wrapped his arms tightly around me.

I buried my face in his chest, and I could feel his shirt getting wet with my tears. “I’m trying to be strong, Ty. I’m so fucking proud of you, but I’m also going to miss you so much it hurts. I just love you so much.”

He kissed the top of my head and tightened his hold on me. “I love you so much. I’m going to miss you so much, too. You better send me a picture everyday of that belly. I want to see our baby grow, and I want to hear every detail.”

I nodded and pulled slightly away from him as he put his hands on my slightly rounded stomach. “Don’t worry about us. You play your heart out and enjoy the game. Keep doing your best. One day at a time, right?”

“One day at a time,” he agreed and pulled me into a deep kiss.

“Son, we’ve gotta go,” the bus driver called.

“I have to go,” he said and gave me one more kiss. “You be safe. I’ll text you.” He bent down and kissed my stomach and then grabbed his bags that were sitting on the ground next to me.

“We’ll take good care of her,” Hayden called out as he walked over to us.

“Yeah, we’ll make sure no other guy even thinks about looking at her,” Cooper said with a very serious tone.

Tyler and I both laughed. “Thanks, guys.”

“Let’s go, man,” Tucker said next to the bus door. I guess he had arrived while we were saying our own goodbyes. I gave him a wave and wished him good luck.

“I love you!” Tyler exclaimed one last time and waved to his former teammates.

“Don’t come back,” Cooper called out with a chuckle. “We love you but get your ass to the Cyclones. Save me a good locker.”

Tyler shook his head and nodded as he climbed up the bus steps. As I watched him get to a window seat and look back at me, I felt several of his teammates surround me. Hayden pulled me in for a tight hug, and I didn’t even bother to try and wipe the tears as they flowed down my cheeks. I was glad to be part of their baseball team family.

Tyler opened his window and waved. The bus driver started the bus and began to drive away. “Love you, Strawberry Shortcake!”

Before the bus even disappeared around the bend, my phone dinged with a text message. And yes, this is how Tyler is now saved in my phone.

My Everything: Miss you already ♥

A few of the guys walked me back home, which was really sweet of them. Cooper even offered to spend the night and

keep me company. Hayden hit him on the back of his head. Cooper explained he loved me like a little sister and had planned to sleep on the couch. I told him I would be okay but thanked him for the offer. As soon as I locked my door, my phone rang.

“You doin’ okay?” Tyler’s deep voice asked over the phone.

“Honestly?” I asked.

“Always.”

“I’ve been better. It’s going to be hard to sleep without you next to me.”

“I know, baby. I just got off the phone with my parents.”

“Really? How did that go?”

“Well, Dad was surly at first, and when I said I was on a bus, he thought I was coming home and said I’d have to find a new job. When I told them why I was on the bus, Mom cried happy tears, and Dad grumbled about them not giving me much notice.”

“It does suck, but I’m glad your mom is proud of you.”

“I’m glad, too. Then, I talked to Carter, and he said in a few weeks my new team will be playing the Nashville Hornets. That’s the team we grew up watching and cheering for.”

“Really? That’s awesome.”

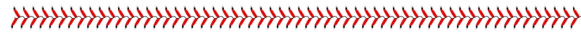
“Do you want to come?”

“To Nashville?” I asked, already opening the calendar app on my phone. “When is it?”

“The first Tuesday in June,” he said. “I know it’s asking a lot for you to drive down there, or maybe you could take a bus, but do you think Penelope could watch the bakery?”

“Tyler, it’s not asking too much at all. I would love to come! The reason I promoted Pen was so she could watch the bakery for times like this. I will be there in twenty-seven days.”

Tyler sighed, “It doesn’t seem like that many days, but it also seems like a lot at the same time.”



The first few days of him being gone were the hardest. We talked as much as we could on the phone and texted all the time. Penelope would take a picture of my growing belly every Tuesday morning. She called them “The Bun in the Oven” pics and would make some sort of bread to correlate with the size the baby was that week. I knew she was trying hard to make me laugh and be happy since I missed Tyler like crazy. We both knew going into this relationship that the distance was a very high probability, but it didn’t make it any easier.

Tyler told me about how the guys on his new team were nice enough, but he doubted he’d ever find the closeness that he found with the guys on the Raptors. Hunter Montgomery was the shortstop for the Lightning and had been a first round draft pick the year before out of college. He and Tyler were about the same age, and Tyler said he was the only one who he really hung out with. Tyler shared a room with Tucker, but more often than not, Tucker had a girl in their room, so Ty spent a lot of evenings on Hunter’s couch.

I was busy stocking the pantry shelves from my trip to Costco when I got a Facetime call. I put down the bag of sugar on the shelf and quickly answered the call. “Hi, babe!”

“Hey, gorgeous!” Ty’s face came up on my cell phone screen, and I was glad I still got those butterflies of excitement every time I talked to him.

“Look at all that facial hair!” I exclaimed. He didn’t quite have a beard yet, but it was definitely more than his normal scruff.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“We haven’t lost a game since he stopped shaving,” another male voice said from behind him. “Please, don’t make him shave.”

He was very attractive, with caramel-colored skin and dark blue eyes under thick, dark eyebrows and a sharp clean-shaven

jaw. He had a dimple popping out on the right side of his smile. I was a sucker for dimples.

“I see you don’t have any facial hair,” I said with a grin and had to tease him. “But my man can’t shave?”

He just shrugged. “My mama taught me to shave everyday. But Stone can’t.”

I just laughed, “Don’t worry. I like facial hair.” I put the phone on one of the shelves so I could continue to put the groceries away and talk to them. “I’m Molly, by the way. I’m guessing you’re Hunter.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he drawled with a wide grin showing straight, white teeth. “You’re just as adorable as Stone described you.”

“Adorable? Adorable is for kittens,” I said with a laugh.

“Baby, you’re perfect,” Tyler said and hit his new friend. “Quit checking out my girl.”

“Dude, I have my own girl,” Hunter said with a roll of his eyes.

“How long have you been together?” I asked.

“A little over a year. We met in college. It was also a one-night stand, too.”

Tyler and Hunter gave each other fist bumps, and it was my turn to roll my eyes.

“Chloe is going to be at the Hornets game, too, so you’ll get to meet her then.”

“That’s awesome! I’ll get to see you guys in thirteen days. Not that I’m counting or anything,” I added with a wink.

“What are you up to, Shortcake?” Tyler asked as I put a few containers of oatmeal on the shelves.

“Did a Costco run, so I’m putting stuff away.”

“Where is Cash?”

“He called in sick today. It’s ok, Ty. It’s not too heavy.”

“Molly, you are pregnant!”

“Yes, I’m pregnant! Not crippled!”

Tyler shook his head, and I could tell he was distracted for a minute.

“If anything is too heavy, I’ll ask Pen or wait for Cash tomorrow. Ok?”

Tyler just grunted a response, and Hunter made a face like he knew I was in trouble. He tried to distract Tyler by asking me questions about my bakery. He told me in college a few of his favorite classes were the cooking classes he took as electives.

“That’s so awesome. What is your favorite thing to cook?”

“Lobster bisque,” he stated proudly.

“Oh! That sounds so good right now! I think baby is going to be more like mommy and not be allergic to shellfish.”

Tyler looked up from whatever he was doing and shrugged, “Hopefully they won’t be allergic to nuts either. It sucks.”

“Ty, what the heck are you doing? You called me, and now, you’re doing something else.”

“Sorry, love,” he apologized and put his phone down. “You now have my undivided attention for a few more minutes.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“No shit, bro. You have plans I don’t know about?” Hunter asked.

“Why don’t the two of you room together?” I asked. I loved how quickly Tyler was able to make friends.

“It’s not up to us. But when we go on roadtrips, we stay together,” Tyler explained.

“The coaches love how well we get along. We’re killing anyone who tries to steal second base.”

“That’s great!” I exclaimed. “You and Swanson never really connected that way.”

“Nope, he didn’t have the awesome reflexes or height Montgomery here has.”

“Thanks, man!” Hunter said with a huge grin. “I couldn’t stand our last catcher. You’re way better than him. He never studied pitchers and let a lot of pitches go in the dirt. Also, he didn’t know how to frame. You’ll be called to the big show before he will.”

I was glad that Tyler’s friends saw his talent. Their friendship was very different from the one he had with Ivan, but I could tell they were already close.

I heard a knock on my back door and set the big jug of vegetable oil on the shelf. “I’ll be right back.” I went to the back door and saw Cooper and Ivan standing there with scowls on their faces.

“Why didn’t you call us, Shorty?” Cooper asked when I opened the door.

“Call you about what?”

“No lifting!” Ivan scolded me, but he had a smile on his face.

“Oh my god!” I cried out and followed them into the pantry. “Tyler Stone! Did you really call the guys?”

“Yes, I did! You don’t need to be lifting things. Now, let them put the heavy stuff away while you sit down and relax.”

“Ugh!” I said with a shake of my head. I then introduced Ivan and Cooper to Hunter over the phone. I didn’t sit down and relax, but I did point out where I wanted them to put stuff and yelled at Cooper when he tried to put stuff up on the top shelf. He was six foot six and didn’t understand why I needed stuff on the lower shelves.

“Well, there are step ladders for a reason.”

“Dixon!” Tyler yelled through the phone. “She is NOT going on any step ladders. She could fall and hurt herself and our baby.”

“Fine,” Cooper said and moved the bags of flour to the bottom shelf. Later, he tried to put a case of pecans on the top shelf without thinking.

“If you keep putting stuff up there, I’m going to cut off your man bun,” I threatened with a laugh.

“Oh, shit! Sorry!” he cried. “And don’t you dare threaten the man bun. The ladies love it!”

“If you say so,” I said with a giggle.

“Baby, should I grow a man bun?” Tyler asked through the phone. I could see that he and Hunter were working out while talking to me.

“NO!” All of us, including Ivan, exclaimed.

“Hey, I’ll be right back,” Cooper said and left the kitchen area to go to the front of the bakery.

“Where’s he going?” Hunter asked.

“Sweet tooth.” Ivan explained as he motioned at the bottles of different flavored syrups and asked where I wanted them.

We talked for a few more minutes before Cooper came back in with a hunch to his shoulders.

“Shorty, do you have a few bucks I could borrow?”

“Why?” I asked as I pulled out my wallet.

“Penelope said I have to pay if I want a cookie.”

“Are you kidding me? She always gives you free shit,” Tyler said through the phone.

I shook my head but wasn’t going to get in the middle of it. I went into the kitchen and grabbed a cookie for Cooper and one for Ivan from the storage bin. “No need to pay. Here ya go. Just please leave my friend alone.”

“What did I do?” Cooper asked.

I just shook my head because I honestly didn’t know. I just knew that Penelope had recently stopped giving him free cookies, and she no longer saved his favorite treats. Anytime I asked her about it, she would change the subject.

“Dixon!” Ivan exclaimed suddenly and pointed to his watch. “Practice. Let go!”

I thanked Cooper and Ivan for coming over and helping me.

“We got practice too, love,” Tyler said. “We’ll chat soon.”

“Bye, Molls!” Hunter said while sitting beside Ty and wiping off his sweat with his t-shirt.

“Love you, Ty! Nice meeting you, Hunter.



TYLER

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

To some people, introducing their partner to their parents is no big deal. On the other hand, some people don't feel comfortable introducing partners to their loved ones until they are sure that their relationship is more serious.

I was a nervous wreck but so excited as our bus pulled up to Porter Park, where I grew up watching baseball as a kid. I can still remember the first game our parents took us to when we were in kindergarten. It had been a celebration game after our first season of playing t-ball. Landon and I couldn't get enough of the game, players, and everything going on. Carter wanted to know how the score board worked and then wanted to eat tons of ballpark food. Julia was eight and was more worried when the little boy in front of us fell and skinned his knee than she was about the game going on in front of us.

"Do your parents know she's gonna have your baby?" Montgomery asked me as he looked over the back of his bus seat.

"No," I said with a sigh. "I didn't know how to tell them. I'm a chicken shit."

"Well, I could tell she was pregnant just from the video calls, so they will figure it out soon."

"I know. I'm hoping the fact that she's the girl from the Little League World Series will be exciting enough to balance each other out."

“Good luck,” he said as Coach Henderson stood up to say a few things before we got off the bus. He was a good coach but not as inspiring as Mack had been.

I looked out the window and then got the biggest smile on my face. Molly was walking up to the bus and wearing one of my away game jerseys. The jersey covered the shorts she was wearing but was open to show off a tank top under the Lightning Jersey. It looked like it couldn't be buttoned over her baby bump anymore. I hadn't seen her in person in almost a month, and I couldn't believe how big her belly had gotten.

“I don't know much about pregnancy and shit, but how far along is she?” Hunter whispered as he looked down at her. “She's huge!”

“I should know, but I don't. I think she mentioned she's halfway there, so I guess around twenty weeks.”

“Dude. She's gigantic,” another player said. Montgomery hit him in the back of the head. “Hey! You said she was huge. Why can't I say she's gigantic?”

“Because Stone is my guy.” Hunter replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

I shrugged too but wasn't paying attention to them. I hurried to get off the bus to greet my girl.

“Strawberry Shortcake!” I yelled as I got off the bus.

“Tyler!” She squealed and ran over to me. I grabbed her in a huge hug and brought my lips down to hers. She immediately wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me back.

The cat calls around us caused me to pull back, but I still was grinning. “Look at you!”

“I know! I'm huge!” Molly said with a groan. “And I'm only halfway there. I don't know how I can grow even bigger.”

“I think it's twins.”

That was when I noticed Meadow, Molly's best friend, standing next to her. I hadn't met her in person yet, but we had talked on the phone before.

“Nice to finally meet you!” I said. I was really relieved she was here because she could help buffer things with my family.

“Same here!” she said and gave me a big hug.

“Hunter!” Molly cried and gave my friend a hug, too, like she knew him and wasn’t just meeting him for the first time. “This is my best friend, Meadow. Mead, this is Ty’s new friend, Hunter Montgomery.”

“Nice to meet you,” Hunter said, and I could tell that he was checking her out but trying to not be obvious about it. Meadow was gorgeous with long blonde hair, beautiful blue eyes, and legs that seemed to go on for days. Tall blondes didn’t do it for me, personally. I pulled my small, adorable redhead into my arms and kissed the top of her head.

“Nice to meet you, too,” my girl’s best friend said and reached up to give him a hug. “We’re huggers around here.”

Montgomery chuckled and didn’t seem to mind giving her a hug.

“Hunty baby!” A whiney voice called from behind us. “Who is she?”

“Chloe! Hi, honey. Uh, yeah... this is Meadow. She’s, uh...”

“I’m his friend’s friend, and we were just meeting for the first time. Didn’t mean anything,” Meadow explained simply. “Just a hug.”

Chloe, Montgomery’s girlfriend, still gave him a look, sauntered up to him, and wrapped herself in his arms. She was too skinny, with too much makeup and too little clothes. I guess some guys liked that type. I took Molly’s hand, and we began walking with the team towards the stadium.

“I’m so glad we got here when the bus got here.” Molly said, oblivious to the fact that her best friend was glancing over her shoulder to watch Montgomery and Chloe behind us. “We’re going to go grab lunch somewhere close, and then we’ll head back over here to watch the game.”

“Sounds great.” I said and pulled her close to me again and gave her another kiss, “God, I’ve missed you. I love you.”

Molly grinned, “I’ve missed you, too. So freaking much. Oh!”

“What! What’s wrong?” I asked, suddenly on high alert.

“Baby just moved!” she said with a huge smile. “I love that feeling. Baby knows his or her daddy is here!”

I pressed my hands on her stomach but didn’t feel anything moving.

“Am I supposed to feel anything?”

“I don’t know,” Molly said quietly. “I guess I can ask my doctor at the next appointment.”

“How far along are you?” Hunter was finally able to ask.

“Almost twenty-one weeks,” she said as she protectively rubbed her stomach.

“Wow, is it multiples? You’re huge!” one of my other teammates asked. Hunter punched him in the shoulder before I could.

“Thank you!” Meadow said while moving her arms in front of her to emphasize a point. “That’s what I’ve been saying!”

“Oh, good. I just thought she was fat,” Chloe sneered from behind us.

Molly shrugged. “They haven’t said anything, but I have a new doctor with the new insurance, so we’ll find out at my appointment in a few weeks. They couldn’t get me in until then.”

“I’m betting on multiples!” Meadow said. “Anyone want to put some money down?”

“Not me, because I agree with you,” Montgomery said as he looked at my girl.

“Hunty bear! Let’s take some more selfies!” Chloe whined at him and pulled him away from us.

“What is she anyway? A freaking influencer?” Molly asked,

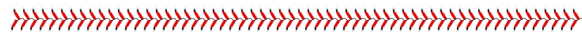
“Actually, yes,” I said with a groan. “Hunter said she’ll order tons of food and ask for it for free to tell people about it on her social media. Some places give her free food, but she pouts when they don’t. It’s insufferable.”

“Not someone I want to hang out with,” Meadow sighed loudly. “I miss Penelope already!”

“Me, too!” Molly exclaimed. “But someone had to watch the bakery.”

“Ok, we gotta go. See you ladies after,” I said with one last kiss to Molly’s plump lips. “Love you, baby.”

“Love you, too.” Molly said. “Have a great game!”



The game went great, and we won 6-2. This team was really coming together and doing well. I’m not sure I believed Montgomery’s not letting me shave theory, but since I had been called up, we had only lost one game, and it was the game I sat out to let the backup catcher get some work in.

“My baby!” I heard my mom’s voice.

“Mom!”

“I almost didn’t recognize you with all this stuff on your face.” I had to laugh. I knew she wasn’t going to like the full beard.

“Good game, bro,” Carter said as he gave me a hug after Mom.

“Thanks. I gotta find Molly and Meadow. Hopefully, you’re okay with her friend coming over for dinner, too.”

“Of course!” Mom exclaimed “And if you have any friends on the team that want to come, they are welcome, too.”

“A home-cooked meal? Please, invite me,” Montgomery begged from behind me.

“Come on over!” My mom said and then smiled at someone behind me. “I would know you anywhere. You’ve grown up to

be beautiful, sweetheart.”

“Hi, Mrs. Stone.” I turned around and watched as my girl walked over nervously. “This is my best friend, Meadow. Thank you so much for having us over for dinner.”

“Please, call me Susan or Mama Stone,” my mom said and held her arms out for a hug. Molly looked at me and then smiled and walked into my mom’s embrace. Mom held her tightly before pulling back and looking at her more closely. “Um, I know it’s not polite to ask, but honey, are you expecting a baby?”

Molly quickly looked at me, “I thought you told her!”

“I meant to...” I said without making eye contact with the two most important women in my life.

“Does that mean the baby is Tyler’s?” Mom asked quietly.

“Yes, Mrs. Stone - I mean Susan. You’re going to be a grandmother. I’m so sorry. I thought for sure Tyler told you.”

My mom suddenly burst into tears, right in the stadium parking lot. Carter looked at me and gave me a look like I was in big trouble.

“Dude, maybe I better leave this to just family. I can still catch the bus to the motel,” Hunter said quietly beside me.

“Can I, I mean, is it okay if I touch your belly?” my mom asked Molly, with tears still streaming down her cheeks.

Molly nodded, and I saw tears start to pool in her eyes, “Of course. The baby loves when Tyler talks to him or her.”

“My son talks to your belly?” Mom asked and placed both her hands on Molly’s protruding stomach.

“All the time,” Molly said with a laugh and a snuffle at the same time.

“Hi, little one. I’m your Grandma Susan. Maybe you’ll call me Gigi? I always thought that would be cute.”

“I love that,” I said and walked over to my wife and my mom. I placed my hands on her belly bump near where my mom still held on.

“Don’t think you aren’t in the dog house for not telling me, Tyler Elliott,” Mom full-named me. “But I’m too damn happy to be mad.”

“Sorry, Mom,” I said sincerely, then reached over and gave her a huge hug.

“You definitely get bonus points for being the first one to make me a Gigi.”

“I’m so glad you’re happy.”

“Of course, I am. You found your long-lost dream girl, and now, you’re starting a family together. Please, tell me I get to help plan a wedding, and I’ll be the happiest mom in America.”

“They did get engaged,” Carter supplied.

“What? I need to hear all about it!” Mom said with a clap of her hands. “Let’s get home, and we can talk there.”

Carter and I walked together with Hunter towards the cars as mom, Molly, and Meadow walked together. “I still can’t believe you found her. You know Dad isn’t going to be as welcoming about the baby news.”

“I know,” I said with a shrug. “If he’s rude to her at all, I will be drawing the line.”



TYLER

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Family recipes are special: They remind us of a specific time and place, they're unique to your family, and it's quite nostalgic.

“No fucking way. How did he get off?” I asked as we saw Landon getting out of his car in my parent’s driveway. I hadn’t seen Landon since I left for the minors and was excited to see my brother.

“Ty!” Landon called out with a huge smile on his face. “How the hell are you?”

“How the hell are you here?” I asked as I gave him a big hug.

“Talked to my manager since today was an off day. He wasn’t too happy about it, but I couldn’t miss seeing you and meeting your girl.”

“Molly!” I said and looked around but didn’t see her.

“Right here,” she said and walked over to us by Landon’s car. “Wow. I just can’t get over the fact that there are three of you. How did I not notice how you were all so identical back then?”

“Because you only had eyes for my Tyler,” Mom answered her.

Molly looked over at me with a blush on her cheeks. She then turned to Landon and introduced herself, “Hi, I’m

Molly.”

“Hi, again. It’s been a long time,” Landon said and pulled her into a hug. “And damn, I still can’t believe you knocked her up. I’m definitely going to be the favorite uncle!”

“I can’t either, but it’s so worth it,” I said with a huge smile on my face.

“Let’s get ready for dinner,” Mom said as she gave Landon a huge hug, too. “I made Ty’s favorite chicken and noodles.”

“Fuck, yeah!” I said.

“Oh, man, that sounds amazing.” Hunter rubbed his stomach and then looked at my brothers. “Holy shit! You’re identical triplets. I had no idea.”

The three of us just laughed and said in unison, “We get that a lot.”

“But that’s Landon Stone. Dude, you’re amazing. You’re a shoo-in for the Gold Glove in center this year,” Hunter said with amazement. “I never put two and two together with the last name Stone. I should have since you really do look alike.”

“Thanks, man. That means a lot,” Landon said with a laugh and shook his hand.

“Ty, when you get to the bigs, the media is going to have a field day that you have an identical brother playing already.” He then turned to Carter. “Do you play?”

“Not anymore,” Carter shrugged. “I’m happy being a mechanic here.”

“That’s good,” Molly said and smiled at Carter. “Baby is getting hungry, though. Let’s go eat.”

“Mike? Where are you?” Mom asked as she entered the house. “We have a lot of guests here for dinner.”

“I’m washing up for dinner now. I have it warming in the oven like you asked.” My dad’s voice came from the back of the house in the kitchen.

“Hi, Dad,” I said tentatively as I walked into the kitchen. We hadn’t talked since I left for the minors either. And it wasn’t

from my lack of trying.

“Tyler,” Dad gave me a nod from the oven. “Nice to see you again. Mom said you’re playing close by. That’s good.”

“You could have come to the game, ya know,” I said. I looked over at Molly, who was standing awkwardly at the door of the kitchen. “Baby, why don’t you go sit down in the dining room.” I thought maybe if she were already sitting, we could prolong my dad seeing her stomach.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot you brought a girl home. Another redhead, huh?”

“Ty’s definitely got a type,” Landon joked.

“Landon? Wow. Nice to see you, too, son,” Dad said and shook his hand. “Saw your diving catch on the local news. It was very impressive.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Landon said. “The offer still stands for you and mom to come watch a game in Miami or anywhere you want. We play at Atlanta and St. Louis this year, and they are closer to here.”

“You know I can’t just leave the shop. People need their cars fixed, and someone has to do it since two of my sons decided to up and leave.”

“Michael! You promised no arguing,” Mom warned. “Let’s just go eat.”

Dad nodded and stepped to the head of the table. We all sat down, eating family-style, so people just passed around the chicken and noodles, mashed potatoes, honey rolls, and salad. Mom also put out several salad dressings since she wasn’t sure what people would like.

“Dad, this is my girlfriend, Molly,” I said as people began eating. “And this is her best friend, Meadow. The guy next to Landon is my new teammate and friend, Hunter Montgomery.”

Dad just nodded his head at each person but didn’t say much.

“How’s business, Dad?” Landon asked, trying to break the tension.

“Great, thank you. Carter, why is Alec not eating with us?” Dad asked about Carter’s best friend, who is also an employee at the auto shop.

“He had plans, Dad,” Carter explained as he took a big bite of a honey roll. “One of his sisters graduated from college and today is her graduation party.”

“Wow. I can’t believe one of Alec’s little sisters is old enough to graduate college,” Landon commented.

“Vera is very smart. She’s heading to veterinarian school this spring in Nashville. Dawn is so excited she’ll be closer to home,” Mom explained about Alec’s sister and mom.

“To me Vera and Nora will always be the little sisters that would follow us around and try to paint our fingernails,” Carter said, and we all had a good laugh.

Dad just nodded, and they talked shop for a few minutes while the rest of us ate quietly.

“Michael, you missed a great game today. I’m sure Alec could have watched the shop. You should have come,” Mom said as she passed the salad to Hunter on her right.

“Were you not listening, Sue? Our son said Alec had plans,” Dad said.

“I still think you should have come.” Mom shook her head in obvious disappointment.

“Oh my gosh, Mrs. Stone, this is the best,” Meadow exclaimed, sensing the tension mounting I’m sure.

“Yes, Mrs. Stone,” Molly agreed. “This is all amazing. I would love the recipes.”

“I would love to give it to you!” Mom said proudly. “But, please, as I said before, call me Susan. I’d be happy to share any recipe you’d like, sweetheart.”

“But you never give out your recipes,” Carter said in shock.

“Yes, but Molly is going to be family,” Mom explained, and Dad’s fork fell to his plate with a loud clang. I felt a sense of *deja vu* from the last time I had sat in this dining room.

“What do you mean *family*?” Dad asked.

“We’re engaged, Mr. Stone,” Molly said bravely.

I squeezed her hand under the table and began to rub her thigh. I knew where this conversation was going.

“And how do you plan to support another person?” Dad asked, looking right at me.

“Dad, I’m moving up, and I’m already in Double-A.”

“And you make what? \$600 a week before taxes. That’s hardly enough to take care of just you, much less someone else, too,” Dad mumbled. “This is very sudden. Or is she with you because she’s waiting to see *IF* you get to the major leagues?” He put extra emphasis on the word ‘If.’

“Careful.” I literally growled. I did not like him implying that my girl was with me just for money. It was Molly’s turn to give me a reassuring squeeze of my hand under the table.

“Mr. Stone, I have my own successful business,” Molly explained while straightening up her back. “So, I don’t need his help financially now or when he makes it to the majors.”

“Dad, do you know who she is?” Carter asked.

“Your brother’s fiancée. That’s already been established.”

“No, Dad. She’s more than that,” Landon stepped in. “She’s the girl we met when we went to the Little League World Series. The one Ty’s loved ever since.”

Molly looked over at me with a huge grin on her face, moved her hand to my thigh, and rested her head on my shoulder.

“The one that caused his allergic reaction?” Dad asked. Was he really only picking up on the negativity?

“Mr. Stone, because of that reaction, Molly actually makes sure to have a case in her bakery for allergy-friendly baked

items. It impacted her whole life and career. They were meant to be together,” Meadow told him with confidence.

“I can’t wait to come to your bakery and try your items,” Mom said, trying to change the conversation to something positive. “I’m sure you’re very talented.”

“I can’t wait to make something for you,” Molly said with a kind smile to my mom. “What is your favorite flavor or baked item?”

“Mom loves pecan pie but hasn’t had it in forever because of Ty’s allergy,” Landon let her know.

“Oh, I don’t need anything with nuts. I do love anything with peaches, though. That’s my favorite flavor,” Mom said.

“I can make you something special with peaches and pecans,” Molly said and then looked around. “Um, where is the restroom?”

“Down the hall, second door on the left,” Mom pointed in the direction of the downstairs half-bathroom.

Molly stood up and walked towards the bathroom. I saw the change in my dad’s face when he noticed her stomach. His eyes closed, and if this was a cartoon and not real life, I could imagine steam coming out of his ears.

“Please, tell me it’s not true,” Dad grinded his teeth and looked right at me.

“Dad, Molly is expecting our baby,” I said and felt my own back straightening, waiting for the conflict. “And if you don’t have anything nice to say about my woman or your first grandchild, I expect you to not say anything.”

“How could you have been so irresponsible?” Dad asked. “How are you going to afford to take care of not only a girlfriend but a baby, too? Especially being on the road so much. I’m guessing because she’s got a bakery that she’s in the original town, so you’re not even near her since you moved up. Long distance never works, son, and now you’ll be stuck with this girl for eighteen years because of the baby.”

“He’s not just ‘stuck with me’, Mr. Stone!” Molly announced as she entered the room. “I’m glad to be with him. I love him. Yes, long distance is going to be hard, but we’re living off the motto of taking it one day at a time.”

Dad just shook his head. “And what happens when he gets injured again? What then?”

“Then, I will be there for him IF that happens,” Molly stated, putting the same emphasis on the word ‘if’ as he had earlier. “Your son is very talented, and I’m very proud of him. I think you should be, too.”

“Don’t tell me how to feel about my son,” Dad ground out, and I felt myself stand up next to Molly and pulled her closer to me.

“Michael!” Mom cried out. “Don’t talk to our guest that way.”

Dad didn’t listen to Mom and just shook his head, “I’m very proud of the one son that stayed with me to help me with the family business. He won’t get his knee injured or just play a game during half the year and be on the road away from his family when he chooses to have one. He will be around and present.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Stone, your son is very present. We talk every day.”

“And once you have this baby, they will get to know their father through a telephone?”

“Dad, really?” Landon asked.

“Don’t you even start. I wasn’t happy when you got drafted, but then you put crazy dreams in your brother’s head, and he left the family business, too.”

“Mr. Stone, do you know how many fathers out there would be so proud if only one of their son’s played professional baseball? You have two! That shows how talented they are, and you should be proud of them. I understand the family business is important, but my grandparents raised me to pursue a career that would support my family and make me happy.”

“Well, that’s very nice, dear,” Dad said. “But Tyler can’t support a family on \$600 a week.”

“Maybe not, but if you took the time to come to his or Landon’s games, you would see how talented they both are. Tyler’s going to make it to the majors before long, and I’ll be there for him every step of the way.” Dad began to respond, but Molly held up her hand. “Before you imply, once again, that I’m only with Tyler because he might make it to the major leagues, you better stop now.” I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her head. She was vibrating with fury now, and I knew better than to interrupt. “I love your son. Not because he’s a baseball player, but that is a big bonus because I love the game of baseball. I love your son because he’s understanding, kind, and very hard-working. I bet you didn’t know that scouts love Tyler because he dedicates a lot of time watching film on not only his own players but also their opponents. He works out extra hard and is getting close to breaking a minor league record of most base stealers thrown out. I don’t know you very well, but I’m guessing he gets his hard work ethic from you.” Dad just grunted but didn’t argue with her. “If I were you, Mr. Stone, I’d take the time to watch and be proud of your sons. All three of them. Not just the one that followed in your footsteps. No offense to you, Carter.”

Carter just waved his hand in a forward motion. “It’s all good, darling.”

Molly smiled at my brother, and then her smile widened when Landon thanked her for what she said. “I know I just met you, but whenever Miami is playing, we have it on in the bakery. Tyler and I are very proud of you.”

“Yes, we are,” I agreed, walking over to clap him on the shoulder.

“Families should support each other. Not tear them down and make them feel guilty for living their dreams,” Molly continued as she looked at my dad. “And with that, I’m ready to leave.” I knew she hated confrontation and wanted to leave before Dad had anything else to add, but I loved that she stood up for me. If I wasn’t already madly in love with this woman, her speech alone would have done it for me.

I nodded. “Me, too. Thank you again for dinner, Mom.”

“I wish you could stay longer,” Mom said and stood up to give Molly a huge hug. She handed her a piece of paper. “Here is my phone number. You call anytime, and I mean it. Whether it’s a pregnancy question or you’re just missing my son.”

I saw Molly’s eyes begin to tear up, and she thanked my mom and hugged her again. “You and my mimi would have gotten along.”

Hunter grabbed one more honey roll and stuffed it in his mouth. “Thank you for an amazing meal,” he said after he swallowed.

“Yes, thank you so much,” Meadow added and gave my mom a hug.

“We’ll drive you back to the parking lot.” Carter said as he also got up from the table.

“I’ll come, too. I want to spend as much time with you guys as I can while I’m here. I do have to head for the airport soon,” Landon added. “Thanks again, Mom.” It meant so much to me that Landon had come just for this meal.

We all left the house, and my dad didn’t say another word as he was left with just my mom at the dining room table.



Think your baby's name is truly one of a kind? Well, here's a reality check: no matter how hard you try to buck the trends, you've subconsciously jumped on board.

"I'm really sorry about your dad," I said as we entered the hotel room. We had just said a long goodbye in the parking lot to his brothers. Meadow was staying in a hotel room that I had gotten for both of us. I wasn't sure where Hunter was going to be staying since the room we were in was supposed to be for Hunter and Tyler to share.

I sure didn't care where Hunter was staying as Tyler backed me into the door and leaned down to kiss me hungrily. I opened up for him and felt his tongue slide into my mouth. I reached up and wound my hands around his neck, and he lifted me up so my legs wrapped around his hips. He held onto my bottom with one hand and cupped my face with the other. He turned us as one and walked towards the bed as he continued kissing me. He dropped me on the bed and climbed on top of me.

"I don't want to talk about my dad," Ty declared. "Except to say it was hot as hell seeing you stand up to him. No one ever has before."

"Well, I'm glad you appreciated it. I couldn't stand it anymore," I grinned and looked up at him. "So, me standing up to your dad was hot, huh?"

“Enough dad talk,” Ty said as he pushed my shirt up and over my head.

“Well, I was going to ask something else...” I began and felt my face getting red with embarrassment.

“What is it?” Tyler asked as he stopped undressing me. I still couldn’t look at him. He swept a piece of my hair behind my ear and trailed his finger down my cheek and over to my chin. He lifted my chin with his finger so I had to look into his considerate eyes. “You can tell me anything.”

“Well, I’ve always wanted to be on top, but my last boyfriend only wanted missionary.”

“You want to be on top?” Tyler asked with a tilt of his head and a smirk growing on face.

“Yes, I think so...” I said tentatively and felt a blush staining my cheeks.

“Fuck, yeah!” he said and tore his shirt over his head. “I’m down for whatever you want to do.” He quickly rolled us around to where he was on the bottom, and I was lying with my legs over his hips. We were both shirtless but both still wearing pants. I reached behind me and was about to take off my bra when he said he wanted to do the honors. As soon as he got it unclasped, the bra quickly flew across the room. Immediately, his mouth was on my breasts where the bra had just been. I felt my hips move almost on their own against his erection trapped in his jeans.

“We need to lose these pants,” I said as he flicked his tongue against my nipple.

“That might help,” he agreed and told me to stand up. I stood on the hotel bed with my feet on either side of his hips. He lifted up said hips, and I leaned over and pulled his pants and boxers down all at the same time. He kicked them off, and they landed in a pool at the end of the bed. I marveled at his cock standing straight up, and I licked my lips. I straightened back up, and he leaned up and pulled my pants and underwear down. As soon as I stepped out of them, he threw them across the room, and I had to giggle.

“Are you ready for me?” Ty asked with a raise of his eyebrows. He leaned up and kissed my mound. “You really are always ready for me.”

“Always,” I admitted. “So, um, yeah...how does this work?”

Ty grinned up at me. “Just sit down over me, and I’ll help line myself up. Then, just lower yourself all the way down, and I’ll fill you up.”

I nodded and straddled his hips. “Move back just a little, baby,” he guided me. He grabbed my hips gently and moved me where he wanted me. He fingered my entrance and let out a moan before he lined himself up, and I felt the tip of his hard cock at my entrance. “Oh, yeah, you really are always ready for me.” I leaned back and felt him enter me as he placed his hands back on my hips. He helped me lower down further until he filled me completely.

“Oh, that feels so good,” I sighed and tilted my head back.

“Now, just move as you feel comfortable,” Ty explained and moved his hands up to massage my breasts. I began to move and placed my hands on his defined pecs for balance.

“Oh, yeah. You’re a natural. You’re such a good girl,” Tyler praised as I felt his hips moving in time with mine. “Look at these huge, beautiful, swaying tits.”

I had to laugh, “I never knew you were such a boob man. I thought you were more of an ass man.”

“Oh, yes, most definitely to both. I love your ass and your tits,” Ty said as he leaned up and repositioned me a little so he could suck on my nipples while I continued to ride him.

“You realize you’ll have to share these puppies with the baby. I plan on breastfeeding.”

“Oh, fuck. That will be so hot!” Ty said with a grin as he bit down on my breast. It was painful but pleasurable at the same time.

“Oh my god!” I cried out when the orgasm hit me out of nowhere.

“Oooohh, my wife likes a little pain,” Ty smirked. While I was still coming down from the orgasm, he bit my other breast.

I fell against his chest with my body spent and tried to catch my breath. He flipped me back over easily, while he was still nestled inside me, and began pounding into me. As soon as I could, I began moving along with him. He loved that and began going even harder.

“I’m close, again,” I said as I reached in between our joined bodies and began to massage my clit.

“I’m close, too, baby,” he said as he balanced on his arms above me.

“I love you, Ty,” I yelled as another orgasm rocked through me.

“I love the feeling of you tightening around me. Oh, God, I love you, too,” he groaned, and I felt him empty himself inside me. He fell on the bed next to me and almost rolled off. I grabbed onto him and tried my best to keep him from falling off.

“Damn small beds,” he said with a laugh. “Why they get rooms with twin beds for huge baseball players, I’ll never know.”

I was laughing, too, as I rolled onto my side to make more room for him.

We were facing each other, and Tyler moved my sweaty hair out of my face. I lay my head on his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms tightly around me.

“I miss this,” I said quietly. “I miss you.”

“I know, baby,” he agreed. “I miss you, too. Maybe my dad was right, and it’s not fair to you or the baby to pursue a job that keeps me away from you for so long.”

I shook my head and said, “No, no, no. That’s not what I meant. I do miss you, but you’re meant to be a baseball player. You’re so talented. I just miss you, and I’m going to soak up as much of this as I can when we’re together.”

Tyler kissed the top of my head and sighed, “I would walk away from it all just for you and our baby. Just say the word.”

“That is the second time you’ve said that, and my answer is still the same. I know you would, but I love you too much to let you do that.”

“When is your ultrasound appointment?” he asked as he placed a hand onto my stomach.

“In two weeks. I really wish you could be there.”

“You’re not going alone, are you?”

“Nope. Pen’s going with me. I got the latest appointment time I could, so we could go after the bakery closes and when her sister can watch her kids.”

“Good. Are you finding out the sex?”

I realized we hadn’t talked about if we wanted to find out or let it be a surprise. I looked into his green eyes and shrugged, “Do you want to know?”

Tyler shrugged back at me, “I don’t know. There aren’t many surprises in life, so it might be kind of fun not to know. But if you want to know, I’m okay with that, too. I know that Camila needed to know to be able to plan for clothes, the nursery, and everything.”

I nodded and liked what he said the more I thought about it. “I think a surprise sounds fun, and we can do the nursery in a gender-neutral theme like baseball.”

“A baseball-themed nursery sounds perfect for a boy or a girl,” Tyler said with a chuckle. “I do have one request.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“If we have a boy, I’d love to name him Hudson. My baseball coach in high school was Brian Hudson, and he helped me enhance my game and really put a lot of time and effort into my catching skills. He always said he couldn’t wait to see me in the major leagues. A few years ago, he was killed in a car accident, and it was such a major loss.”

“Hudson Stone,” I said with a smile. “I love it. Oh! Baby likes it, too. It just kicked!”

“Maybe that means it’s a boy,” Tyler said with a grin. “I can’t wait until I can feel the kicks, too.”

A thought crossed my mind, causing me to let out a laugh. Ty arched an eyebrow at me. “What’s so funny?”

“I was thinking if we have a girl, we could name her Hazel since it was a hazelnut cookie that brought us together.”

Tyler had to laugh as well and shook his head. He moved down the bed to where his face was right at my growing belly. “Hey, in there, you will either be Hudson or Hazel. Are you okay with that?”

Then, he kissed my belly, and I squealed as the baby kicked right where he had kissed. “I think those names are baby-approved.”

We talked some more, and before I knew it, I had fallen asleep in the middle of our conversation. I woke up in the morning to his alarm going off. He had already showered and dressed.

“I need to head to practice,” he said and leaned down to kiss my lips. “You can go back to sleep until you need to leave.”

I really wished we had more time together, but I had a business to run, and his team was heading to their next city right after their practice. I shook my head at him, got up out of the bed, and wrapped my arms around him tightly.

“Goodbyes are the worst,” I said as I lay my head on his chest.

He rubbed my back, and I felt him nod his head. “The All-Star Break is coming up soon, and I’ll be able to come home during that. Plus, we’ll talk every night like we have been. Maybe we could even add some phone sex. That could be fun!”

“I’ve never done that. I like that idea,” I said with a small laugh and felt the tears start to fall, even though I tried to hold them back because I knew he hated seeing me cry.

“I’ve never done phone sex either. I love you, Molly,” he said and hugged me even tighter.

There was a knock on the hotel door, and then we heard Montgomery’s voice. “Stone? Are you there still? We’re gonna be late.”

“You better go,” I said and leaned up on my tiptoes to kiss him once more. “I love you.”



Most of us know that person. The one who believes he or she can predict snow, rain, or any kind of weather event simply by when their body – specifically their joints – hurt more.

“Batter Up! This is Molly. How can I help you?”

“Molly, I am so sorry!” Penelope’s voice sounded frantic.

“Hey, Pen. Are you okay?” I asked worriedly, looking at the clock. It was 6:15, and we were scheduled to open in forty-five minutes. She should have been here an hour ago. She was never late, so when she didn’t answer her phone after I called at 5:45 and again at 6:00, I got worried.

“I’ve been calling everyone I can, and no one is answering,” she said out of breath.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I moved the phone to rest between my ear and shoulder. I was adding the coffee grounds to the filter so I could just hit ‘brew’ just a few minutes before we opened up.

“My sister is sick and can’t watch my kids. I called my next-door neighbor, Denise, from the diner and even left a message for their old babysitter.”

“Bring them here. I know I’ve only met them a few times when I came to hang out at your place, but they are good kids. Bring a few toys or whatever, and we can sit them in a booth and feed them sugary treats.”

Penelope sighed with relief. “Are you sure?”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. “I wouldn’t have offered it if I weren’t sure. I can’t wait to see Peyton and Camden when you get here.”

It had been awhile since I opened the store by myself, but I had to grin at the first customer that came through the door.

“Cooper!” I cried out and ran around the counter to give him a huge hug. If the guys were in town, at least one of them would stop by just to see how I was doing. I really loved these guys!

“How’s my favorite short girl?” he asked as he lifted me up in the air and twirled me around. When he set me down, I could see he was looking around. “Where’s Penelope?”

“Oh. She’s running late because she couldn’t find a babysitter. Pen’ll be here soon with her kids.”

“She has kids?” Cooper asked.

“You didn’t know? I thought you knew she was a single mom.”

Cooper looked at me with a twist of his lips. “You know, now that you mention it, I guess I knew that, but it didn’t even register with me. I’ve been hit too many times in the head with baseballs.”

I shook my head and patted his shoulder. “What can I get for you? The usual coffee and unhealthy cinnamon roll, or do you want something healthy? I’ve started making some protein bars since Hayden and some of the guys requested them.”

“How old are they?” Cooper asked.

“Huh?” I asked as I reached for the coffee pot to pour him a cup. “I made the protein bars fresh last night.”

“No, no, not that. How old are Penelope’s kids?”

“Oh,” I replied, “Camden is around 6, and Peyton is 3 or 4.”

“Got it.” Then, Cooper walked out the door without his cup of coffee or breakfast.

Another customer walked in, and I didn't have time to wonder what was going on with him as I began serving people their morning coffee and treats.

Not long after 7:30, Penelope walked in with a canvas bag over her shoulder, holding the cutest little girl with two brown braids and the same beautiful brown eyes as her mom. Next to her stood a little boy with disheveled brown hair. His eyes were the same shape as his moms, but instead of brown, they were bright blue.

"Hi, Camden!" I called out. "Do you remember me?"

He nodded. "You're my mom's boss."

"And you make the best cookies," Peyton blurted out.

"Do you guys want some of your mom's favorite blueberry scones, or would you rather have donuts with sprinkles?" I asked as I grabbed two orange juice boxes and set them in the corner booth.

"Sprinkles!" they both exclaimed at the same time, and I had to laugh while I walked over and grabbed their donuts.

"Thank you so much," Penelope said. "Shiloh feels so bad."

"It happens. No worries at all. And if you can't come to the ultrasound with me today, I totally understand."

"Oh my gosh! I totally forgot that it was today, too!" Penelope said with her hand to her forehead. "Shit, Moll, I'm sorry. I don't know if I'll be able to go."

"Mom! You said shit. That's a dollar in the swear jar," Camden said as he sat down and took a big bite of his donut.

"Now, you know why I'm always broke," Penelope said with a shake of her head. "Sorry, sweetheart. I'll try to do better."

"Shit, this donut is good!" Peyton said with a huge grin.

"Peyton Jane!" Penelope scolded.

"Mommy, you said it. I put money in jar later."

“Monopoly junior money,” Camden said with a roll of his eyes, and that made all of us laugh.

These kids were awesome, and I hoped my baby would turn out to be just as great.

I felt my phone vibrate in my hands and smiled as I looked at the text message I just received.

Mama Stone: Happy Ultrasound Day! I still think you kids are crazy for not finding out if I'll have a granddaughter or a grandson, but I'll support you. Please, send me pictures. Love you, sweet girl.

Me: I will make sure you get pictures! Thanks for supporting us no matter what! 🥰

The door to the bakery opened, and in walked Mrs. James, a regular elderly customer who came in everyday. She was followed by Cooper, who had been holding the door for her. I noticed Penelope didn't even look at Cooper but instead began asking Mrs. James how she was doing and if her good friend, another widow named Mrs. Hastings, was joining her.

“Oh, I don't think so, dear. She said her knee is acting up pretty badly, and whenever that happens, there is usually a big storm.”

I looked out the window and saw the sun finally coming up and a clear sky. I gave Penelope a look with my eyebrows raised, and she just shrugged at me. It didn't look like any storms were coming today.

“If you could please box Shirley's and my stuff up to go, that would be nice. I want to get back home before the storms hit,” Mrs. James requested before turning to Cooper and smiling at him. “You sure are a handsome young man. If only I were a few years younger.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” Cooper said with a lopsided grin. “I'd be lucky to have a looker like you!”

“Oh, stop!” Mrs. James giggled and actually blushed.

“Oh, Coop, ever the charmer. Where did you go earlier?” I asked him as I made Mrs. James’s coffee.

“Had to run to the store,” he said and held up a few grocery bags.

Penelope gave him a side glance but didn’t say anything.

“Are those toy cars in that bag?” Camden asked while peeking around the corner of the booth.

Cooper looked over at Camden and nodded his head. “They sure are. Do you like toy cars, my man?”

Camden nodded energetically.

“I don’t like toy cars,” Peyton said while jutting out her bottom lip.

“Put that lip back in your mouth, Peyton Jane Benton!” Penelope scolded with a groan.

“Oh, don’t you worry, little lady. Do you like My Little Ponies?”

“Yes!” Peyton squealed.

“What is he doing?” Penelope hissed at me.

“It looks like he’s playing with your kids,” I said with a huge grin as Cooper pulled a chair up to the booth the kids were at, sitting in it backwards. He pulled out several coloring books, crayons, toy cars, My Little Ponies, and Legos.

“Why?” Penelope asked as she watched Cooper flip through a Disney Princess coloring book and ask Peyton which princess he should color.

“Because he’s a good guy,” I said and went to help the next customer that came in the door.

“I heard you guys were stuck here, and I figured you’d want some stuff to keep you entertained,” Cooper was telling them.

Peyton’s eyes sparkled, and she said, “Thank you, mister.”

“I’m Cooper Dixon. I’m guessing you’re Peyton Jane,” Cooper grinned at her. “You look just like your mommy.”

“That’s what everyone says!” Peyton giggled and then said in a hushed voice, “But I’m only ever called Peyton Jane when I’m in trouble.”

Cooper laughed and leaned in closer to the little girl, “I was always called Cooper James Dixon when I was in trouble.”

Peyton giggled, “Will you be my friend?”

“Of course!” Cooper said, looked over at us, and gave a huge grin. He was so good with kids! Who knew? “Hey, can I call you PJ since we’re best friends now?”

Peyton tilted her head in thought and then nodded enthusiastically, “I like that! And I’ll call you CJ!”

“Best friend nicknames for the win!” Cooper said with the same amount of enthusiasm and gave her a high five.

“I’m Camden Benton,” Penelope’s son said, wanting to be involved in this friendship, too. “But my middle name is Bradley, and CB doesn’t sound very cool. Everyone at school calls me Cam but I think it would be cool to have a new nickname from you.”

Penelope had stopped working all together and was watching the interaction. “My egotistical ex, Brad McLeod, had to include his name as Camden’s middle name,” she whispered to me. This was the most I had ever learned about Penelope’s past.

“Nice to meet you, Cam,” Cooper said and gave him a fist bump. “How about we just call you C-Man? That sounds awesome to me.”

Camden nodded, “I would like to be called C-Man.”

“Coop, how did you end up being so good with kids?” I asked him as I took some cash from a customer and added it to the drawer. I thanked them as they put a few dollars in our tip jar.

“Because he’s a kid himself,” I overheard Penelope say under her breath.

“I’ve got a lot of younger siblings.” Cooper explained, “Zander and I both have the same parents, but after they

separated, my mom married Calvin, and they had Darcy and Calvin Junior, or just Junior as we all call him. Dad married Candi, who is only a few years older than me, by the way. Together, they have Hadlee, Bryndle, and Leyton.”

“Holy cow. That’s seven kids!” Cam exclaimed loudly as he was counting each of the siblings on his fingers.

“Well, Dad and Candi ended up not working out. He got married again to Kelli, and they had Paisley and Willow.”

“That’s nine! Whoa!” Camden said.

“Good math there, kiddo,” Cooper said, and Camden’s chest puffed out with pride. “I mean, good job C-Man. Kiddo is a little kid’s nickname.”

I saw Penelope roll her eyes out of my peripheral vision and groan.

“Seriously, do you think I’m a bad mom or what?” she asked as she stomped over to where her kids were sitting and watching her with wide eyes. She hefted a black tote bag onto the table.

“What are you talking about?” Cooper asked innocently.

“I have a bag of toys here for them and things for them to do. You didn’t have to go and spend money on *my* kids,” she added emphasis on the word ‘my’.

“I was just trying to help. I heard they would be here all day. I’m sorry if I overstepped,” Cooper said with a hang of his head.

Penelope sighed and said, “Camden and Peyton, give Mr. Dixon his things back. We don’t need his charity.”

“Mom, please? Can we keep the stuff CJ got us?” Camden asked as he clutched the superhero coloring book to his chest.

“Please, Penelope. Let them keep the stuff. I’ll leave if that will make you feel better about it. And for the record, I don’t think you’re a bad mom at all. I was just trying to help. It was nice to meet you, PJ and C-Man. See ya, Shorty!”

“I must be a friend, too, if I get a nickname!” I said, trying to lessen the tension in the cafe. Cooper nodded at me but gave me a sad smile as he waved goodbye and walked out the door. I sighed at my friend. “He was just being sweet. Why do you dislike him so much all of a sudden?”

Penelope just grunted, put the bag of stuff Cooper brought on the table, and came over to make a customer’s coffee. “You guys can keep the stuff. Make sure you help your sister write him a thank you letter, Cam.”

Her son nodded with a huge grin on his face. “I will.”

Peyton squealed with joy, “And I know how to spell CJ! I want to draw him with the My Little Ponies and your cars, Bubby.”

Camden helped her spell ‘thank you’ and began making his own thank you card. It kept them busy for quite a while.

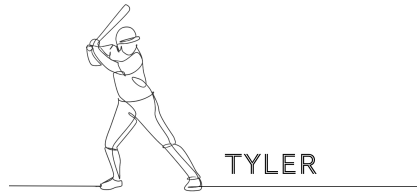
“Pen, you know you can talk to me,” I said quietly. “You’ve been here for me so much.”

Pen sighed and looked right into my eyes. “I’ll tell you later. Not with the kids around.”

I nodded and greeted Dr. Sebastian Cambell with a big smile as he came in the door as I began filling his regular order.

At around 10 a.m., I sent Tyler a text asking how his day was going and reminding him that I missed him. I sat my phone down and grabbed an apple pie danish to nibble on. I heard my phone ding, signaling that I had a text message. I smiled when I saw the text was from my husband.

My Everything: I miss you too, baby. I’ll be in my cave for awhile. The Oakville Bobcats are going to be hard to beat! Call me after your appointment. Wish I could be there! Love you so much!



“Stone! Stone!” The bang on the door startled me, and I pressed pause on the film I was watching. One of the best up and coming pitchers was slated to start against us tonight, and I wanted to be prepared. I rubbed my eyes and looked at my watch. I had been in my cave, as the guys called it, for several hours watching film on our team and our opponents. This team we were playing tonight was going to be tough.

“What’s up, Montgomery?” I asked as he opened the door.

“When was the last time you talked to your girl?” he asked, and I could tell he had been pulling at his hair, which was his nervous tell.

“Around 10, before her lunch rush.” I suddenly felt on edge. Hunter was pacing the small media room and wasn’t looking me in the eye. He was one of the calmest and most even-keeled people I had ever met. For him to be stressed meant it was something big.

I checked my phone, but the only unread text was from Molly at 2:15.

My Shortcake: Hey, Ty! I can’t wait to close up the bakery soon & go to the doctor at 3. I will call you later. Are we still sure we don’t want to find out?! I know, I know – a surprise will be awesome! I’m just so excited to see our baby. I really wish you could be here. I love you!

I looked up from my phone and looked at Montgomery, “There is no way it’s 4:43.”

Hunter looked at his watch with a nervous swallow. “It’s 4:43, man.”

“No way. She would have called. She had her doctor’s appointment at 3:00 today. I don’t have any missed calls.” I

had been in the cave longer than I thought.

“That’s not even the issue right now,” my friend said in a very serious tone, and I looked up into his blue eyes. “Riverbend was hit by a tornado, Ty. It’s bad. The cell towers are down, and there is no communication.”

Stunned, I looked back at my phone and tried to call her, even though Hunter told me the towers were down. I had to know for myself.

“Hi, you’ve reached Molly. I’m not available right now, so please leave a message after the beep. If you’re wanting to make an order at Batter Up, please call 555-5378. Thanks, and have a great day! Go Raptors!”

“Molly, baby. Call me when you get this message. I’m worried sick. I just found out about the tornado. Please be okay! I know they said the phone towers were out, but I hope they start working soon. I love you so much. Take care of yourself and our baby.”

I disconnected the phone and looked over at Hunter’s worry-filled eyes. I had no idea how I was going to play baseball tonight.

Coming Soon

The second book in the series and the HEA for Molly and Tyler's duet is coming soon.



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Bibliography page

I hope you have grown to love the game of baseball and the joy of baking as much as Tyler and Molly do! Here is where all the fun facts at the beginning of each chapter in this book were found:

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About the Author



Sasha McCallen is a romance author that writes about stories that are both sweet and spicy that are centered around sports.

Her favorite sport is baseball, and she is a huge St. Louis Cardinals fan! She also loves hockey, gymnastics, and college basketball. She is a mom to three amazing kids and has been married to her own insta love husband since 2007 (they got engaged on their 3rd date!). Sasha also loves cats, diet coke, reading, getting tattoos, going to sporting events, hanging out with friends, and going to book events.