



DUMP *and* CHASE

KODIAKS HOCKEY BOOK ONE

ANNA ALBO

Dump and Chase

Kodiaks Hockey

Book 1

Anna Albo

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Chapter One

Tangi

How do you start a story at a funeral? Because that's how this one started. I hadn't seen Ethan in almost three years, not since our colossal breakup on New Year's Eve. No single thing had precipitated what was going to happen that night. Looking back, it was all the little things that had snowballed into one huge catastrophe. I found out that day that we both wanted different things out of life, and so I put my big-girl pants on and finally decided to end it. I'd dumped him and hadn't looked back.

He'd made a half-assed attempt at stopping me that night, and I mean half-assed because he was half drunk. Once reality hit, he'd tried pretty hard to win me back in the weeks after, but I held firm to my demands. Demands I knew he'd never agree too.

I've hated New Year's Eve ever since.

And now I was off to a funeral, where I'd see Ethan for the first time in three years.

I put on a plain black dress and pinned my hair in a simple updo. Mom and Dad were taking a separate car because Mom hated funerals and Dad didn't want to stay long. Mom had dropped off some dainties the night before for the wake. As usual, she was already prepared, and that included her exit strategy to get herself and Dad home early—blaming Dad's arthritis. A shit excuse, but who was going to call her on it?

So that left me driving to the funeral alone. My little sister had already decided not to go because of her unresolved anger toward Ethan. I'd already told her a million times that the breakup was my choice, but my little sister took it hard. Ethan was the big brother she'd always wanted, someone who had been in her life since she was thirteen, and then he was gone, poof, from her life. Being the semi-decent guy he was, he still sent her texts and IG

messages sometimes, but she ignored them all.

As I was heading for the door, I caught her in the living room, playing on her phone.

“One last chance to come,” I said.

She didn’t look up. “You shouldn’t even go.”

“I’m not going for Ethan. I’m going for Ava and her family.” And Ethan too, but there was no reasoning with Leah, so I kept that part to myself.

“I sent a card with Mom and Dad. Besides, I work tonight.”

Leah rarely turned away a shift at the swanky restaurant job she’d landed after finishing her degree. I couldn’t blame her for loving the job. The tips were beyond ridiculous. She made more money than I did at my job at the sports and rehab clinic, despite how hard I worked. And she did it in fewer hours too.

After I’d dumped Ethan, I’d moved back home and finished my college degree, the one I’d put on hold when I moved to Vancouver with him. I probably could have finished my degree there, but I was living in a different country and was trying so hard to navigate and fit in. School was the last thing on my mind.

Now I had that degree and a job, and my little sister was making more money. A lot more. Enough where she could probably move out, and I’d still be living with Mom and Dad. Probably forever, to pay off the damn school loans.

“Okay, well, I’ll see you later.”

I drove to the church and tried to quell my nerves. Three long years we hadn’t seen each other. Even though Ethan and I had broken up, I’d still maintained a friendship with Ava. We just made sure that Ethan was never brought up. As far as I knew, Ethan hadn’t even been home in those three years, or if he had, Ava hadn’t mentioned it. Or course, my friendship with her changed after Vancouver. We tried to rekindle what we had, but it became a friendship of group outings rather than anything one-on-one.

Maybe we were both afraid Ethan would come up? I'm not sure.

Mom and Dad's SUV was already in the church parking lot. I snagged a spot at the very back—it paid to come early. I expected the place to be packed. The Grant family was well-known around town, and with Ethan back, that would be an added draw. I'd have to hang around the church longer than necessary, but I was doing it for Ava and Ethan's mom. Or so I kept reminding myself.

I took a deep breath and made the slow walk to the church doors. A few people were milling about outside, enjoying the early and warm July sunshine, but my thoughts drifted to Ethan. Had he brought his girlfriend? If he had, how would I react? I knew he had a girlfriend. He'd mentioned it on his socials, the ones we'd kept ourselves connected by, but I'd rarely looked. And if she was at the funeral, I had to keep it together even though my heart was threatening to burst out my chest.

After one more breath, I reached for the door. The waft of burning incense hit me first. Was that frankincense? It was strangely comforting as my eyes adjusted to the darker light. Music was playing softly inside, and before I had a chance to do anything, an attendant asked me to sign the guestbook. That's when I saw a picture of Ethan's dad. Rick Grant had always been sweet to me, making sure I was well fed at family dinners and included in all the Grant weekend adventures. He'd taught me to fish, golf, and play the guitar, although I barely knew how to play it now. The one thing we loved most was a good game of chess. He could beat me every time, but he was sure to let me win once in a while.

I choked up a bit seeing his smiling face. Ethan had his eyes and his smile, although Rick had smiled a lot more often. Ethan had always been the serious one in his family.

The attendant grabbed my arm again. He clearly needed to keep the line moving.

"Ma'am," he said, "please feel free to pass your condolences on to the

family, then make your way to a seat.” It was more a command than a suggestion.

As I crossed the back of the church, I took a peek inside. The pews were already two-thirds full, and I scanned for my friends Wolseley and Jill, who I knew would save me a seat. I’d need them today, but as I made my way toward another attendant, I didn’t see them anywhere. Crap. But I didn’t have time to think about it. The second attendant was motioning me down an aisle to the family.

I sucked in a breath. In a matter of seconds, I’d see Ethan. Would he be cool and unaffected, like he usually was? Would he pretend not to remember me even though we’d dated for more than seven years? I didn’t have much time to think about it, as I was thrust forward by a third attendant toward the family line. Boy, these people were pushy.

Rick’s sisters pulled me into hugs. I’d met Ethan’s aunts many times over the years at Grant family functions, and both were warm and friendly, just like Rick. Amid a flurry of tears, they thanked me for coming before passing me on to their husbands. I finally got to breathe when I saw Ava. I threw my arms around her as she cried on my shoulder. I rubbed her back and offered her any comforting words I could think of. She kept thanking me and when we broke apart, I handed her some extra tissues.

“I think you’re going to need these,” I said.

She nodded and I moved forward. And there he was. All six foot two of him. He was looking down on me with sullen brown eyes. He was hiding the hurt, but I could see it. He couldn’t hide that from me.

“Ethan, I’m so sorry for your loss. Your dad was a great man, and he was like a second dad to me.”

I grasped his hand to squeeze, but he had other ideas. He pulled me into a tight hug, tighter than I’d expected. I thought he’d let go right away, but he nestled his cheek against mine, and whispered, “Thank you for coming. It’s so nice to see you,” into my ear. He smelled good, like soap, aftershave, and

the soft sent of his cedarwood cologne. Why was I even thinking like this at a funeral?

Even worse, after all this time, his deep voice had every inch of me tingling. I had to get my shit together. “It’s nice seeing you too.”

We broke the embrace so I could give Ethan’s mom a hug, too, and then I finally found Wolseley and Jill. They were a few rows back, huddled together and chatting about something. I took a seat next to them and waited. I wasn’t sure for what. I stole a few glances at Ethan, and I had to stop doing that before people noticed, especially my friends.

“How are you doing?” Jill asked quietly. “Was it weird seeing him?”

“A bit, but I expected that.”

“That was quite the hug,” Wolseley added. She was always the flighty one of our group. She couldn’t keep anything to herself, and was a wild free spirit who sometimes needed to be tamed. If she thought there was a chance of Ethan and me getting back together, she’d push hard for it. She was all about happily ever afters.

“You guys, his dad died. Can we cut him some slack and stop reading into this?”

“You know who isn’t here?” Jill said, sweeping her long blonde locks over her shoulder. “His girlfriend.”

I wasn’t going to react. I didn’t want anyone to assume how that might affect me because *I* wasn’t even sure how it did. The fact that he had a girlfriend stung, that was for sure. I didn’t want to imagine it, but it would be crazy to think he hadn’t moved on. I’d dated, hooked up with a few guys, how could I expect him to not to do the same?

Wolseley leaned in closer now, tucking a strand of her bleached blonde hair behind her ear. The rest of her hair was purple this month. “I know we said we wouldn’t talk to you about this, but we can’t wait. Sorry,” she said to me before focusing back on Jill. “Ava told me he didn’t even ask her to come here for the funeral. Isn’t that weird?”

They didn't know Ethan at all. I wasn't surprised by this. Everything was always arm's length with him, and that included keeping his girlfriend away from his father's funeral.

"I don't know," Jill said, shaking her head. "You can't tell me you've been dating someone a year and you don't ask her to come with you to this?"

A year? Those words kept bouncing around in my head. The longest I'd dated anyone after Ethan had been four months. But he'd already been with someone that long?

"Maybe they aren't serious."

Jill pffted. "Ava made it sound like it's serious. They went to Europe last month. Some trip to Paris after his season ended."

She got him to go to Paris? No, this conversation had to stop. "Enough, okay? Let's show some respect. You shouldn't be gossiping at a funeral."

That seemed to shut them up. When the funeral began, Wolseley sobbed throughout the whole service. She was also the weepy one. She cried if an animal died in a movie, and she used to cry if you looked at her the wrong way, or if she thought you were making fun of her. As she got older, she'd toughened up a bit, but funerals were her Achilles' heel.

Jill and I sat stoically, but I teared up a bit when Ava and Ethan did the eulogy together, sharing stories about their dad. I was so proud of both of them for getting through it. They were certainly tougher than I was. Then the small church choir sang "Ave Maria," and I was done. That song made me cry no matter what the event. Jill was handing me tissues before the choir had finished the first line. Damn, I hated funerals.

"We're all going to the wake, right?" Wolseley asked, wiping her damp gray eyes. "Please tell me we don't need to go to the cemetery. I don't think I could handle it."

"Ava said family only. They didn't want an entourage," Jill said.

At one time I would have been included in that the family. Now I was just another friend ... but only barely.

“Why don’t we head over to the reception now. What else are we going to do?” I asked.

“Good idea,” Wolseley said. “I want to try the food.”

The Grants had booked a place just outside town. It served two purposes: it was private, and fewer people would likely show up. There had easily been five hundred people packed into the church, and thinning out that crowd was the goal. No one wanted to entertain all those people.

I took my car and Wolseley and Jill went together in Jill’s car. I couldn’t stop thinking about Ethan’s new girlfriend. A whole year. I wondered what she looked like. Odds were that she was blonde. I was pretty sure he had a thing for blondes. Probably petite too. He liked to have stimulating conversations, so she could probably do that otherwise he wouldn’t have hung around that long.

No, I wouldn’t google her, and I wouldn’t scour his IG either. For my own sanity, I had to forget about her and once this day was over, forget about Ethan Grant too.

Chapter Two

Ethan

Seeing Tangi again took my breath away. Had three years passed? How many times had I come home for a quick visit and secretly hoped I would run into her even though I'd made Ava promise not to tell her, or Jill and Wolseley, I was in town? If one found out, the rest would know, just like the Three Musketeers. I was a coward. Seeing her would have made me feel things I didn't want to feel. It would have reminded me what an idiot I'd been for letting her walk out of my life.

But there was no avoiding her now. I knew she'd come to the funeral. She'd loved Dad, and he'd loved her like another daughter. Seeing her was a punch in the gut. She was just as gorgeous as the day I'd set eyes on her back in high school. She'd been seventeen then, and Ava had invited her over after school. I knew in an instant that I wanted to go out with her, and within weeks, to my sister's dismay, I'd asked Tangi out on a date.

All these thoughts cycled through my head as the car took me, Mom, and Ava to the cemetery. All morning I'd wondered what she'd look like. We follow each other's socials, but she rarely posted pictures of herself. She tended to post shots of animals or inspirational messages. And when she did post pics of friends, she wasn't always in the picture. Or maybe she had my access restricted. Who knows.

I assumed she'd come with her family. Our parents had all been friends for years, even after our epic breakup. They'd even gone on a cruise together the year I'd been drafted. Tangi's dad was seasick most of the time, but everyone else had a good time. And then it hit me: Leah wasn't at the service.

I tried so many times to reach out to Tangi's little sister. I still did when I saw a funny meme I knew she'd laugh at. I texted her on her birthday, Christmas, and whenever I thought about her. Not once did she reply. Maybe

she'd changed her number, but her IG handle hadn't changed, and she was posting there, so I came to the conclusion it was me. More collateral damage associated with the breakup.

"The service was lovely," Mom said as cheerfully as possible. She'd been a rock since finding Dad after his massive heart attack. She was the one who stayed with him while they waited for the ambulance to show up. She was the one holding his hand when he took his last breath. Her voice had cracked when she called me in Vancouver to tell me the news. I was so stunned that I didn't say anything for the longest time. But then the adrenaline kicked in, and I knew I had to step up for my family. I was on a flight home hours later.

"It was," I said.

Ava burst into renewed tears, which got Mom crying again. I didn't know what to do other than hand them some tissues. I hadn't cried, at least not in front of anyone. After I'd gotten off the phone with Mom, I'd called Brandi to tell her the news. She was preparing for her trip to Central America where she was part of a medical and dental team that offered free services to those who couldn't afford it. The last thing I wanted her to do was cancel her trip to come to the funeral. She hadn't even met my parents, so it didn't seem right to meet Mom at Dad's funeral. More importantly, I didn't want to do that to Tangi. I couldn't humiliate her like that.

"Sorry I can't be there but we both know you don't want to introduce me to your mom under these circumstances. Besides, I should probably be with my team."

Things had always been so easy and surface-level with Brandi. That was what I liked about her. Even when we got into fights, it was about drama that bothered her way more than me, and as soon as she was done raging at me, we'd have spectacular makeup sex. Maybe it was shallow, but this was what I wanted after Tangi. Brandi was beautiful, we had wildly different worlds so we spent a lot of time doing our own things, and nothing ever felt complicated.

“You’re leaving in a few days. I don’t want you to change your plans.” Things had gotten rocky between us, and I knew we’d both been looking forward to her trip. To get some space. The last thing I wanted was to bring her to Dad’s funeral. “I’ll be there for at least a few weeks, helping my mom and sister with things. I think they’ll need me.”

“I’m so sorry about this. You’ve always said such great things about your dad. It’s too bad I didn’t get to meet him.”

We’d planned a trip home at the end of the summer, presumably to get back on track. I wanted everyone to finally meet her in person. It was going to be another quick in-and-out trip, but it was going to be an important one. Now that was all on hold.

Mom put her arm around Ava, and I stared out the window as they consoled each other. I thought of Dad. We talked to each other almost every day. The thought of not being able to pick up the phone and call him, get his advice, and listen to his dad jokes made my heart lurch. I was going to miss it all. How could he go and die on me like that?

Our car pulled up to the cemetery near the plot Mom and Dad had picked out years ago. Seeing the hole in the ground gave me a chill. Dad would be gone and he was never coming back, stuck under six feet of earth. I thought I was going to have him forever ...

The driver opened the door and I got out, helping Mom and Ava out too. We stood next to the casket, waiting for the pastor to lead us to the plot and the final blessing. The rest of it was kind of a blur after I realized Tangi wasn’t going to be there. Right, family only, the way Dad had wanted it, but he surely would have made an exception for her. Damn, that was an oversight.

All these thoughts rambled through my head as Dad’s casket was lowered into the ground. Ava began to sob, and I put my arms around her and Mom. I would have to hold my family up now, even though I lived nearly a thousand miles away.

* * *

I kept telling myself that I had to get through the wake, then I could decompress. Maybe I'd invite a few old friends over and sit in the backyard with beers and reminisce. Maybe we'd talk about Dad, maybe we wouldn't. I had no clue what we'd do, but I needed to be out of this place. Away from all these sad faces. So many people had patted me on the back and told me how great Dad was that I probably had the bruises to show for it.

Ava's boyfriend Matt was the first to offer me an escape. He had two beers and pushed me toward the food tables. We had a huge spread, just like Dad wanted. He insisted his "going away" party be a blast.

"You gotta eat, man," Matt said. "And drink too. Ava tells me your dad wanted a big to-do. I think he'd be happy. The place looks great. I think he'd also not want you to mope around."

I snapped back the tab on the beer and took a long gulp. I *was* hungry. Too much had been going on all morning to think about eating, so I piled cheese, crackers, various meats, some vegetables, and pickles on my plate. Dad loved his damn pickles. Mom made sure to order every kind imaginable.

"I think I could sleep for a week," I said. "I'm trying really hard to be chipper."

"You've had a lot of shit going on. People understand, but this is your dad's last hurrah. Make it a good one."

He was right. He was probably the only boyfriend I've ever liked of Ava's. They'd been dating for a long time, and he'd even come out to Vancouver with Ava once. We'd had a blast. She'd finally picked a good one.

I glanced around but didn't see Tangi. How many times had I looked for her? Too many. I had to stop.

"You looking for you mom?" he asked.

Shit, he'd noticed. "Uh, no—I mean, yes."

He arched a brow, and I knew I was caught. “You’re looking for Tangi.”

Did I deny it? Matt and Ava had just started dating when Tangi and I broke up, but he was in her circle of friends, and he knew Tangi well. I hadn’t gotten to know Matt until he’d started dating my sister, and I didn’t know where he really stood on things. Since Tangi and Ava were friends, Ava and I had an understanding that we never brought her up. That seemed to work well.

“Is she doing okay?”

Matt pursed his lips, and I knew I was putting him in a tough spot. Even though he was a good two or three inches shorter and twenty-five pounds lighter, he had me feeling small for asking. He turned a little more and I did the same so that no one could listen in.

“I think she’s doing fine. She finished school and works at a sports clinic. I’m not sure if it’s full-time, because she’s still living at home.”

My heart soared at the fact she’d finished school. She’d hated being “the girlfriend” and wanted more out of life. I hated that I’d kept her from that.

“Good. I want her to be happy.”

“I have no business telling you this, but she was pretty messed up when she came home. It was a good six months before she got her shit together. I don’t know what happened and it’s not my business, but she’s back on track, so try not to derail that.”

Fragile wasn’t a word I’d use to describe Tangi, but I knew what Matt was talking about. He was giving me a gentle warning that if I screwed around with Tangi’s feelings again, her friends would make sure I heard about it. And frankly, I was terrified of Jill.

“I get it.”

“Good. Now eat and try to have a good time. I gave Ava the same advice. Your dad would want you to.”

Matt was right. We talked hockey while we ate and drank, and just as I was getting two more beers from the bar, I saw her. She was with Wolseley

and Jill, talking to Mom. Tangi gave Mom a big hug and my heart picked up a few beats. Her hair was lighter now. Instead of her usual dark chestnut, there were streaks of a lighter color, so subtle it was easy to miss. Her hair had the same gentle waves I'd run my fingers through so many times. And she looked amazing in her black dress, but she'd always been athletic. And then she looked over to me with those hazel eyes that sometimes looked more brown than green, depending on the light. She made no reaction at first, but then she gave a slight nod.

“Your beers,” the bartender said.

I turned my attention back to him. I grabbed the beers and glanced back Tangi's way, but she'd moved on to the other end of the hall to see Ava. Why would she even bother to come talk to me when I'd been such an ass to her? She was better off without me.

Chapter Three

Tangi

“I think you should go say hello. A peace offering,” Ava said. “Let’s put the past behind us. Don’t you think my dad would want it that way?”

Ava was laying the guilt trip on extra thick. I think Ava, like so many others, had hoped that Ethan and I would eventually get back together. When I broke up with him, in many ways I broke up with his whole family, and that included Ava. I couldn’t put into words how much I missed them all.

“You’re trying really hard.”

Ava’s brown eyes, just like Ethan’s, were pleading with me. “I just want it to be over, you know?”

I knew all too well, and I’d been thinking about it for days. In the blink of an eye, we were together again, but for all the wrong reasons. I’d thought about going to talk to Ethan when I’d walked in, but Ava was the safer option. We’d been talking for a few minutes before Ethan’s name came up. With Wolseley and Jill raiding the dessert table, it was the perfect opportunity to trap me in this conversation. I sighed and gave her a hug. “Tell you what, I’ll do this for you and your dad.”

She beamed. “Good. Thank you. I’d love for it to be the way it used to be.”

That was asking too much, but now wasn’t the time to set that truth bomb off. With one final hug, I made my way over to Ethan, but not before stopping at the bar for a little liquid courage. With a glass of cold Riesling in hand, I walked over to him where he stood talking with Matt and a few other friends. They all dispersed when they saw me, and I couldn’t help but wonder if everyone in the hall was watching us.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he said back, flashing his boyish smile, the one that always made

me melt.

“You doing okay?”

He shrugged but kept up the façade that he was invincible. “It was a shock. No one even knew he had heart trouble. He’d had his annual physical a few months ago and everything was fine.”

What did I say to that? That he was lucky he didn’t have to suffer like my grandfather did, through five years of prostate cancer? That would be little consolation when Ethan’s dad hadn’t even made it to sixty. “If you ever want to talk about it, you know you can bend my ear,” I said even though I knew he wouldn’t.

“Thanks. I noticed Leah wasn’t here.”

I was hoping he wouldn’t ask about her. “She’s working. She couldn’t get out of it.” I hated lying, but it was partially the truth. She *was* working, but I was fairly certain she could have gotten out of it if she’d tried.

“That’s okay. What’s she doing now?”

Crap. I should have changed the subject right away, but now I was stuck. “She’s a server at Newman’s.” It sounded so pathetic when I said it. Translation: she’d missed Rick’s funeral to make a few bucks.

“Oh.” He was absorbing the insult like a champ. “I’ve tried to reach out to her, but she hasn’t ever responded back.”

So he knew it was a flimsy excuse. My sister was such an asshole for missing this. “She had a hard time adjusting to things. And you know how stubborn she is. When she makes a decision about something, she doesn’t budge.”

He nodded and chuckled. “I do. So she’s decided to ghost me.”

“Don’t hold it against her.”

“I won’t.” His face softened and my heart melted a little. “And how are you doing? Matt mentioned that you finished school.”

They’d talked about me? “I did. I’m working part-time right now, and I’m hoping to get a full-time job as soon as I can. I’m trying to find

something more permanent so I can move out of my parents' house."

"That sounds crowded. Have you tried applying with any of the sports teams in town?"

"Yeah, but they all want more experience. So I'm biding my time until I have that. How about you? How's Vancouver?"

"Good. The same. Still the traffic you hate."

I sipped my wine and as I glanced around, I was sure everyone was glued to us. What were they expecting? A brawl?

Ethan must have noticed too, because he said, "You want to go outside? It's a beautiful day and we won't be on full display there."

"I love that idea."

I followed him out one of the side hall doors, fully aware that Wolseley and Jill were watching my every move as they ate their cake and cookies. Add Ava to that as well. Whatever they were thinking, they could unthink it. My plan was to settle things with Ethan and move on from this. Maybe in the end, we really could be friends.

We found a shady spot outside where a few tables and chairs had been set up for another event. Neither of us said anything for a while until a memory popped into my head.

"Do you remember that camping trip to Bunker Hill? The one where my mom would only let me go if I brought Leah along."

Ethan covered his face with his hands and laughed. "How could I forget?"

"That third night was pitch black and I couldn't find my mini flashlight. I was sure I had the right tent, but imagine you're dad's surprise when I tried to crawl into his sleeping bag with him."

"He watched us like a hawk those last few days. And when we got home, I got this long lecture about responsibility and that he and mom would pay for condoms, and that they were too young to be grandparents."

I gasped. "You've never told me that before."

He shook his head and groaned. "I was mortified."

“You were mortified! I tried to cuddle with your dad!”

“He didn’t hold it against you.”

“And he didn’t tell my parents, so that was a real bonus.”

“Because he loved you. You were the only one willing to play chess with him. I don’t know how many times he tried to teach me how to play. I wasn’t interested and neither was Ava. But when you wanted to learn, it made his day.”

“You dad and I had a lot of fun together. Especially on all those road trips to watch you play on weekends. I’ll miss him.”

“Me too.”

I sipped my wine and contemplated what to say next. I had no idea when I’d see Ethan again, so there was no better time to get the past out of the way. “About what happened...”

He looked at me with sad brown eyes. I hadn’t noticed the dark circles under them till now.

“I was an asshole,” he said. “I’m sorry for the way things ended. I didn’t want it to end, but looking back, I understand where you were coming from. I should have been more considerate.”

“It’s been a long time. We should both move on from it. I hate that Ava walks around on eggshells when your name comes up. I just want it to be natural. And that if you’re in town, we can say hi and it won’t be awkward.”

He cracked a smile, almost like he was relieved. “I’d like that too. And I have an idea to get past this awkwardness. How about we go for burgers at the North Star? Let’s even spring for chocolate milkshakes.”

I got excited at the prospect before reality set in. “What now?”

“Why not?”

“You’re going to ditch your dad’s wake?”

“He’d want us to have fun.”

I took a second to ponder that. Yeah, Ethan was right. “He would.”

He called us an Uber since I’d just downed a generous glass of wine, and

I sent a text to Wolseley and Jill.

Going for burgers with Ethan. Breaking the ice. Go home without me.

“Uber should be here in five minutes,” Ethan said, watching its progress on his phone screen.

I finished the last of my wine, and we walked around the outside of the hall so no one would see us. While we were waiting, my phone pinged.

Don't do anything stupid.

Jill was always looking out for me. But she didn't need to worry.

* * *

We'd missed the lunch crowd at the North Star diner, so it was just us and a few other booths. The last time I'd been there was with Ethan. I'd avoided it ever since because it had always been our place. As teenagers, we'd liked it because the food was good and cheap. As adults, it was special because we'd shared our first kiss here. And many celebrations had taken place in these booths. When he was drafted, after his first year playing professional hockey, when I got into college, and when he told me he loved me.

The server came around and we ordered our usual. Bacon cheeseburgers, fries, chocolate milkshakes, and gravy for Ethan's fries.

“So Leah graduated?” Ethan asked.

“Yes. Last year.”

“And she's at Newman's?” he asked with an arched brow.

“She makes more money at Newman's than she'd make as a dietitian.”

He blinked a few times. “That blows my mind.”

“So I can't blame her.”

“And your mom and dad are good? I barely saw them today.”

“Yeah, they're good. Dad retired at fifty-five and keeps busy in the

garden. Mom is working part-time so Dad won't drive her crazy." I couldn't tell him how Mom and Dad felt about funerals. "I guess you plan to stick around a while to help your mom out?"

"At least a few weeks, but probably longer. I don't want her to have to deal with this all alone and Ava is no help. She's taking this hard."

"I know you don't need my help, but if there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to ask."

As we stared at each other, I couldn't help noticing a few lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. But then I probably looked a little older too.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I'm guessing the team has changed a lot in three years?" I asked as I dipped a fry in ketchup.

"Some of the old-timers have retired. Some guys went into free agency and are gone. But our core group is still there."

I tried not to reminisce about those days and the fun I'd had hanging out with the other girlfriends and some of the wives. A lot of them were new to the city too, so we did outings together and charitable work. Many of us didn't work—I'd dropped out of school for Ethan so I couldn't get a physio job, and some of the wives had kids to look after. But I also couldn't forget the lonely times when Ethan was on a road trip and I didn't have much to do. I took some courses here and there, but I should have finished my degree. Instead, I was waiting for something, I'm not sure what, but it certainly never came.

"You'll say hello to them for me?"

"Of course."

I played with the straw in my milkshake. "I wish that we'd reconnected sooner and not because your dad passed away, you know? I hate that it went on this long."

"I feel the same way. I didn't know what to say to you. I didn't know how

to fix things, and I wasn't sure you even wanted to hear from me."

"I have missed being able to talk to you." When I looked up at him, I saw the same longing in his eyes.

"I missed you too. I think about you a lot. You were always there for me, and then you weren't. And I know I should have been more supportive of you. I fucked up."

The server popped in just at that moment to ask if we were finished. Ethan and I looked at each other and nodded.

"I'll pack it up for you," she said, then took our plates away.

We left the diner with our doggie bags, and I didn't know what to do next. Was this when we called two Ubers and parted ways forever? Or did we try to be friends? I had no idea, and my brain was in a fog. So when Ethan grasped my hand, I startled.

"Let's just hang out for a bit. Do we have to say goodbye now?"

I should have said goodbye at that moment, but before I could stop myself, I was saying yes.

Chapter Four

Tangi

We took a short walk, but my feet were killing me in my heels, screaming for my comfy work sneakers. So I suggested we hang out somewhere, and Ethan proposed his condo. He'd bought it after he'd signed his first contract, and I'd just assumed he sold it at some point.

"It's a place of my own when I'm in town," he explained as we Ubered there." And when a friend gets traded here, it's a place for them to stay until they get settled."

"That's nice of you."

He shrugged. "I figured it was empty, so why not have someone use it. Plus, Dad did encourage me to invest in real estate."

We reached his penthouse condo was in Downtown East, and rode up in the elevator,. It didn't occur to either of us to go back to the funeral, despite Ethan's phone pinging every few seconds. We were going to hang out, talk, then I'd go home. Once inside his all-too-familiar place, I kicked off my shoes while he replied to some texts. I collapsed onto his fluffy gray sofa and let out a contented sigh.

"My feet thank you for this reprieve."

He put our food in the fridge and sat next to me.

"Thanks for coming here," he said. "It's nice to be away from the ... sadness."

I turned to face him, placing my hand on his. "You know, it's okay to not keep it all inside. I know how much you loved your dad. Don't be afraid to feel things."

He chuckled. "You sound like a therapist."

"I've done some therapy. Learned to meditate. Decided to let go of anger. It makes a huge difference."

He leaned back on the sofa and ran his hands through his hair. “Yeah, I have to learn to do all that. This last week has drained me.”

“You don’t need to handle this alone. People care about you.”

“And I was really good at hurting you. Tang, you were too good for me.”

“Stop that. Look, we weren’t meant to make it. Shit happens.”

He squeezed my hand. “When we broke up, Dad gave me the biggest lecture. He said I was throwing away the best girl I was ever going to meet. He wasn’t wrong.”

My heart blipped again. Why was he saying this and what was I feeling? Could we get back together? And why did a big part of me want that? “Ethan I—”

“I get it. I know we aren’t getting back together. I’ve accepted that. It’s just nice being with you. I missed you so much.”

I opened my mouth to say something—I wasn’t sure what—but stopped when he leaned in closer to me. And then he kissed me gently, tentatively, to see what I’d do. I was frozen in shock, but when he leaned in again, I returned the kiss. This was wrong, but it felt amazing, and I wanted to be selfish and not let it stop.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I said at last.

“I know,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine. “But when I saw you, it was like seeing you that very first time. You were the prettiest woman in the room.”

I touched his cheek and tried to quell my pounding heart. I could hear Jill in my head telling me he had a girlfriend, but so many feelings were coming to the surface. Ethan had been the only man I’d ever loved.

“Why do you always have to mess me up?” I asked.

“Because you mess me up too,” he said, kissing me again. I didn’t stop him this time, but I didn’t want to rush this moment either. Our kisses were hungry and longing, and he only stopped to scoop me up into his arms and lead me back to his bedroom, the bedroom we once shared whenever we

came back home together.

He set me on my feet and yanked off his suit jacket. I turned for him to unzip my dress. The only black underwear I had to go under the dress happened to be a matching pair of a lacy black bra, not that I'd expected to end up here. Not in a million years.

"You look amazing," he said, trailing his fingers down my arms. His touch sent chills through me.

"Let's see how you look," I said, slowly undoing each button of his dress shirt. His breath hitched as I pulled it from his pants and slipped it off his shoulders. Of course he looked like he belonged on the cover of any men's fitness magazine, right down to the chiseled abs. "Yeah, you look good," I said with a devious smile. When he reached out to touch me, I stepped back, and he frowned. "I'm not done yet."

I unbuckled his belt and he did the rest, casting his pants aside. We didn't take our eyes off each other as he moved in close, reaching behind my back and unfastening my bra. It fell to the floor, and he hoisted me up. I wrapped my legs around him as he brought me to the bed, setting me down, and then he hooked a finger in my panties and pulled them down my legs.

"How wet are you?" he asked.

Probably sopping wet, but I wasn't admitting it. He could find out for himself. So I shrugged and gave him a playful smile.

"I see. I'll have to find out."

He climbed onto the bed next to me, kissing me again and his hand slipped between my legs. I groaned as he found my clit.

"Yup. Totally wet."

As he circled my clit, his mouth found my right breast, and he sucked and nipped before moving to the next. He had me close to coming, but I tried to fight it off. I wanted to keep the foreplay going as long as possible. I knew how good Ethan and I were at it. We'd spent a lot of time practicing.

But then he broke my resolve when he inserted one, then two fingers

inside me while his thumb worked my clit. I came completely undone, crying out as the orgasm ripped through me. Ethan kept up the finger fucking, and there was only one thing I could do to stop him. I slid my hand inside his boxers and grabbed hold of his rock-hard cock. I ran my fingers over his balls, then up the main vein of his cock, placing just enough pressure on him. I knew just what he liked. His fingers finally slipped out of me, and I sighed as he fell back and took off his boxers.

I sat up, looking down at him, my hand on his cock. “Do you want what’s behind door number one, or would you like to know what’s behind door number two?” I asked, licking my lips.

“I think I need to know my options,” he said breathlessly as I placed more pressure on his cock.

“Door number one consists of a hand job until you come. Behind door number two, I ride you.”

He smiled. “Fuck, I want them both.”

“Sorry, you’re going to have to pick one.”

He closed his eyes as my hands continued to work his cock. Then he opened them and said, “I’m going to need you to ride me.”

“Excellent choice.”

He reached over to his nightstand and pulled open the drawer, producing a condom. He slipped it on, and it was a good thing he was thinking, because it had slipped my mind, and I wasn’t on the pill anymore. I lined his cock up with my entrance and slowly slid down. I hadn’t been with a guy for almost a year, so it had been a while. When he was a few inches inside me, he grunted his satisfaction.

“Shit, Tang, you are so fucking tight.”

I took a few breaths and relaxed my muscles as I slid down him further, letting my body adjust to his size. It felt so fucking good as I planted my hands on his chest. He played with my hard nipples, giving them a gentle twist.

“Be nice,” I scolded.

Once I had him fully inside me, I slid up and down, trying to keep up a good pace, but when he started playing with my clit again, I lost myself. He thrust up with his hips and I tried to keep control, but he could see that second orgasm building, and he flipped me onto my back, pistoning his cock into me, and I couldn't hold back. The orgasm tore through me, and with a few final thrusts, he was seated in me, growling his satisfaction as he came too.

He kissed me a few times before slowly pulling out and heading to the washroom to dispose of the condom. I felt empty and already wanted more. Knowing Ethan, he wasn't finished with me yet.

He climbed into bed and pulled me close, one hand resting on my ass. I wanted to lie there a few minutes and take it all in, but I didn't want to think too far ahead, either. But maybe, just maybe this meant more than I thought. If Ethan wanted to get back together, I couldn't see myself saying no.

Chapter Five

Ethan

I opened my eyes, my face nestled into Tangi's neck. We must have fallen asleep. From the scant evening light, it was maybe around nine o'clock. That was what I missed most about summers back home. Late summer nights when it wasn't pitch black until after eleven.

I didn't want to move, instead enjoying the feel of Tangi in my arms, the way she smelled of citrus and lavender. I thought of the last few hours where nothing seemed to matter but having my Tangi back. The sex was just as I'd remembered, and thinking of the sounds she made, the way she'd moved and teased had my cock getting hard again. That was the thing about us: the sex had always been good, despite how young we'd been when we'd first started dating. Neither of us had been virgins, but we hadn't been experienced either. Together we'd experimented, and the results had been mind-blowing.

I gently kissed her neck, and she rolled over to face me. I caressed her shoulder, then let my hand slip down to her breast. Her nipples looked red and swollen from the abuse they'd taken from me earlier, so this time I leaned in and rolled my tongue over one, then the other. She mewled in satisfaction. She had the perfect breasts—not too big and not too small. I was a tits man, and I could play with hers all day long.

“Do you plan to torture me some more?” she asked, her hand slipping down to my semi-hard cock. “Because two can play at that game.”

My hand found the soft folds of her pussy, and without warning, I shoved two fingers inside of her. She bucked at the intrusion, giving my cock a momentary break, but when I saw her bite her lip, I knew what she had in mind. I didn't give her a chance. In one effortless maneuver, I had her on her stomach and she giggled in delight. Fuck, how I missed that.

“Hands and knees, Tangi,” I whispered in her ear.

We both liked it doggy style, and she didn't put up an argument. I lined my cock up to her sopping entrance, and slammed into her to the hilt. She squeaked at the invasion, but soon she was meeting me thrust for thrust. Her pussy was like a vise on my cock, and I knew I wouldn't be able to hold out for long—and I wasn't coming alone. I reached around and massaged her swollen clit. Within seconds, I was exploding inside her and she followed close behind. We both crumpled to the bed, exhausted.

“Okay, no more. I don't think I could take it,” she said breathlessly.

“I figured it was my way of getting in shape for training camp.”

She punched me playfully in the arm. “I think it would help if we replenished ourselves. Don't we have some burgers and probably gross french fries in your fridge?”

“We do, and if we douse them in gravy, the fries will taste just fine.”

Her eyes had taken on a bit more green as she stared at me. “Is that why you get the gravy?”

“Sort of. I love gravy and it makes old fries bearable.”

“Smart.”

She was going to get back into her black dress, but I rummaged through one of my drawers and pulled out a T-shirt for her instead. These last few hours with her had helped to ease the pain of Dad's death, and her dress was a painful reminder, even though she looked amazing in it.

“This is kind of like old times,” she said as I pulled the food from the fridge and popped it in the microwave. I grabbed a bottle of white wine, a Riesling I was sure she'd like. I'd always kept a bottle around for what? A moment like this? Just in case?

“We spent too many late nights doing this.”

“Thankfully, it didn't affect your play.”

I laughed. “That we know of.”

I grabbed two plates and when the microwave beeped, I plated our food with her fries drenched in gravy. She ate a forkful and nodded her approval.

“How are we going to explain our absence?” she asked.

“We were catching up.”

She arched a brow and then glanced at her watch. “For the last six hours?”

“It was a lot of catching up. Three years’ worth.”

My phone trilled with a text. While Tangi ate, I grabbed my phone and my heart picked up a few beats. Brandi.

I miss you, babe. I can't wait to see you and sort out everything.
I want us back on the right track. Love you.

“You okay? Bad news?” Tangi asked.

I shook my head and set down my phone. I'd answer Brandi later.

“Uh, no. No big deal.”

I didn't want this moment to end. I knew it couldn't go on forever, but I'd make it last as long as I could. “What are Wolseley and Jill up to?” They'd been her best friends since middle school, and while both liked me, after the breakup, they'd cut me off even on their social media accounts. I was suddenly a plague.

“Jill is working PR for Richardson's. She's been there a few years, working her way up the corporate ladder.”

“Holy shit! Good for her. They opened up a massive store in Vancouver last year.”

“She loves the job. It's a bit stressful, but she thrives under pressure. As for Wolseley, she's planning to open a new vegan and vegetarian restaurant this fall. It's been a dream of hers. Until that happens, she's been doing catering on the side.”

Tangi's thick, chestnut-colored hair was tousled in the sexiest way, and all I wanted to do was run my hands through it, but I had to keep my cock at bay. “I'm glad they're doing well. And that you're doing what you love.” I paused. “You know, I was thinking about your job and some connections I have.” When her face lit up, I pressed on. “I know some of the guys on the

Wolves. I can have them put a good word in for you. Getting in with a professional team here would be an amazing job.”

For a split second, the light went away. What had I said? I knew she liked to be independent, so it was possible I’d pissed her off by offering to help.

“I prefer to find my own job. And if the Wolves are ever hiring, I’ll consider it.”

Yup, I’d fucked up. There was a sudden coolness to her voice.

“You seem annoyed,” I said. Not too long ago, I would have let her iciness slide, never knowing what I’d done, but that was before. We didn’t have much time together, so I didn’t want to leave it this way.

“I’m not,” she said, focusing on her burger as if I’d vanished from the room.

“No, we aren’t doing this. Is it because I’m interfering? What is it? I’m just trying to help you out, that’s all. A job with the Wolves would be huge.”

She sighed. “It’s just that ... I don’t get it. We had sex, it was fucking fantastic, it’s like we were before, and now you’re trying to isolate me.”

I didn’t get it at first, and when I did, a huge pit formed in my stomach. She thought that we were going to get back together? I guess I hadn’t considered that. And now that it was presented to me, I felt like an idiot.

“Tang, I didn’t realize you thought this meant more than it does.”

Her mouth opened in shock, but she quickly closed it. “I didn’t realize I was just a puck bunny.”

Crap. Now I’d really screwed up. “You’re not. I wasn’t thinking about anything other than the present. I didn’t realize you thought it meant we were going to get back together.”

Now she wagged her finger at me, and I’d really stepped in it.

“No, no. I didn’t think anything specific. I wasn’t envisioning some grand reunion. I simply thought there was possibly a chance, but you’re suggesting I get a job here with the Wolves instead of suggesting a job with the Kodiaks in Vancouver. So it’s crystal clear to me now. This was just goodbye sex.

Whatever.”

This was the moment I’d been dreading. She took a few sips of wine as I drew in a deep breath.

“Tang, haven’t we both moved on with our lives?”

“Yes, *Ethan*,” she said, stressing my name, “we have. But then you fucked me twice, so now I’m a little confused. Unless you’ve spent so much time with other hockey players that you’ve become *that* guy. You know, with a girl in every city. I won’t be your Minnesota girl.”

I scratched my head, feeling like the biggest piece of shit. “I’m assuming you’re dating, that you have a boyfriend.”

“I’ve dated, yes. I don’t have a boyfriend, because if I did, I wouldn’t be here with you right now. I’m not that kind of asshole.” Her expression let me know that I *was* that kind of asshole.

The pit in my stomach was getting bigger and bigger. I swallowed down the lump in my throat with a gulp of wine. “I just assumed you knew I was seeing someone.”

Her jaw tensed and I knew that wounded her. I hated myself.

“I did, but clearly that didn’t stop you.”

“Her name is Brandi and we’ve been seeing each other for about a year. We’re pretty serious,” I said. “I mean, it hasn’t been perfect, at least not recently ...” Shit. I had to stop babbling.

She sipped her wine again, but I could see her hand shake just a bit. This was killing me, so I couldn’t begin to imagine what it was doing to her.

“I’m happy for you.”

She wasn’t happy. She was fucking furious.

“Tang, I’m sorry you got the wrong idea.” Part of me wanted to set things right with Tangi, let Brandi go, but I was in too deep now.

“Don’t be sorry to me. You should be sorry to your girlfriend.”

No beating around the bush. I was a shit. I’d cheated on Brandi, but I’d pay for that later. “I suppose I am. And I’m sorry for doing that to you. I do

love Brandi.”

“You love her so much that you had sex with me? Screw you, Ethan.”

I deserved it all. “There is something else you should know. I don’t want you to find out from someone else.”

And that’s when I saw the panic on her face. I shouldn’t have slept with her and given her hope. I should have just left her alone.

“Tang, Brandi and I are engaged.”

Chapter Six

Tangi

The words thundered in my head. The most commitment-phobic man on the planet was engaged to someone he'd been dating a year? A fucking year! How long had I waited? How many times had I told him I wanted more than just being the person he lived in. I wanted to have a life with him, and after almost seven years, I got the shaft, while *Brandi* secured the ever-illusive commitment in less than a year?

I was enraged! I slammed my wineglass down so hard I thought it was going to shatter. I wanted to throw the bottle of Riesling at him. "Are you serious right now?"

The look of horror on his face gave me no satisfaction. Suddenly, the first and only guy I'd ever loved was worse than any man I could ever possibly date. My high school sweetheart, the person I'd put my career on hold for, the one I'd stood by, who was as close to my family as a son, had met a basic bitch, dated her a year, and popped the question?

He put his hands up to placate me. Such a prick. "I know you're upset," he said.

I vibrated with rage. "Fuck you!"

He took a second to let the tension ease, but I wasn't done with him. Since this was definitely goodbye forever, there were things I needed to get off my chest, and he was going to listen. Except he spoke first.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm a different person now. I'm more mature, I see things in a new way. I met Brandi and we connected."

"You connected to her so well, that you didn't have a problem connecting your dick to my pussy."

I was never a wallflower, but I'd always taken a step back to let him shine in his hockey career. I'd often told myself that once his career was over, I'd

have time to finish school, pursue a career, and maybe along the way we'd have a family. I'd held my tongue more than a few times when I would have loved to tell some of his teammates and their partners what I thought, but no more. He was getting the entire Tangi Kildare experience.

"You're right to be pissed. We shouldn't have done that," he said as calmly as possible.

"You say that now. How convenient. Did you fuck around on me too? It's okay to be honest. We aren't together, and you're engaged to someone else, so who cares. Did you?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, likely wishing he could be anywhere else. "No. I was never unfaithful to you."

"How noble of you. So you only cheat on your *fiancée*. And here I thought you were one of the good guys. But you're just like all your teammates."

"Tang, we aren't getting anywhere here. Let's talk when you've cooled off. You can be pissed at me then too, but you're freaking out right now."

I laughed sarcastically. "Am I not allowed to freak out? Does that make you uncomfortable?" I said as sweetly as possible. "Because here's the thing: once I walk out of here, we're never going to talk again. I'm done with you. I don't care what you do with your life or who you marry. Shit, Leah had you pegged right after all. Here I thought she was being unreasonable by shutting you out. Turns out I should have listened to her and stayed home today, but I respected your dad too much. By the way, go fuck yourself."

I pushed past him into the bedroom to change. As I was getting my shoes on, he got close to the door but didn't block it.

"I'm sorry I hurt you. I never wanted to do that. It's why I've stayed away. You'll always have a place in my heart. I know I screwed up, but I hope you can forgive me. I hate that you're leaving here so angry."

He sounded sincere, but I didn't trust anything about him anymore. "Make sure to leave my family off the wedding invitation list. I can assure

you that none of us will be attending.”

I got out of there as fast as possible, before he could see any cracks in my demeanor. As it all began to sink in, my heart was beginning to break. Through blurred vision, I called an Uber that was thankfully only minutes away. I pulled myself together long enough to make it home. Dad was watching TV in the living room and barely looked up. Mom was already in bed, and Leah wasn't home from work. I headed straight for the bathroom to take a shower. I could still smell Ethan's cologne on me, and I wanted it gone. Maybe I'd burn the dress.

By the time I crawled into bed, Leah was home from work. It was a weeknight and Newman's closed a little earlier. A light knock on my door startled me, but I told her to come in.

She popped her head in and when she saw me sitting up, she came inside. She was still in her Newman's uniform of a short black shirt and fitted black top. Sexy but professional.

“How'd it go?” she asked, her voice having lost its edge from this afternoon.

“It was fine. Sad.”

“And Ethan?”

I bristled at the memory of less than an hour ago. “He's fine, I guess. We talked a bit. We're both going our separate ways.”

“That's good,” she said, her light brown eyes searching me for some sign that that wasn't true. “I'm sort of feeling bad that I didn't go today. Maybe I should have gone.”

I wished she had. There would have been no way I would have ended up in bed with Ethan if she'd been there with me. “You sent a card. That should be fine.”

She stood there for a second, thinking of something, her gaze fixed on my bedroom window. Then she turned to me again. “Was it weird seeing him?”

“A little.”

“Did he look the same?”

“A little older.”

“Was he nice to you?”

Part of me wanted to tell her what had gone on this evening, but she'd kill me. “He was polite. Sounds like he'll be around for a bit, sorting out his Dad's will. Did you know he was engaged?”

Leah's eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Are you shitting me?”

“Nope. He mentioned it to me. I'm pretty sure I was one of the last people to know.”

“What an asshole! The guy who said he was never going to get married is engaged to someone other than you?”

“It's fine. It makes cutting that final tie easier.”

She scooted me over and sat next to me. “I'm sorry, Tang. I know that's all you ever wanted from him. To finally pop the question, and the asshole does to someone else. I thought the two of you would be forever.”

“So did I. But he moved on, and I moved on.”

“I'm going to make it my life's work to find you a real man. One who respects and loves you. Ethan will be sorry he let you go.”

I hugged her and part of me wanted to cry and tell her everything, but I was too ashamed. How stupid had I been for jumping into bed with him? No, no one would ever find out. It would be my secret forever.

Chapter Seven

Ethan

My phone was buzzing on the nightstand. I slowly opened my eyes and rubbed away the sleep. The night before came flooding back and I wanted to roll over and go back to sleep, but I knew who was calling. Ava and I had agreed to help Mom with some of the paperwork and the visit to the lawyer's. I had no idea death was so complicated.

I sat up and grabbed my phone. Ava had sent a dozen texts and called several times. Shit, I was late. After Tangi had left, I couldn't get to sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about the way she'd looked when I'd told her about Brandi. Her hurt and anger was like a knife to my gut, a knife that kept twisting. I hated the way we'd left it, but I had to let her go. She was right: we had to be done.

I'll be there in 20 minutes.

I hoped that would hold off Ava's onslaught. I took a shower and didn't even have time for breakfast. By the time I got to Mom and Dad's, I'd made good time. Just a few minutes late. Ava was standing at the dining room table while Mom sat. There were stacks of boxes in front of them.

"So glad you could make it," Ava said sarcastically.

"Sorry. Slept in."

The look on Ava's face told me she knew it was more than that. Everyone who'd been at the wake knew that Tangi and I had left together. There would be so many questions, but knowing Tang like I did, she'd tell people that we'd talked, had a bite to eat, and decided to go our separate ways. She wouldn't tell anyone the truth.

"Well, get to work."

"What is all this?" I asked, taking a seat.

“Your dad didn’t like to throw anything away,” Mom said. “Not even the old stuff, so the lawyer suggested we go through it all and make sure there’s nothing important here. I made a list of what we keep and what goes to the shredder.”

I scanned the list and got started. The work was tedious, and Dad sure liked to keep a lot of crap. Unnecessary financial statements for the last ten years were there, but Ava also stumbled on some important old information on stocks and bonds, stuff Mom hadn’t known about. By the time lunch rolled around, I was starving, so Ava suggested we go pick up takeout. I should have known what she was up to, but it wasn’t until we were in the car that I became painfully aware.

“What happened with you and Tangi? You disappeared and never came back. Mom and I had to do all the entertaining.”

She’d made sure to drive so that I was stuck until this inquisition was over. Maybe I could open the door and jump out, but that would likely end my hockey career. “Nothing. We talked. We went for burgers, and that was it. We’re both moving on.” Just saying it was a stab to the heart.

“Then you told her about your engagement.”

“Yup.”

Ava pursed her lips. “Having to keep that a secret for months was a shitty thing to make me do. You should have let me tell her a long time ago.”

“I know. I was trying to find the right way to tell her.”

“How did she take it?”

There was no use lying to my sister; she’d know right away that I was full of shit. “Not well.”

Ava shook her head and grunted. “How did you think she’d take it?”

“I figured it would be bad. She told me she didn’t want me in her life anymore.”

Ava huffed. “Yeah, well, that’s the answer I expected she’d give you. You know what that means? This is finally over. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t

think she was pining away for you. She'd been seeing guys, but now I hope she finds someone decent. Who will treat her right."

Meaning, not me.

We didn't say much else. We picked up lunch, then got back to work. I could barely keep my eyes open by the time we called it for the day. We'd managed to get through half the papers with a plan to finish them the next day. I offered to stay with Mom for a bit, but she told me she was tired and wanted to get some rest. I think that was code for "I want to be alone for a good cry."

I got back to my place and tried not to think about Tangi. Damn, what was I going to tell Brandi when she checked in? She said she'd call every couple of days, and I was due for a call. She mentioned that cell service was sketchy in some parts and not to bother trying her. So what would I say? That I'd reminisced with my ex, and we accidentally had sex a few times? No, that wouldn't go over well. For now, I'd say nothing. She never needed to find out.

I didn't want to stick around by myself feeling like shit, so I texted Craig and asked him if he wanted to go out for drinks. I needed someone to hang out with who wouldn't make me feel like shit.

Sure. Sam's at 7? It's wing night.

Craig loved his wings.

Yup. See you then.

* * *

A lot of people around St. Paul and Minneapolis recognized me as one of their homegrown hockey stars, but for the most part, other than the occasional autograph and adoring kid, no one bothered me. In some cases, it protected me from insults, which was kind of cool. In return, I was always

good to the fans, and especially for the kids. I couldn't imagine disappointing a kid.

When I got to Sam's and made my way over to the booth Craig was in, I got a few stares and nods. I smiled back and when I took my seat, Craig gave me side-eye.

"I barely talked to you at your dad's funeral, then I see you leaving with Tangi. What shit did you get yourself mixed up in?"

I sighed as a server came around and slapped down two beers. I'd known Craig long enough that he ordered my favorite beer if he arrived somewhere first. I took a gulp of it and set it back down. Craig's washed-out blue eyes were watching me, waiting for an answer.

"We talked. We reminisced."

"And then you slept with her."

How the hell did he do that? "Look, we were talking. Things just happened."

"Your dick in her pussy just happened? Damn, I wish that happened to me."

"You know what I mean."

He shook his head, and his expression held all his disappointment. "You shouldn't have done that. I'm guessing she still doesn't know about Brandi."

"I told her. She got pissed. Told me to screw off."

Craig's face contorted as if he'd chomped into the sourest lemon. "You didn't. Are you serious?"

"She had to know. It was going to come out anyway."

"If I had my wings right now, I'd throw some at you. What were you thinking? Tangi has been nothing but good to you, and not only do you sleep with her, but then you crush her? She deserved better than that."

Craig was the first guy to break up with a girl for a stupid reason, but for some reason, he'd always had a soft spot for Tangi. Maybe he had a crush on her, but he would have never pursued it while I was dating her. But then

again, everyone loved Tangi. She was fun, honest, smart, athletic, and the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. And I'd been an ass to her.

"I know. I feel like crap."

"You didn't ask for it, but I'm going to give you a piece of advice. Leave her alone. Leave her sister alone. Leave it all alone. Go get married, stay out west, or wherever you plan on living after hockey, and let her do the same. The way I see it, you guys are definitely done."

We stuffed ourselves with wings, watched a baseball game, caught up on the last few months, then it was time to go home. I dreaded that part. I hated being alone. My first year of junior hockey was the shittiest time for me. I was staying with a strange family, I had no friends other than my new teammates, and Tangi was miles away. When I'd finally made the Kodiaks full-time, Tangi had put her life on hold and moved out to Vancouver with me. She'd taken some college and university courses here and there, but she'd put it all aside for me. So I wouldn't be alone. I was an asshole.

As I entered my empty condo, my phone trilled. It was Brandi's distinctive ring. For the first time since we'd started dating, I wasn't looking forward to her call.

"Hey! How are you?" I said as cheerfully as I could muster.

"I'm good. Doing a lot of work. Days are long, but it's rewarding. But more importantly, how are you doing?"

I gave her a recap of the funeral, how Mom and Ava were doing, Dad's mountain of papers and my night out with Craig. No mention of Tangi, of course. She listened and apologized for the hundredth time that she hadn't been there.

"Your work was important. I don't ever want you to feel bad," I said. "If you'd come for the funeral, you would have missed out on that opportunity."

"I wanted to be there for you."

"It's fine. I had my mom, my sister, and loads of family. I was all right."

She cleared her throat, and I knew what she was going to ask before she

said. "Did you see your ex?"

"Yeah. We talked. We're good. She's moved on with her life, and so have I. You're in my life now. She's in the past."

"I love you," she said.

My heart hurt a little. I'd been so shitty to her as well. "I love you too."

How would I ever make this up to her?

Chapter Eight

Tangi

The next few weeks I managed to keep a low profile. I avoided anyone who would ask me about what Ethan and I had done when we'd disappeared from his father's wake. The only two people I'd told were my besties, Wolseley and Jill. In usual fashion, Jill had given me a long lecture about respecting myself and reminded me that I should have known he was a jerk. Wolseley was easygoing about it, her usual free-spirited self.

"If you enjoyed yourself, think of it as a last hurrah," she'd said.

That hadn't gone over well with Jill and the two had gotten into a long debate about it, one I'd avoided joining.

"Where are you going tonight?" Leah asked as I put on an ivory dress embroidered with sequins that fell just above my knees. It was fitted, with spaghetti straps and a plunging neckline, and it screamed sexy while also being elegant. As long as the girls were covered, I was fine. I'd worn this dress to one of the many charity galas I'd attended with Ethan. At one point, I'd had a whole closet full of dresses like this, but when I'd come home, I'd sold most of them off. They paid for some of my tuition.

"Richardson's is having a fundraiser tonight and Wolseley is doing the catering."

"Mmmm, vegan food," Leah said sarcastically.

"Cut it out. First of all, Wolseley is a vegetarian. Secondly, she cooks with meat, she just has her sous chefs taste it. And this isn't a vegan event, not that it would matter if it were."

Wolseley had been catering for almost two years, and the reception had been great. She'd gotten tons of clients, but this Richardson's event was going to put her on the map, especially when her restaurant opened in the fall, and I was going to be there to support her. And to stuff myself with her great

cooking. Her new restaurant would specialize in her delicious vegan and vegetarian cuisine. If she could make an impression tonight, maybe this would get her over the top with the last of the investment money she was looking for.

I drove there because I knew I wouldn't be drinking. I had to be at work early the next morning. I supposed Richardson's didn't care that they'd scheduled an event in the middle of the week. They knew that anyone who was invited would show up. And of course almost everyone was there when I got there. Jill was busy schmoozing donors for the fundraiser and Wolseley was busy in the kitchen, but Ava and Matt were there, and I beelined over to them. I needed someone to talk to.

Matt's eyes opened wide when he saw me, and that was when he gave Ava a nudge and motioned to me. Was something wrong with my dress? Was it too much? I didn't think so, based on the other fashion on display. As I approached them, Ava pasted on a pained smile.

"Hey! I should have known you were coming."

What an odd thing to say. "Yeah. Jill invited me."

"Right. Yeah. So, I think you should know something. I feel stupid that I didn't tell you sooner, but Ethan's here. Richardson's invited him because they knew he was in town. They're trying to land an endorsement deal with him."

Matt nudged Ava again, but this time I turned to follow his gaze. And then I realized why she was doing all the blustering. There was Ethan, and he had a gorgeous blonde on his arm. His fiancée. I was pretty sure my blood pressure spiked.

"Damn. Okay, he's here with Brandi. Tang, I'm sorry," she said.

I put on the fakest of smiles and turned back to her. "No problem. We sorted it all out. He's engaged. It's fine."

So why did my insides feel as if they were being torn up inside by a million tiny razor blades? I was certain that at any moment, my legs would

give out. How embarrassing would that be, meeting Brandi for the first time while flat on my ass?

“You don’t have to meet her if you don’t want to. I can make sure he stays away.”

I shook my head. “Really, it’s not a big deal. I’m fine.”

I wasn’t fine. My face was suddenly hot and my hands were clammy. I wanted to run away, but before I could make an escape to the bar, they were walking our way. I know I groaned out loud, but there was no way they could have heard it over the chatter of other guests. I turned and smiled at them as best I could. I took a quick glance at Ethan, and he looked about as uncomfortable as I felt.

“Hi,” Brandi said with a little wave. “I’m Brandi. Nice to meet you.”

I really hated my life at that moment. Where were Jill and Wolseley to save me from this misery? How did Jill not know that Ethan would be here? And then I found myself staring at Brandi. She was shorter than me, maybe five foot five. Her blonde hair was swept up in perfect waves, and while she was slim, she had more of an hourglass shape rather than an athletic one like mine. Her blue eyes were trained on me, waiting for me to speak. Fuck.

“I’m Tangi,” I managed to get out.

Her face illuminated with faux surprise. It was obvious that she knew who I was. “So you’re Tangi! Now I can finally put a face to the name.”

Nothing she said was passing the sniff test for me. If she wanted to know who I was, she could check Instagram. I didn’t hide my profile, plus there were tons of pictures of me on Ava’s page. I was pretty sure she’d sashayed over to rub my nose in their relationship.

“Nice to meet you. And congratulations on the engagement,” I said, matching her faux friendliness. Why not play along with this stupid game?

“Oh, thanks. I had no idea Ethan was going to propose. It all happened so fast.”

She casually flashed the ring, and the blow to my heart hurt even more. I

stole a quick glance at Ethan and he looked more pained than I felt. Served him right. “I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful life together.” I made the point not to ask any questions, hoping the two of them would shove off, but Brandi didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

“It so nice to finally visit Minneapolis and meet the rest of Ethan’s family. I’m sorry I missed Rick’s funeral, but Ethan insisted I continue my mission in Central America.”

Was she some sort of religious missionary? What had Ethan landed in? When I didn’t ask her a question, she continued.

“I’m a dentist. We visit developing countries and offer dental care and guidance about oral hygiene.”

“Oh, sort of like Doctors Without Borders?” I wanted to kick myself. Why had I asked a damn question? And why wasn’t Ethan saving me from this instead of sulking and shuffling his feet a million times. I was happy he was uncomfortable.

Her face lit up. “Exactly like that. My latest mission took me to Guatemala and Honduras. Some days I was working sixteen hours. We take what we do—”

“There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you,” Jill said. “I’m so sorry to interrupt,” she said to everyone else, “but I need Tangi for something special. Please excuse us.”

She pulled me away before Brandi could do any more bragging. Once we were out of earshot, I heaved a sigh of relief. “That was awful.”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you they were going to be here. It was all last-minute. I was hoping to catch you before you saw them. I should’ve just sent a text. My bad.”

“Well, you didn’t. And I just learned all about Brandi.”

Jill cringed. “I didn’t even know she was in town until about an hour ago. How bad was it?”

“It’s fine. I’ll survive, but I’m not sure how long I’m going to hang out. I

don't want to hear any more about how perfect Brandi is.”

“I don't blame you.”

I hung out with Jill for a while. She was my security blanket. I met a few of her coworkers, some of the town's movers and shakers, and finally got to say hello to Wolseley as she scurried around the event. But I didn't want to keep my two friends from their work, so I slipped out early.

And of course, Ethan was standing outside. He didn't see me at first, and I thought to turn around and go back inside, but then decided I wasn't tiptoeing around him. I wanted to go home, and he wasn't standing in my way.

He jumped when he saw me coming down the stairs. I thought to walk right past him, but he decided to speak to me before I could do that.

“I didn't know you were going to be here.”

“So you're waiting outside to stalk me?”

“No. I was getting some air. There's a lot of people and I can only mingle for so long. Brandi is hitting up some deep pockets to donate to her mission.”

“How nice. See you.”

“Wait,” he said, grasping my arm. My skin tingled at the touch, and I hated that. I hated how much my body betrayed my brain. “I wasn't trying to rub her in your face. I had no idea you were going to be here.”

“It's fine. Have a nice life.”

But he didn't let go. “I'm never going to stop being sorry for how things ended. You'll always mean a lot to me.”

“Okay. Goodbye.”

“Tang, really?”

Heat flushed my body. “Yes, really,” I said, seething. “What do you want from me? Forgiveness? Just stop talking to me and leave me alone. All right? Do you understand?”

I pulled my arm away and started walking. I didn't stop until I reached my car, even though my eyes were filled with tears. I would never let him

know that he'd always mean a lot to me too.

Chapter Nine

Tangi

I was busy for the rest of the summer, mostly dealing with older patients and their pickleball injuries, but by the beginning of September, the clinic wasn't as busy. As the new person, I was given the fewest hours. I had tried to build up a clientele base, but it was hard when the clinic kept screwing around with my schedule. I needed to find another place to work if I ever wanted to move out of my parents' house.

After another short shift at work that had me leaving early in the afternoon, I was heading home when my phone beeped. My menstrual cycle app was having a hissy fit. Apparently, it wanted an update. I stopped walking. It wanted an update? I tapped on the app and froze. Not only had I missed one period, but I was late for another one. No, no, no. My brain instantly went to that day with Ethan. He'd used a condom the first time, but had he the second time? I was worried I was about to face-plant, so I leaned against a car and was happy I didn't set off an alarm.

I didn't have any symptoms. Where was the nausea? Although I had been feeling more tired lately. Maybe it was just stress. God, I hoped that was it. I rushed to my car and drove straight to the CVS. I bought every kind of pregnancy test they sold, and as I drove home, my hands shook. If I was pregnant, what was I going to do? How would I tell my family? Mom and Dad would be happy to have a grandchild, but Leah would want to kill me. And my friends? Wolseley would tell me it was meant to be, and Jill would give me a lecture about sleeping with an ex and not using protection. Dread came over me.

I'd have to tell Ethan.

I got home, and thankfully the house was empty. I downed a few glasses of water and peed on the first test. I didn't think I had enough in me to do any

others just yet. Why had I gone to the bathroom before leaving work?

I tapped my foot on the bathroom floor as I waited. Now I was nauseous, but more about this damn test. If it turned out I was pregnant, everyone would know it happened the night of Rick's funeral. The utter humiliation I'd face knowing that everyone else would know. It would be like a billboard in downtown Minneapolis.

And then something settled in my heart. If I was pregnant, I was pretty sure I was going to keep it. I didn't care what anyone thought of whatever decision I made. And I wouldn't expect Ethan to do anything. If he wanted to, that was up to him. If I had the baby, I would find a way to raise my child alone if I had to. My parents would help out, and Leah would be a fantastic aunt even if Ethan was the father.

My phone buzzed as the timer ended. I took a few deep breaths, then looked down at the test.

Pregnant.

I sat on the toilet and stared at the word. The world seemed to close in on me at that moment. Not once had I considered this possibility. I figured I had lots of time to have kids. And hadn't I decided to be done with Ethan forever? Now we had a tie that would keep us linked. But more importantly, I was growing a little person inside of me, one I would love with all my heart.

I think that settled my decision on whether I was keeping it.

A couple hours and a couple more tests later, I had all the confirmation I Needed. My hands shook as I stuffed everything in my bag, hiding the evidence until it was time to reveal the news. Next, I called my doctor's office to make an appointment. It seemed like the right thing to do. The receptionist didn't care that I was probably pregnant and my life was about to undergo a massive upheaval. When I told her I wanted to confirm the pregnancy with my doctor, she told me that if I'd taken three tests, I was pregnant, and that I could see the doctor in two weeks. Two weeks? She was going to make me wait that long? I channeled Jill who didn't put up with

bullshit or people blowing her off, so I made a fuss. She said she'd squeeze me in first thing, but if I was late, then I'd have to wait two weeks.

I didn't sleep that night. I stared at my phone, trying to read, trying to meditate, anything to put me to sleep. Nothing worked. I'd barely eaten dinner and thankfully hadn't seen Leah. She'd come in late from her shift at Newman's, and I pretended to be asleep. She'd know something was wrong, and then I'd want to tell her. And *then* she'd kill me.

The next morning, I was at my doctor's appointment early, greeting the receptionist. As promised, she squeezed me in. Dr. Duncan smiled when she saw me. She was the best doctor I'd ever had. After the breakup with Ethan, I'd seen her when the anxiety and likely depression had been too much to cope with. She'd recommended therapy and put me on a low dose of anxiety meds. Within six months, I was back on track.

"Hello, Tangi. What brings you by today?"

"I think I'm pregnant and I want you to confirm."

"Oh," she said with a pleasant smile. "We can do a test right away."

And she did. Fifteen minutes later, I had the news that didn't surprise me.

"I have this conversation with all my patients, so I hope I'm not stepping out of line," Dr. Duncan said. "Is this a pregnancy you want to continue? Because if it's not, we have options we can discuss."

I'd had the entire night to consider this. "I'm having the baby."

"Okay. So we'll make a schedule of prenatal appointments. Until then, I recommend some prenatal vitamins and continue doing what you're doing. I know you like to keep active, and there's nothing wrong with that. I'd like to see you again next month, and in the meantime, we'll schedule an ultrasound." She gave me more information about the first trimester, mapped out how far along I was—she figured I was about nine weeks—gave me a due date of mid-April, and it was all a mess of information that she was kind enough to give me on a printout.

I scheduled all my appointments and left the office in a fog. While I

wanted to lean on Jill and Wolseley for support, telling Ethan first seemed like the right thing to do. This was going to turn my life upside down, and I was about to do the same to him.

* * *

I'd purged his phone number years ago, so I had to ask Ava for it. I'd spent hours trying to concoct a lie that wouldn't arouse any suspicion. After some long thought, I'd decided to tell her I'd found some mementos from him junior days that he'd probably want, but since I wasn't sure, I'd wanted to ask him myself. It was lazy, but it would do.

I texted her just before leaving my doctor's office. The text was far too long and explained way too much, but without asking a single question, she replied with his number. Her second text nearly floored me.

He's in town for a few days. You can give him the stuff if he wants it.

I hadn't considered telling him in person. I dreaded the thought.

Ok. I'll text him now.

My hands shook as I programmed his number into my phone. I'd probably need it from now on.

Hey, it's Tangi. Can we meet?

I thought to add that it was important, but that would sound too desperate. I drove to work and got in a few minutes late for my shift. I'd told Diane, my boss, that I'd had a last-minute doctor's appointment. Nevertheless, Judy, our receptionist, told me that Diane wanted to see me. Diane couldn't possibly blame me for being less than fifteen minutes late. Besides, I didn't have a client for another half hour.

I knocked on the door and she asked me to come in.

“Please close the door behind you,” she said.

Odd, but I didn’t question it. She always had her door open. I shut it and sat down across from her. Her desk was a mountain of papers. She was so old school and liked to have hard copies of everything. She didn’t trust computers, or backups, and thought clouds should only be in the sky. Thankfully, Judy kept an electronic copy of everything.

“Sorry I’m late. The appointment ran long.”

Diane looked down on me over her glasses. “Oh, I hadn’t noticed. That’s not why I wanted to talk to you today.” She folded her hands and looked at me thoughtfully. “I’m sure you noticed we haven’t been as busy lately. The biggest problem is that we simply have too much staff. That’s a me problem, since I’m the one who hired you all.”

I laughed politely. What else was I supposed to do?

“Tangi, your clients love you, and I know you’ve been working hard, and I hate that I have to do this, but I’ve got to let you go. We just don’t have the space for you. I like you a lot and you’re great around here, but you were the last one we hired, so you know how that goes. I’ve got to keep my senior staff happy and working, so I hope you understand. I will give you a glowing recommendation letter. And if someone here leaves, you will be the first one I call.”

I was too stunned to speak. She was firing me? So not only was I pregnant and on my own, but I was now unemployed? I swallowed hard and tried not to panic. How was I going to find a decent job and keep it while I was pregnant? That was a problem for later, because I’d just been let go and I decided to accept this with dignity.

“I’m sorry to hear this. I really enjoyed working here.”

Diane frowned now, the wrinkles on her face bunching around her mouth. The woman had to be close to seventy and could easily retire, but she was active and loved her business. “Dear, I’m sorry. But like I said, you will be the first person I call. And we’re going to give you two weeks’ pay.”

Two weeks' pay wasn't going to go far. And who was going to hire me now? I knew how it worked. The second they saw the belly, I'd be crossed off the list.

"Thanks," I said, rising. I didn't see a point in hanging around. "Am I supposed to work out my day?"

"I've got it all covered. Think of it as two weeks off."

Was she serious? Now she'd pissed me off, but I wasn't going to make a scene. I gave her a fake smile and went to cubicle. I didn't have much and packed it up in a box I found in the storage area. I hadn't made any close bonds there and didn't bother to say goodbye to anyone. Judy was opening her mouth to say something as I passed her, but I cut her off.

"Nice working with you, Judy. Later."

Fuck them all.

Just as I was getting to the car, my phone pinged. I stuffed the box in the back seat and pulled out my phone.

I can meet you tonight.

Chapter Ten

Ethan

I had a flight the next day, then a few days to get ready for training camp. I was looking forward to putting this miserable summer behind me. Mom, Ava, and I had finished up all the necessary work for Dad's estate, packed up and donated what we didn't plan to keep, and finally picked out a gravestone for Dad. And then I'd gotten the text from Tangi. It had come completely out of the blue, and while I'd planned on hanging out with Craig, I asked him if we could postpone for an hour or two. Of course he didn't mind.

I had no idea what she wanted. Maybe one final tongue-lashing for the road? She'd made it clear to me that she wanted nothing to do with me. On top of that, I'd wondered how she'd gotten my number until Ava copped to it while Mom insisted we have a final dinner together.

"It was strange," she said. "This longwinded message about finding some stuff of yours. I guess she wants to completely rid you from her life."

Mom shot Ava a look. "Stop," she said.

If Mom knew the truth, she'd be giving me shit too. But now it was making more sense. She'd found some of my crap and was giving it back and shutting the door on us completely.

After dinner, I packed the last of my things and made my way to the coffeehouse where we'd agreed to meet. Tangi was there already, sitting at a booth away from others. My breath hitched at the sight of her. Her wavy long hair was tucked behind her ears, showing off her high cheek bones. She had some extra color that added to her already tanned complexion. Everything about her was gorgeous, and I couldn't help thinking of that night together. The way she felt in my arms, her kisses, the softness of her breasts, the way it felt inside her. My cock twitched at that. Shit, I had to keep it together. I couldn't forget what I'd done and how it would hurt so many people.

I grabbed a coffee and a peanut butter cookie. The cookie was for her, her favorite, and my way of a peace offering. I handed it to her as I sat down. She was startled to see me and smiled politely, the kind of smile you'd offer a stranger.

"Thanks," she said.

How many times had I stared into those hazel eyes. I could always tell her mood by her eyes, and right now I had no idea what I was doing here. She was giving nothing away.

"How are you?"

"I'm good," she said, sipping her tea. The smell of peppermint wafted across table. She rarely drank coffee after 2 p.m. She claimed it kept her up all night. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. I'm heading back to Vancouver tomorrow."

"Right, training camp starts soon."

I nodded. Her lips were full and pink and all I could think about was kissing them, and I hated myself for it. I had Brandi to think about. "In about a week."

She swallowed hard and I waited for what she had to say. Something was wrong, I could tell.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you here, especially after our blowup last time."

"Yeah, I've been curious."

She drummed her fingers on the table and looked out the window for a moment. What the hell was going on? Was she sick? After that night in my condo, and then at the Richardson's fundraiser, I expected to never hear from her again, yet she was the one who'd initiated this meeting. Whatever she had to say was going to be huge.

"I don't know how to tell you this, so I'm just going to spit it out. I'm pregnant."

I blinked a few times. "Okay. Congrats?"

She frowned and her eyes were giving off a death stare, as if she were about to leap across the table with a machete and hack me to bits.

“Are you serious right now? Congrats?”

“I mean, what am I—” I stopped. Holy shit. I didn’t speak or move for what felt like an eternity.

“I see you’ve figured it out. That took a while. Too many pucks to the head?”

I finally found my voice. “But I used a condom.”

“Both times?”

I thought so. Didn’t I? I tried to remember putting on the second one, but there was no memory of it. I looked at her and she looked back at me, her expression giving nothing away.

“I’m sorry,” was all I could manage.

“Don’t be,” she said simply. “I’ve had a day to deal with it. And you’re the only person I’ve told.”

What was I supposed to do? What was I supposed to say? “Do you want it?” I sounded insincere and I was going to kick myself.

She nodded. “Yes. And I’m not expecting anything from you. If you want to help out, be a dad, I’m all for that. If you don’t, that’s your choice. I can make this work. You’ve made it clear to me in the past that you have no interest in being a dad, but you also had no interest in getting married, so maybe your opinion on kids has changed too.”

I was shaking my head. No way was I going to be a deadbeat. No fucking way. “You have my full support. Anything you need. This is our baby.”

She seemed surprised and that bugged me. Why would she ever think I’d abandon her? We were having a kid! A piece of me and a piece her. Yes, maybe there was a time I didn’t want kids, but that was years ago. I’d changed.

“You really don’t have to.”

Now I was confused. “But I want to. Tang, we’re having a kid. I’m not an

asshole who walks away.”

She bit her bottom lip. “I guess I wasn’t sure how you’d feel. You have a fiancée who is probably not going to be happy about this.”

Shit. Brandi. With this big news, I hadn’t really thought about her and how this would affect her. What was wrong with me? “I’ll deal with that.” How? I had no idea.

“It’s been a bit of an odd day. First I find out I’m pregnant, and then my boss calls me into her office to tell me I’ve been let go. So now I don’t even have a job anymore.”

“Crap. Sorry, Tang.” And then a thought occurred to me, and before I had time to process it in my own head, I was spitting it out. “I know of a job. It’s with the Ravens, our farm team. They just lost their physiotherapist. I think he retired? I have a friend on the coaching staff who said they’re looking for a replacement before the season ramps up. The job may require travel, but I figure not as much as with the Kodiaks. I’ll put in a good word for you if you’re interested.”

She was shaking her head more as a way of slowing me down than an outright no. “I’m not sure moving back to Vancouver is the answer. And it’s still a lot of travel.”

While she was talking, I pulled up the email on my phone and handed it to her. She looked it over, even scrolling through it a second time. She was thinking about it.

“No. I can’t leave.”

“And what are you going to do here?”

“For starters, my parents and my friends are here.”

“You’d have to live with your parents and try to find a job. Or you could come to Vancouver and work your way up to a professional team. The job pays well, and you can stay in my condo there.” Her eyes widened, and I quickly added, “Brandi and I moved into her place and I hadn’t gotten around to selling it yet. And when the baby comes, I’ll be around.”

She grimaced. “You won’t be around, though. And maybe you should talk to your fiancée before you make this offer.”

“She’s not going to change my mind. I’m going to want to be around my kid. And this gives you a chance to start fresh.”

“Providing I get the job,” she said skeptically.

“Will you at least think about it? I’ll text you all the info. I know this is a huge move for you, and I don’t want to pressure you.”

But why did I feel as though I was pressuring her? I wanted her to say yes so badly, but then it hit me. I’d have to tell Brandi whether Tangi came to Vancouver or not. That wouldn’t be an easy conversation.

“I’ll think about it,” she said with a small smile.

That was a start. “I hate that I have to leave tomorrow because I think there’s so much more we should talk about, but you have my number. You’ll keep in regular touch, right?”

“Yes,” she said, breaking off a piece of the cookie.

“Tang, I mean it when I say I want to be part our kid’s life. I get that we aren’t together anymore, but maybe this was meant to be?”

She leveled her gaze on me. “I’m pretty sure Brandi would disagree.”

“This isn’t about her.” I paused before I said the next thing, debating whether I should say it at all. “Brandi and I were on a bit of a break when we hooked up. Maybe she won’t be that pissed off.”

Tangi looked at me as though I’d just eaten a bowl of bugs. Horrified? Confused? I wasn’t certain. But she pushed on. “You’ve given me a lot to think about. My old job was so kind to give me two weeks’ pay, so I’m going to take at least one of those weeks to make a decision. If I do apply for this job and get it, you’re sure you’re going to want me around? Living in your condo? Maybe you should talk to your fiancée before either of us make any plans.”

“Like I said, I’ll do that, but it won’t change anything. If you come to Vancouver, I’ll be there for you.”

And I meant it.

Chapter Eleven

Tangi

I woke up the next morning with nervous excitement running through my veins. Not only was I pregnant and unemployed, but Ethan, of all people, had thrown me a humongous curveball. He'd embraced the idea of being a dad, *and* he'd suggested a job with the Ravens. I'd looked over the job listing a million times last night. I had the damn thing memorized. The position was for a physiotherapist that wouldn't travel the team. The PT would be responsible for helping rehab injured players and what looked to be the bulk of the paperwork and reports. All things I was more than capable of doing. I guessed the paperwork fell on the PT since they wouldn't be traveling with the team, and the Ravens wouldn't have the same amount of staff as the Kodiaks.

Applying for the job didn't mean I would get it, but if Ethan put a good word in for me ... Adding to the urgency was that the job listing closed in one day. Ethan wasn't lying when he said they needed to fill the position right away. And would moving to Vancouver complicate my life? I'd have no support there other than whatever Ethan offered. I could possibly reconnect with some old friends if they were still in town, but again, those friends were all wives and girlfriends of other players. How would that work with Ethan's fiancée? On the subject of that, he had his own crap to deal with. I imagined telling her wouldn't be easy. "Oops, I got my ex pregnant. Hope you're okay with that." Yikes.

I did the only thing I could think to do. I texted Wolseley and Jill and told them we needed to meet for coffee pronto. They both said they could that evening, and while I waited, I worked on my resume. I'd only worked at the Perth Clinic for eight months, likely not nearly as long as the Ravens would have liked. I struggled through my cover letter, trying to make it sound as

professional as possible despite my lack of experience. I mentioned my stint of work experience for the University of Minnesota's women's soccer team, which had to count for something.

I spent the morning working on my resume before moving on to reading the information my doctor had sent me home with. I then scoured the internet for more insight on this whole baby-making deal I had going on. Neither Mom nor Dad asked why I wasn't at work until Mom found me in the kitchen. I was having lunch and scrolling through baby essentials on my phone, although I was a long way off from decorating a nursery.

"You're not working today?" Mom asked, heading into the kitchen to make some lunch for her and Dad.

"No. I'm off." Permanently.

"Oh. Do you want to help me can some eggplant salsa? Your dad went nuts this year with the eggplant, and I've run out of ideas for it. So I found this great salsa recipe."

"Sure. Why not." I didn't exactly have a full day planned.

Mom and I made salsa after lunch, and it was kind of nice spending the day with her. She filled me in on all the gossip with the neighbors, how Ethan's mom was coping without Rick, Dad's massive garden, and how she'd like to take a winter vacation this year. So many times I wanted to tell her I was pregnant. I knew she'd be over the moon, but I decided to wait a few more days, to have a better plan for the future first. Then I'd break it to her and Dad, and who the father was. That'd be fun.

We canned our last few jars and Mom pulled out leftovers from the night before. I quickly ate my dinner and then showered and got changed. I took a long look at myself in my floor-length mirror and nothing about me had changed yet. The books said it was usually around the three-month mark. I'd have to wait and see. I'd also decided to put off telling everyone about my pregnancy other than close friends until I'd made it to that first trimester mark. If nothing else, all the books I'd been reading had been invaluable.

I drove to the Roasted Bean and found Jill already waiting inside. I grabbed a tea and took a seat.

“Wolseley just texted to say she’ll be five minutes late,” Jill said, putting down her phone. “What’s up? Your text sounded urgent.”

I’d figured I’d start off with the small stuff until Wolseley arrived. “I got fired.”

“Aw shit,” Jill said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. The job was offering me limited hours and I should have seen the writing on the wall.”

“So now what?”

“I’m not sure.”

We chatted about Jill’s job while we waited. Richardson’s had been so impressed with her work that they wanted her to consider taking over PR for their huge Canadian expansion. The company was still in the planning stages, even though they’d launched several stores already. I was happy for her, though. It sounded like a huge promotion.

Wolseley breezed in moments later, slapping her colorful BoHo knit bag on the table. She plopped into her seat and sighed. “I’m sorry I’m late. I was at the restaurant site and everything is behind schedule. I needed to talk to the contractor before he left for the day. He promised he’d get back on track. I don’t even want to talk about it. So enough about me. What’s going on that we needed this emergency coffee date?”

I filled her in on being fired.

“What jerks! Well, you know if you need some work, I can always use you for catering.”

I had helped her out before, and I thanked her for the offer. “There is something else I need to talk to you both about.” I couldn’t even look at them when I said it and instead ran my finger around the rim of my paper teacup. “So you guys know that I slept with Ethan after his dad’s funeral. Well, turns out I’m pregnant.”

Wolseley's brown eyes bulged while Jill's mouth fell open.

"I went to see my doctor yesterday, and she confirmed it," I continued. "I'm about two months along. I told Ethan last night. I haven't told anyone other than you two, and I'd like to keep it that way for a while."

"Holy shit," was all Jill could muster.

"A baby?" Wolseley said. "I don't know what to say. Congratulations?"

"I'm going to keep the baby, so yes."

Wolseley jumped out of her seat and gave me a hug. Jill was still too stunned to react.

"I'm going to spoil this kid," Wolseley said. "I'll help you with whatever you need. I can't wait to decorate the nursery."

Jill, always the buzzkill, asked, "What did Ethan say? How did he react?"

"Surprisingly supportive. He wants to be in the baby's life. He also suggested I apply for a physiotherapy position with the Ravens. It's the Kodiaks farm team, and they also play out of Vancouver in the same building."

The excitement slipped from Wolseley's face. "Vancouver?"

"I haven't made any decisions yet. This is all happening so fast, but I do need to apply for that job by tomorrow if I have any chance of getting it."

"Wait, wait, wait," Jill said, holding up both hands. "All I hear you saying is that you plan to chase after Ethan. *Again*. I don't want to burst any bubbles here, but you'll be pregnant and alone. At least here, you have your family and you have us. How much help do you think Ethan is going to be? He's going to be too busy sucking up to his fiancée if she doesn't kick his ass first."

I expected this from Jill because she was the cautious one. "I've thought about this. The job is a ten-month position, so I'd have two months off every year."

Jill tilted her head and frowned. "Last time I checked, a pregnancy is nine months, and you're already two in."

“Right. I’ve thought of that too. If I apply, I’m going to be honest and tell them I can’t work the full year. And if I don’t get the job, then so be it.”

Wolseley slapped her hand down on the table. “I think you should go for it. Now that your mom is semi-retired, she’ll help you out. And when you come home for two months, you’ll have babysitters.”

Playing the devil’s advocate, Jill wasn’t finished yet. “And where are you going to live? I imagine being a physiotherapist for a farm team doesn’t pay well.”

I cleared my throat and prepared for Jill’s wrath. “Ethan offered his condo.”

Jill’s blue eyes narrowed. “With him and his fiancée?”

I sipped my tea, which was still scalding and burned my tongue, although I tried to be cool about it. “No. He’s living with her somewhere else.”

Jill’s expression didn’t change. “And so his fiancée already knows about the baby you’re having with the guy she’s marrying?”

“I don’t know.”

Wolseley turned to face Jill and scowled. “What’s with the third degree?”

“Tang needs to know what she’s getting into.”

I waved my hands at both of them to stop the argument I knew was coming. “Listen, I’m fine with the questions. That’s why I invited you both here. This isn’t supposed to be an easy decision.”

“I think you should go with your gut,” Wolseley declared.

“I think you should take a week to think about it,” Jill added.

“Then she loses any chance at the job.”

“Then so be it. She shouldn’t rush.”

“*Stop!*”

And they did.

“There’s another factor in whatever decision I make. If I hang around here, people are eventually going to figure out I’m pregnant. I really can’t stop that from happening. And when they do, they can probably do the math.

And don't judge me, but I don't want to go through that. I don't want the whispers and gossip about how I got with Ethan while he was engaged on the day of his dad's funeral. So if I go to Vancouver, no one knows about it until I come home. It won't be news for long."

Wolseley nodded. "She has a point."

Jill's face softened and I saw the guilt setting in. "Look, I get that. I just worry about you, okay? You'll have no one to rely on but Ethan. And that scares the shit out of me. What if he hurts you again?"

"He's marrying someone else. I don't think it will be worse than that."

Wolseley stifled a laugh. "What makes you think he's still getting married? Wait till his fiancée finds out he's having a baby and it's not with her."

Chapter Twelve

Ethan

I should have told Brandi the second I got home, but she was so happy to see me and she'd set up a huge romantic dinner that made me uncomfortable. How could I pretend everything was great when I had this bombshell to drop on her? But I went through the motions, telling her about the last of Dad's estate as we ate, and then I helped her clean up. After I'd unpacked, taken a long shower, and went through all the crap that had piled up while I was gone, she took my hand with a mischievous smile on her face and led me to our bedroom.

For the first time in my life, I felt detached from the situation. Sex with Brandi had always been great, but this didn't feel right. I couldn't figure it out as she pulled off her clothes, then motioned for me to do the same. Was I having an out-of-body experience?

Maybe she sensed I was out of it because she grabbed my hand and pushed me back onto the bed. I strained to sit up, but she pushed me back down. Her devilish smile preceded her hand grasping my cock. But a million thoughts were going through my head, the worst being how I'd tell my fiancée I was having a kid with someone else? And worse still, that it was Tangi?

"I'm sorry, but I'm too tired," I said. I disentangled myself from her and quickly got dressed.

"You okay?" she asked, lying in bed.

The hurt on her face made me feel bad. I got back into bed and pulled her close, gently caressing her arm. "I'm fine. Just a bit stressed. Training camp is around the corner, and I've been traveling. I think I'm just a bit exhausted."

"You're sure?"

She looked up at me with her big blue eyes, and I should have told her

everything. The quicker I did it, maybe there'd be a chance she'd forgive me, but words escaped me. I didn't know where to start or what I'd say.

"I'm sure. It's fine. I just need a good sleep."

And a fucking miracle.

* * *

I met up the next morning with my two best friends on the team. Jeremy, Ryan, and I had been the core part of the Kodiaks for years, back when Tangi and I were still together. They knew everything there was to know, so when we met up at the rink to work out, I told them my secret. Mostly because I knew I could trust them.

Jeremy, my line mate and captain of the team, let out a whistle. "You are fucked," he said.

We'd just started working out, and thankfully no one else was in the team gym. With physicals at the end of the week, guys would be back in no time. I got on the stationary bike and started my warm-up.

"I don't know what to do."

"What I wouldn't have done was ask your ex to apply for the physiotherapist job with the Ravens. You have a death wish?" Ryan asked.

He was our top defenseman and nearly the biggest guy on the team. No one messed with Ryan and made it out of the scrum unharmed. At six foot five and two thirty, he was a tank, but away from the rink, the guy was a pussycat.

"It just came out."

Jeremy got on the bike next to me. "I think you want her around," Jeremy said. While Ryan was a soft touch away from the ice, Jeremy liked to hit you right between the eyes.

I shook my head. "I want to be around for her and the kid. It's not what you think."

“So if Brandi dumps you, you’re not going to try to get Tangi back ASAP?”

“No. It’s not like that.”

Jeremy and Ryan exchanged looks and laughed.

“You want our advice? Rip the Band-Aid off and tell Brandi *now*. The longer you wait, the harder it’s gonna get,” Jeremy said as he worked on his stretches.

Ryan nodded. “And maybe she’ll surprise you and be okay with it.”

Jeremy stifled a laugh as he got off his stationary bike and started on his weights. “You’ll be lucky to come out of it alive.”

I groaned and Jeremy patted me on the back. “Look, we’ve all made huge mistakes,” he said, sounding a little more compassionate. “Not as huge as yours, but some pretty big mistakes. Find a way to tell her that doesn’t make you sound like an asshole. Say you were reminiscing about your dad, you’d been drinking, and you royally screwed up.”

“That sounds like a lie,” Ryan said.

Jeremy shot him a look and he shut up. As team captain, Jeremy always had respect in the room. No one dared cross him and get away with it. He may have been quiet and serious most of the time on the rink, but he said it the way it was, and he wasn’t tolerating any bullshit. Off the ice, things were different, but that was for a different day.

“Sometimes you’ve got to lie,” he said. “Unless you want her to walk out. And I’m not being an ass right now. I know how you feel about Tangi. You were a bumbling mess when she left. You were on pace to score forty goals that year, and poof, you barely hit twenty-five. If having her around is going to mess with your head, then you need to figure that out. If getting her back is the goal, you need to figure that shit out too. Whatever you decide, it can’t affect you or the team. You’re going into free agency in a year. You want to play for every dollar you’re worth.”

And that was why Jeremy was captain. He had his life figured out and

knew exactly what he wanted.

“I always liked Tangi,” Ryan said. “I thought you guys were perfect together. She was sweet, and everyone liked her.”

Right. No one liked Brandi as much. She’d often come off as a snob, implying she was smarter than everyone in the room. Ryan slipped to me that his girlfriend didn’t appreciate the fact that Brandi boasted about her job all the time, and all the important charity work she did. As far as I could tell, Brandi hadn’t made any connections with the other girlfriends and wives, and from what Ryan’s girlfriend Amanda said, she hadn’t even tried.

“And Brandi has to be a smarty pants,” Jeremy added. “It turns people off.”

“But she is hot,” Ryan said, trying to soften Jeremy’s latest blow.

“Why do I feel like you guys are trying to tell me something,” I said.

Jeremy shrugged, running a hand through his dark hair. He’d let it grow out during the off-season, just like he did every summer, and then just before the season started, he’d cut it super short and leave it that way until the end of the season. But then in team pictures, which were scheduled just before he cut his hair, he’d have the longer hair slicked back. So all season long, his team and promo pictures looked nothing like him.

“I don’t think we’re *trying* to tell you. I think we *are* telling you,” Ryan said. “We loved Tangi. And you love Brandi. But if Brandi tells you to take a hike, we’d all get over it pretty fast.”

I shot Ryan a glare but he smiled instead. I let the subject drop because these two guys were no help.

We finished up our workout and I showered and got ready to leave. We’d decided to work out every morning until physicals. Fortunately, I’d been able to do some training back in Minneapolis to stay in shape, but I wasn’t at my best. I also wasn’t worried about it.

I said goodbye and grabbed my phone as I walked to my car and saw the text from Tangi.

I'm applying for the Ravens position. Can I use you as a reference?

My heart skipped a second as the words sank in. There was no turning back now.

Chapter Thirteen

Tangi

I sent the text to Ethan and waited for his reply. It came about an hour later.

Sure. Of course.

Great. I had my three references. I'd spent all evening working on my resume and had Jill read over my cover letter. Then I'd sent Ethan the text asking him to be my final reference. I figured it would show that I had an interest in hockey and had connections with the professional team. I didn't know what to expect. I probably didn't have the experience they were looking for, but based on what the job was paying, not many in Vancouver could afford to take it unless they had another supplemental income. I had the luxury of free housing.

I'd filled my parents in about being fired over dinner, but I wasn't going to elaborate on any plans until something actually happened. Of course, when Leah got home that night, Mom couldn't wait to tell her, so my sister found me in my room. She was munching on an apple as she leaned up against my doorframe.

"Sorry about the job. But didn't you hate it?"

"I didn't hate it. I hated the shitty hours and the terrible pay."

Leah smirked. "Then what did you like?"

I hated when she was right. "Fine, nothing."

"What's the plan now?" she said, standing over me at my desk.

"I'm not sure. I'll send out some resumes."

"Newman's is hiring."

The thought of being on my feet all day made me cringe. I was also pretty sure pregnant women wouldn't make the cut at Newman's. "I appreciate the

offer, but I want to stick to my field.”

She turned to leave, but stopped to face me again. “Something is different about you? Something going on?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’m just relieved to be moving on from my old job.”

She didn’t seem to be convinced, but let it slide. “All right. Well, good night.”

* * *

I woke up the next morning and checked my phone, more out of habit than anything else. I was yawning when I saw the email from the Ravens. Could I do an interview that afternoon? I shot up in bed in a panic. An interview already? I’d only just sent the resume. After having to pee because suddenly I needed to do that every hour, I paced my bedroom. This was suddenly serious. A job with the Ravens would push me closer to my old life and much closer to Ethan. On the flip side, I’d be away from the gossip and prying eyes here.

Since I had no idea what to do, I texted Jill and Wolseley in our group chat.

Ravens want to interview me this afternoon.

Wolseley replied first.

Woot!

I know, right! I’m going to do it, even just for the experience.

Good luck! 😊

I’d showered and gone down to breakfast when Jill replied. As expected, she was my sober second thought.

If you take this job, you're back in Ethan's life. I don't want you to go down the same road. I want you to live for yourself. Remember that when you do this interview. Is this a career move you want in the long term?

What did I want? Right now, I wanted a job. I wanted out of Minneapolis where everyone would be judging me. I could hear Leah tell me that I shouldn't care, but how could I not? At least if I was in Vancouver, no one would talk about me. I'd be free to live my life. Pregnant and mostly alone, but free.

What if I said this was a steppingstone to something else? I'm never going back to being Ethan's plus one. I didn't work hard to finish my degree to sit around and look pretty all day.

Good. That's what I want to hear.

I spent the rest of my morning doing interview prep and figuring out what to wear. I didn't have to worry about Mom and Dad being around because they were out playing golf for a few more hours. When I told Leah about a job interview on Zoom, she said she'd go to the gym to give me some privacy.

I scoured the house for the perfect place to do the interview and chose the dining room table with a backdrop of some of Mom's favorite artwork. I checked my hair and makeup one last time, making sure it was simple and natural looking. Then I flipped open my laptop, took a few deep breaths, and connected to the Zoom call.

I was greeted by three faces in what seemed to be a boardroom once the host let me in. A Ravens HR rep named Kathleen, the Ravens head athletic therapist named Allan, and the assistant athletic therapist named Jim introduced themselves. I subtly wrote down all their names. After some niceties, they dove in.

"Tangi, tell us a bit about your past experience," Kathleen, the HR rep, said.

I went into detail about my work experience with the women's university soccer team where I wore many hats but focused on physiotherapy. I got into my experience with cupping, acupuncture, and myofascial release as well because I figured it couldn't hurt. They listened attentively and took extensive notes.

They then moved on to the boring part, asking me what I would do in certain situations, and I answered all the questions with confidence. Kathleen asked the next question, one I'd been dreading but knew someone would ask.

"You have a bit of a gap in your CV. What were you doing during that time?"

I could hear two voices in my head. One was Wolseley's, telling me to lie through my teeth, and the other was Jill's, warning me that if I didn't go with the truth, when it did come out, it would be ugly.

"I was in Vancouver, actually. At the time, Ethan Grant was my boyfriend. I didn't finish school while I was there because I was in a different country. Our relationship ended three years ago, I finished school, did my practical work, then started at the Perth Clinic. You'll notice that Ethan is a reference. We are still friends."

No one exchanged glances, just the usual note-taking. That had to be promising.

"What did you do at the Perth Clinic?" Allan Tisdale asked. He was the head athletic therapist.

I made my answer as sports-related as possible. How could I tell them I dealt with more than my fair share of racquetball injuries? I did emphasize the attention to detail I had with each client, my structured rehabilitation plan for each of them, and the detailed files I kept on all of them. I'd remembered that was part of the job. Keeping player files detailed.

They asked several more questions about different hypothetical situations and what I would do. I answered those questions like a pro, and noted that if they wanted to dump the interview, they would have done it shortly after my

Ethan revelation.

“And why do you want to relocate to Vancouver?” Kathleen asked.

That was a good question. “I’ve always wanted to work with a professional sports team. That’s always been my goal.”

More note-taking.

As they wrapped up with their questions, they asked me if I had anything I wanted them to know. I told them about my history in athletics, how I’d played university hockey for a year, that I loved the game of hockey, and I understood the injuries associated with it.

“And you’d have no problem relocating to Vancouver if you were selected for the position?” Kathleen asked.

“Not at all. I’m already very familiar with the city.”

“I think that’s all,” Kathleen said, glancing at her colleagues to see if they had any additional question. Both said no. “Anything else, Ms. Kildare?”

Once again, Wolseley was in my head, saying, “Don’t do it.” Jill was yelling even louder, insisting I be as honest as possible.

“There is something you should know as it does affect the job. I’m pregnant. I’m due to have my baby mid-April, so I understand that would affect the job. While I understand it’s not ideal, if I am selected as your physiotherapist, I would potentially only miss about six weeks of work if the Ravens make it to the finals.”

More damn note-taking.

“Well, thank you for your time. As you know, the season is quickly approaching, so we intend to pick a candidate in the next few days. If you don’t hear from us by the end of the week, you weren’t selected.”

Right. I knew what that meant.

“Thank you for the interview. It was a pleasure meeting you all.” Damn honesty had screwed me over. I should have listened to what Wolseley would do.

* * *

I didn't get the job. A week went by and nothing came from the Ravens. I started looking for jobs again, putting out resumes everywhere. I was coming to terms with the fact I'd likely either have to take some shitty job for a few months if they'd have me, or put work on hold until after the baby came. Another gap in my resume. It sucked.

Wolseley and Jill took me out for a movie, followed by some "drinks." They were having cocktails while I sucked back my mocktail. I needed my friends to cheer me up after my dismal week.

"How is the restaurant coming along?" I asked.

"Still on schedule," Wolseley said, diving into the artichoke dip we'd ordered. "I told the contractor if we don't open by the first of November, he's a dead man. I need to cash in on the holiday rush."

"I am so proud of you," I said. "You've worked so hard for this. Jill and I are going to have a massive celebration for you!"

"I've already made some contacts at Richardson's. I think we can get some local celebrities at your opening night. Press too," Jill added.

"You guys are awesome."

She showed us her new menu and asked for advice. It was hard to be helpful when neither Jill nor I were vegetarians, let alone vegan. Wolseley's focus was vegan cuisine, which was a hard sell for some, but Minneapolis-St. Paul was big enough to make the restaurant a success.

"How goes the job search?" Jill asked.

"Not well. Would you believe no one wants to hire someone who is going on maternity leave in less than six months."

"Shit. I'm sorry," she said. "You know, it's not ideal, but we have some temporary openings at Richardson's. They're six-month terms, but I'm sure you can get by with five months or so. It's mostly admin work, but it's better than nothing."

“If nothing comes through this weekend, I’m going to take you up on that.”

“Have you told anyone else about the baby?” Wolseley asked.

I finished my virgin mojito and sighed. “Not yet. I hit the end of my first trimester in a week. I’ll tell everyone then.”

Jill frowned for a second, but I could tell she was thinking. “I don’t think you should give Ethan a pass. He should be there too, telling his family at the same time.”

“I get what you’re saying, but he starts training camp Monday. It’s kind of hard to pop back here to make an announcement.”

Jill was pursing her lips now. “He makes millions every year. He should be supporting you in some capacity. Emotional support for moments like this and financial support, too. I mean it. You shouldn’t be taking on the financial burden.”

I hated when Jill started acting like a mom. “He knows that. He’s offered to pay for anything, but I don’t want to be beholden to him.”

“All I’m saying is don’t carry the burden.”

“I know. I get it.”

What she didn’t understand is that accepting money from him made me feel indebted to him. And it was stupid because he should have carried half the financial burden, but I also wanted to maintain my distance from him. I’d relied on him once, and I never wanted to do that again.

Chapter Fourteen

Tangi

I woke up the next morning feeling a little nauseous. I stayed in bed an extra few minutes until it passed. The last few days I'd been getting fleeting bouts of it and on the advice of a pregnancy blog, I'd bought some ginger tea and ginger candies. They seemed to help, so I hauled myself out of bed eventually and grabbed some candies from my bag, leaving a few on the nightstand just in case.

I sat on the edge of my bed, trying to enjoy the ginger candy, which was a bit spicy first thing in the morning, and then I grabbed my phone. A notification made my heart nearly stop. An email from the Ravens? Marked Urgent? I tapped it open and quickly read it. Then I read it again. I needed to pinch myself. They were offering me a job! They said that they understood I'd likely need to leave take a leave by the end of March, and that they could work around it. They were offering me the low end of their salary range, but I expected that based on my experience. They needed to know within twenty-four hours if I was taking the position and if I was, could I start Tuesday morning! They already had the paperwork sent in for an emergency work visa, so I was all set.

I forwarded the email to Jill and Wolseley and followed it up with a text. I needed to give the Ravens an answer. And if I decided to go, I needed to pack up as much as possible and get a flight out as soon as I could to get myself settled. This was all so crazy.

Jill texted first.

CONGRATS! You know whomever they hired fell through. Your gain.

She could be a buzzkill, but she was my buzzkill.

Wolseley texted minutes later.

I can help you pack! And I'll be crying the whole time.

I had the best friends in the world.

I'm going to need you both to help me pack ... if I'm taking the job.

Jill replied first.

You're taking the job! What time do you need us over?

In an hour? I still need to tell my parents. Wish me luck.

Before I chickened out or thought about it too much, I replied to the Ravens that I was taking the job. I didn't want to spend the next six months filing paperwork and sending emails at Richardson's. I wanted to work in my field, and my dream had always been to work with a sports team, something I'd told my friends and Ethan many times. Now I had this opportunity staring me in the face, and they were going to work around my burgeoning belly. What more could I ask for?

Then it hit me. I had to tell Ethan. I needed a place to stay pronto. With the two-hour difference, it was way too early to call, so I sent a text.

Hey, I got the Ravens job. They want me to start Tuesday! I know this is short notice, but I just found out today. I hope your offer still stands to give me your condo to stay in because I'm going to need to stay somewhere.

I didn't worry about his answer for at least a few hours. My next task was to book a flight. I could leave either Sunday night or Monday morning. I decided to wait on that until I heard back from Ethan. And then it was time to tell my family everything. That was going to require at least one more ginger candy, and I wanted to tell my family the big news before Jill and Wolseley showed up.

Mom and Dad were downstairs having breakfast. Dad was already in his

gardening jeans that consisted of many holes and worn knees. I had to intercept him before I lost him to the last of his harvest.

“Did Leah work last night?” I asked.

Mom looked up from her crossword. “I don’t think so. She didn’t get in that late.”

Good. “All right. No one move. I need to talk to you all. I’m going to wake Leah up.”

Mom’s light brown eyes opened wide and she was about to question me, but I was already bolting for the stairs. I tore into Leah’s room and shook her awake. She nearly punched me in the face for the effort.

“What the hell!”

“Get up. We need to talk. Meet me downstairs in five minutes.”

“What’s going on?” she yelled after me, but I was already out her door.

Mom and Dad were in deep discussion when I returned. They stopped when they saw me.

“Don’t even ask,” I said. “We’re waiting for Leah.”

Just when I was trying to get my life all organized, my phone buzzed. I took a quick glance and saw it was Ethan. He was up early, so that was good, and I needed to see what he’d texted.

Congratulations! Sure, I’ll have it ready for you. I’ll get the cleaners in tomorrow. Text me your flight details and I can pick you up from the airport and bring you there. It’ll be nice having you close by.

I paused. Nice having me close by? No, I wasn’t reading into that. Right now, I had bigger things to deal with. My life was about to change dramatically. This was really happening. Once I booked my flight, I was going all in. I was walking back into Ethan’s life, but this time on my own terms. We may be connected because of the baby and sure, I was going to be living in his condo, but he’d be with the Kodiaks and I’d be with the Ravens. He’d also be living with his fiancée. I was free as a free agent.

“What is going on and why did you walk me up?” Leah said, stumbling into the kitchen. She wandered over to the coffee maker and poured herself a cup.

“I have news. Everyone sit down.”

Mom looked confused, Dad wanted to be outside, and Leah couldn't wait to get back to bed. But after I told them my big news, I was pretty sure they were all going to need a stiff drink.

“I have two things to tell you, but I'll start with my job news. I have been hired by the Ravens as their new full-time physiotherapist.”

Dad was the only one who knew who the Ravens were. “Sweetie, that's wonderful! You're working your way up to the big leagues.”

“Fill me in. Who are the Ravens?” Leah asked, sipping her coffee.

“The farm team for the Kodiaks.”

She frowned. “Wait, the farm team for Ethan's team? In Vancouver?”

“Yes, but it's a totally separate job. No overlap.” I'd tell her later that they both played out of the same building, but I was still sure there would be no overlap. If one team was in town, the other would be on the road. Simple. Easy peasy. Right?

Leah shook her head. “No. That's terrible. Why are you going back there?”

“It's a job in my field, and it's a pretty good one. That's why.”

Mom didn't like the direction the conversation was going, so she stepped in. “When do you leave?”

“Probably Monday morning.”

Her jaw dropped. “So soon?”

“The job starts Tuesday. Their old PT retired at the last minute, so I had to jump in right away.”

“And where will you live?” Dad asked. “Isn't Vancouver expensive? How are you going to afford that? I don't want you living in some lousy basement apartment.”

I was about to step on a huge landmine. And it was only the first one. “About that, Ethan has offered his condo. He’s not living there, so I can stay rent-free.”

“I knew it!” Leah hollered. “Of course he’s all over this. Why are you doing this? He’s only going to mess up your life all over again. The last thing you need is for him to screw you over. How many times does he have to hurt you? Geez, what is wrong with you? And if he’s letting you live there rent free, there must be strings attached. I thought by now—”

“I’m pregnant and he’s the father,” I shouted over her.

She stopped. Everyone seemed a little shell-shocked. I wasn’t sure Dad was even breathing.

“What did you say?” Mom asked.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I’m almost three months pregnant. Ethan is the dad. It was a one-time thing a few months ago—”

“Holy hell,” Dad muttered.

Leah was finally speechless. Mom kept rapidly blinking.

“I told him when I found out and I waited to tell you all until I was near the end of the first trimester.”

“Wait, was this after Rick’s funeral?” Leah demanded, proving my fears that people would immediately figure that out.

“Things kind of happened,” I hedged.

“Doesn’t he have a fiancée?” Dad asked Mom.

She nodded.

“He wants to be in the baby’s life, and he suggested the job. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do, and the Ravens know I’m pregnant, so they will accommodate me.”

Mom finally found her voice. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

I wasn’t sure if it was the hormones, but I started to cry. How did that happen? I thought I was handling this pretty well. “I was embarrassed. It shouldn’t have happened,” I said, wiping the tears away. “But I’m not sad

either. I want the baby.”

Mom came over and gave me a big hug. Dad did the same, but Leah didn't leave her seat.

“Sweetie, we don't care how it happened. And you shouldn't be embarrassed,” Dad said. “You have our full support, but I'm a little worried that you're going to leave. Who is going to take care of you?”

“I'll be fine,” I said. “And I know you probably don't want to hear this, but Ethan will be there for me. We all know he will be.”

Mom acknowledged that. “He is responsible.”

“Responsible?” Leah laughed sarcastically. “He slept with his ex and got her pregnant while he has a fiancée. Sorry, that's not responsible at all.”

“Stuff it, Leah,” Mom said.

Leah stuffed it.

“What if me and your dad come and help you get settled?”

“Mom, he has a fully furnished condo. There is nothing to settle. And I'll be starting work right away. I haven't figured it all out yet, but I have some time.”

“Where will you have the baby?” Mom asked.

Good question. I hadn't thought about it. If the Ravens wanted me around until the end of March, there was no way I could fly home. And driving that far and being nine months pregnant? Nope. Ethan and I would have to discuss this. Maybe that was the time for Mom and Dad to come out to help me. Then we could come back to Minneapolis with the baby for the summer.

“I don't know yet. But whatever I do, you will be the first to know.”

We talked more as Mom made sure I had a healthy breakfast. Leah slinked off back to bed while Dad went to pull out the largest luggage we had. I'd just finished eating and booking a flight out for Monday morning when Wolseley and Jill arrived.

“I guess it's time to tell your friends, but you will be having dinner with us for your last two nights here. No excuses.”

I kissed Mom on the cheek and thought how cute she was assuming that my friends didn't know what was going on. I headed to the door and let them in since they'd come together.

“Ladies, it's time to pack.”

Chapter Fifteen

Ethan

I kept checking my watch. Tangi's flight was coming in at 9:20 a.m., and I had to leave soon to get to the airport on time. Brandi had just showered and was getting ready for work. I sat on our bed and watched her. She smiled back at me, and I felt like a huge piece of shit. I still hadn't told her, and now Tangi was coming to town and staying in my old condo. I couldn't hold telling her the truth much longer, but I had no idea how to tell her. Every scenario I came up with sounded terrible.

"Training camp today?" she asked, pulling out something to wear. She normally dressed pretty casual at work, but for Brandi, that was still trousers and a blouse.

"Yeah," I lied.

Coach had excused me for the day. I explained I was helping a friend out and moving them into my condo. First, my place on the team was in no doubt, so giving me a day off wasn't a big deal. Second, I'd set up a lot of traded players in my condo when they had only a hotel to stay in. Coach knew this, so one day off wouldn't kill anyone.

"Have fun. I'll see you later."

She gave me a quick peck on the lips and flew out of the bedroom. I fell back onto the bed and massaged my temples. The one good thing about training camp was that the Ravens trained out of a different facility, so I wouldn't see Tangi. But when the season did start, there was some overlap when we both played out of Graham Place. I'd just have to avoid her unless it was about something baby-related. I hoped that would satisfy Brandi.

I took a shower and got dressed. I headed to the airport and got there just as Tangi's flight landed. The plan was to get her settled in, show her the surrounding neighborhood—something she'd probably recognize easily,

though it wasn't the same condo she and I had lived in—and then ask her what she needed.

I hung around the customs area, waiting for her. I had on a ball cap and tried to remain inconspicuous. The last thing I needed was for someone to come up to me, or worse, take a picture of me with a woman who wasn't my fiancée. I didn't need that kind of gossip circulating.

Tangi appeared through the glass doors, pulling a large suitcase with a backpack slung over her shoulders. My heart hitched for a moment. No matter how long I lived, my heart would never stop doing that when she walked into a room. I ignored it for now and jogged over to her, grabbing the suitcase and insisting she give me her backpack to carry as well. Should I have given her a hug? This was all so awkward.

“How was the flight?” I asked instead.

“Good. Uneventful. I watched a few movies.”

“How are you parents? Leah?”

“All good. I told them the news on Saturday. My little sister didn't take it well. I'm not surprised.”

If Tangi's parents knew, it was only a matter of time before my mom and Ava found out.

“About that,” I said as I led her to my SUV, “I haven't told my family yet. You mentioned waiting until the end of your first trimester.”

Tangi bit her lip. “Right. Sorry. I should have told you I did that but it didn't feel right leaving without telling them everything. I did ask them to keep quiet about it for now, but I'll send my parents and Leah a text. Remind them not to tell your family before you've had a chance to.”

She did that while I loaded my SUV with her stuff. Her luggage weighed a ton, and I hoped someone had helped her with it. I imagine guys from all around got in line at the MSP airport to help her. How could you not notice her?

“Okay, done. Mom has already replied back that they haven't spoken to

anyone about it, and I really doubt Leah will tell anyone. She's still in denial."

"She pissed at me?"

"Pissed at us," Tangi said, throwing me a smile. How I missed that smile, and how it warmed me up inside.

We talked about Vancouver while we drove to the condo. She asked about the traffic, and I told her it was still hell. She wanted to know how far the rink was from the condo, and I explained that Graham Place was walking distance but that the practice rink was in Burnaby.

"I'll need to figure out transportation."

"I'll get you a car."

She shook her head. "Nope. You're already letting me live rent-free. I can pay for my own stuff."

Right. I should have known she'd respond that way. "I get that, but hear me out. I know a guy at a dealership, he'll lease me—you—a car for a great deal. Maybe once we drop your stuff off, we can go see him. He's working until six. I imagine you don't have plans tonight," I said, arching a brow.

"Good point. Fine."

"This condo, is it the same one we had?" she asked as we turned onto East Hastings.

"A different one."

Once she'd left, it felt strange living there without her, so I'd sold it. I'd lived in the new condo for about a year when I'd met Brandi. She didn't like being downtown and the commute to work, so we'd decided to buy a house, and with real estate prices as they were, keeping the condo as an investment seemed like a good idea.

We pulled into my building and the underground garage. I parked and hauled Tangi's luggage out of the car to the elevator.

"I don't like paying for nothing. Let me at least pay amenities or condo fees."

“We can work something out,” I said, with no intention of working anything out.

She gave me side-eye. “I mean it, Ethan. I’m paying something.”

“For sure. We’ll figure it out.”

She knew I was full of shit.

We took the elevator up to the twenty-second floor. Not quite the penthouse, but it had been good enough for me. We exited the elevator and were hit with what smelled like a lemon cleaner, but nothing too offensive. Maintenance was constantly keeping the place clean, so I couldn’t complain.

“You’re the last door on the right.”

She followed alongside me, taking in the abstract paintings that lined the walls. I was glad she didn’t ask what the place cost. I put the key in the lock and swung open the door. She stepped inside, taking a long look around. The places was furnished in mostly white and shades of gray. There were pops of color on the walls in the way of artwork, but not much else. I’d kept the look simple.

“This place is really nice,” she said.

“I splurged a little. Why don’t you take a look around and I’ll put your stuff in the main bedroom. Then we can pick up some groceries for you and head over to lease you a car. Sound good?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, heading for the balcony. I was pretty sure she was going to love the ocean view.

While I was dropping off her luggage, I took out my phone and sent a quick text to Rob, telling him to subsidize her lease and that I’d pay for the shortfall. I got that Tangi wanted her independence, but I also had a pretty good idea what her new job paid, and she wasn’t going to be able to afford a car even if her accommodations were free. Then I returned to the open living room to see her taking in the kitchen.

“This place is okay,” she said with a laugh. I couldn’t help but smile too.

“Do you want to get changed? Do something else before we hit the

town?”

“I think I will change. Be back in a second.”

She disappeared into the bedroom and I checked my phone. Rob had already replied that he had a car in mind, and that he'd make sure it was more than affordable. I had a few texts from the guys asking where I was. I'd tell some of them later. I then sent Mom and Ava a text, letting them know I wanted to talk to them, and that it wasn't an emergency. I didn't need to freak them out.

“All ready,” she said, having changed into jeans and a T-shirt. She had a sweater tied around her waist. She hadn't forgotten how what seemed like a warm day could be cold once the wind came off the water.

“There are a few grocery stores nearby, and one is just down the block. A fancier one is two blocks away. There's a huge pharmacy too, and the mall is probably a five-minute drive.”

“Do you mind if we take the car? I want to stock up since I have your help.”

“Of course.”

I loved shopping with Tangi. She liked to look at everything, and before I knew it, she had a shopping cart that was overflowing.

“I forgot that I have to get used to the metric system again,” she said, as she hit the produce section. She'd always been a healthy eater, so I knew we'd be here for a while. By the time she was finished, I was piling bag after bag into my trunk.

“You weren't lying about taking advantage of me.” Ugh, I hadn't meant to say it like that.

“I figured if I was going to go crazy, I should probably bring the muscle along.”

We drove back and I helped her put all the groceries away. We then set out for Rob's dealership. He greeted us at the door and shook Tangi's hand. I let him take care of things, and he showed her various cars that he assured her

would be in her budget. Two test drives later, she'd picked out a sporty silver sedan and Rob filled out the paperwork.

"Why don't we get the car ready and drop it off to you this evening," Rob said to her.

"Oh, that's nice," she said, signing off on everything.

"And if you need anything, just call me," he said, handing Tangi a business card.

I took her out for a late lunch, and I could see she was starting to fade. She'd gotten up early for her flight, and with the two-hour difference, it was nearly her dinnertime.

"I'll take you back to the condo so you can call it an early night. The practice rink for the Ravens is probably a half-hour drive. I also left you all the condo info on the kitchen counter if you need it. And I'm always a call or text away."

"Thanks," she said.

I dropped her off out front and asked her if she wanted me to come up.

"I think I could use a nap before Rob drops off my car," she said. "But thank you anyway."

"Let's keep in regular contact, okay?"

"Yes, we probably should."

I made sure she was safely inside before I drove away. I then had a call to make, and it wasn't going to be an easy one.

Chapter Sixteen

Tangi

I was up at 5 a.m. Crap. I couldn't keep doing this to myself. Sure, I'd gone to bed at eight thirty after spending more than an hour with Rob as he showed me all the features of my new car. The GPS was going to come in handy. I'd have to make myself stay up until at least ten tonight.

Allan, the head athletic therapist for the Ravens, had asked me to come in early, but even so, I wasn't expected in for another three hours. So I took a long shower, made myself some coffee, and stood out on the balcony. I could do this every morning. While Vancouver was rarely quiet, it seemed to be at its quietest this early in the morning. I could hear some birds singing as I watched the ocean waves in the distance.

I was going to need to get some outdoor furniture for the balcony. So while I ate breakfast, I pulled out my laptop and ordered some patio furniture. I then made myself a lunch and filled the new water bottle I'd gotten at the grocery store. I mapped out my route to the Ravens practice rink and left early. I wanted to make sure I was there before 8 a.m.

As I so unfondly remembered, Vancouver traffic was heavy. Still, I got to the Ravens practice rink with fifteen minutes to spare. The front door wasn't locked, but a security guard was there and asked me who I was.

"I'm Tangi Kildare, the new Ravens physiotherapist."

The guard wasn't much taller than my five foot six, but he definitely thought he was. He puffed out his chest and shook his head.

"Sorry, you don't have a badge. You'll have to wait here," he said, pointing to the empty lobby.

I waited until eight fifteen, when Allan Tisdale walked through the doors. He seemed a bit harried and when he saw me, he looked at his watch.

"Shoot. I'm late. Sorry about that." He turned to the security guard.

“Cliff, she’s with me. She’ll have her badge next week, but we’ll get her something temporary in the meantime.”

“No problem,” Cliff said, finally flashing me a smile. “Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Come with me,” Allan said. “I’ll show you around.”

His tour didn’t consist of much. The practice arena was pretty easy to navigate, with two locker rooms, an office area, and the front desk. I imagined when the Ravens weren’t commandeering it, the facility was used for a rec league or maybe some junior hockey leagues.

“We have your office here that you’ll be sharing with Jim Chalmers, our assistant athletic therapist. You met him during your interview. At Graham Place, you’ll also be sharing your office with Jim and the Kodiaks physio. You will need to consult with their PT on players as they move from the Kodiaks to the Ravens and vice versa.”

He took me to the small gym area that would be a tight fit for fifty guys, but that number would be pared down as training camp played out. I took a look around and got an idea of what equipment was available.

“Obviously, Graham Place has more to offer.”

I nodded, taking it all in.

“And this is your office,” he said, pointing to the tiny cubicle with a small desk and a few chairs. There were a few older plastic file totes as well as a laptop. “The team swung for a new laptop this year, probably because the old one was a dinosaur. It’s yours to use and do whatever you want with them.”

“And the totes?”

Allan groaned. “Our old physio liked to keep hard copies. He wasn’t big on technology or computers, so you’re going to have to decipher what’s in there and decide what we need to keep and then create files that can be easily shared. We have some a program set up that the Kodiaks like to use, so you’ll be using that too.”

“Okay. Good to know. And I’m good with technology.”

“And about hours, you know we work pretty much nonstop.”

I remembered that from the interview. “Yes. Right.”

“You will have some time off while the Ravens are on road trips, but you will be rehabbing with the injured players. So keep that in mind. We work long hours, so you’re sure you’ll be fine?”

In my condition is what he meant to add. “I’ll be fine.”

“Good. You’ll be working with Jim most of the time, but we do have weekly meetings to see where players are at. I try to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Of course.”

“Training camp started yesterday, but don’t worry about that. Over the course of the next few weeks your job will be to meet one-on-one with every player to get a feel for what’s going on with them. You’ll also be working with Brandon Warde. In case you don’t know, he tore the hell out of his ACL last season and had surgery early last spring. But to be cautious, the Kodiaks want him to start the season with us for a few games to get him back in shape. But that’s at least a few months out. He still needs more rehab.”

“Got it. And he’s not doing that with the Kodiaks?”

“Long story, but while he’s with us, he’s our responsibility.”

I should have brought a notebook along, but so far I’d kept track of all this.

“Anything else I should know?”

“Jim is going to have more to talk to you about, but in the meantime, why don’t you get started on the files. The program is pretty easy to figure out, and all your passwords and such have been set up for you. They are with the laptop. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask. Jim will be here soon. And we have a short team meeting to introduce you at nine thirty. That’s in the locker room.”

“I think I’ve got a good idea where to start. Thanks, Allan.”

He marched off toward the dressing room, and I went into the cramped

office. I got the laptop going and set up my profile with the passwords the team had given me. I took a look at the present training camp roster and figured it was a good place to start with the totes. Jim wandered in a half hour later and plopped some black shirts on the desk, sending some of the paper files flying off the desk.

“Sorry,” Jim said gruffly. “Brought you some shirts. All kinds of sizes. That’s our official uniform. I also brought you some jackets and sweat tops to try. We don’t care what you wear for pants, but I’d make it comfortable.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He looked at me through his thick glasses and frowned. “Yeah, you’ll need to change before the team meeting. There is a washroom down the hall. It’s unisex.”

I got the hint and riffled through the shirts. All men’s shirts. Oh well. I grabbed a size small and headed for the washroom. I put it on and while it was still too big, it would do. I tucked it in where I could to make it a little less boxy. Jim was still in the office where he’d pulled out his own laptop.

“I’m sharing my files,” he said without looking up.

Either he didn’t like having me around or he was a grump. I wasn’t sure which. “Okay. I just got started with the old hard copies. I’m cross-referencing between what the roster looks like. Do you recommend that?”

He looked up now, his brown eyes staring at me, possibly evaluating me? “Sure. Good idea.”

“Anything else you recommend?”

“No.”

I had another forty-five minutes until my grand introduction, so I worked on the files. Jim came and went, and fifteen minutes before the meeting, he sank down in the other chair and stared at me. I looked up from my laptop to meet his gaze.

“You weren’t their first choice.”

Okay, he didn’t like me.

“Is that right?” I asked as pleasantly as possible. What I really wanted to do was kick him in the nuts.

“Yup.”

I smiled. “How lucky for me that the previous applicant fell through.”

“When you’re all big and pregnant, how are you going to work?”

“Just like every other pregnant woman before me.”

I hoped he’d realized he’d crossed a line because he didn’t ask anything else. I kept working until Allan came to get us. I followed Allan and Jim into the locker room where all the guys were milling around. Coach Fontaine whistled so loud I flinched, and the guys suddenly became quiet.

“All right, boys. Allan has a few things to say.”

He handed it over to Allan who got right into things. “Gentlemen, we’ve hired our new physiotherapist. This is Tangi Kildare. Today is her first day, so cut her some slack. She’ll be meeting with you all individually to discuss what ails you or has previously ailed you.” Allan turned to Jim. “Do you have anything to add?” he asked him.

“She’s pregnant.”

What the hell! Sure, the guys would figure it out, but I didn’t need him to broadcast it like that. I maintained an awkward smile as Allan shot Jim a look.

“Uh, thanks,” Allan said.

“And she’s off limits. For obvious reasons,” Jim added.

Allan blinked a few times. “Right. Well, the players are familiar with our no fraternization policy. But thanks for the reminder.”

Jim was either a complete jackass or so angry a woman was on staff that he planned to sabotage me at every opportunity.

“Would you like to say a few words?” Allan asked me.

“Sure,” I said, facing all the guys. “I look forward to meeting and working with all of you, and I’m so happy to be part of the Ravens family.”

Allan nodded. “All right. I’ll pass you all back to Coach Fontaine.”

I was about to fade into the background when Allan caught up to me. He motioned for me to follow him, and I did into his equally cramped office. He shut the door behind me.

“I’m sorry about that. Jim doesn’t always have a filter, but he’s a good guy. I hope you don’t mind too much what happened out there. I’ll talk to him if you’d like me to.”

I pondered this for a second. “Does he not like me?”

“It’s not that. He’s just adjusting to change. He’s great at what he does, but he’s just not a people person all the time.”

I think I understood what Allan was trying to say. “It’s all good.”

“Great. And let me say this for us all: welcome to the Ravens.”

Chapter Seventeen

Ethan

I got home after training camp and wanted to crawl into bed. I'd essentially taken the summer off from training, and every damn muscle in my body was letting me know. Everything ached as I prepared a protein shake and downed a few Advil. I was careful what I took, and refused anything stronger than extra strength ibuprofen. I'd seen what painkillers had done to friends and teammates, and that wasn't a path I intended to take.

I sat outside on our deck, taking in the warm and sunny afternoon, thankful to see no clouds in the sky. I had a call planned with my mom and sister in about an hour so I could finally tell them the secret I'd been keeping for so long. I also had to tell Brandi. And soon.

Brandi wouldn't be home until later tonight. She was having drinks with friends to celebrate someone's birthday. I hadn't caught the name. That gave me a long time to talk to Mom and Ava, and it also gave me too much time to think. I'd been putting off what I'd do about Tangi and the baby for from the moment she told me. I wanted to set up a trust for the kid, and figure out a plan with Tangi on visitation. As it was, there was no way I could take the kid for long periods of time other than summers, and I was fairly certain Brandi didn't want to help me raise the kid I was having with someone else. Knowing Tangi like I did, she'd want to spend summers back home with her family, and convincing Brandi to come back with me to Minneapolis every off-season would be another challenge. Her life and job was in Vancouver, not to mention her missions that she did at least a few times a year.

I sat outside for a bit, finishing my shake, then I went in for a long shower. While I waited for Mom and Ava to FaceTime me, I sent Tangi a text.

How is the job going?

I was scouring the fridge for a snack when my phone chimed.

Not bad. Lots of paperwork and egos. The previous PT didn't like computers. ☹ Getting to know everyone. How is training camp?

A pain the ass and everywhere else.

She sent back a laughing emoji.

I loved being able to talk to her. Everything about her made me smile. And that was a bad thing.

I pulled out some steamed broccoli and carrots, chicken, and brown rice. I pretty much ate the same thing every day, but I did like swapping out the chicken for salmon on occasion, and mixing up what vegetables I was eating. I didn't lead an exciting culinary life during the season but did let myself cheat once in a while.

My phone buzzed with a FaceTime call. I took one deep breath and tapped the icon. Mom and Ava showed up on my screen.

“Hello, big brother,” Ava said. “How are you doing out there on the coast?”

“Good. It's been okay.”

“Any rain?” Mom asked. She loved to know about the weather, and when it was twenty below in Minneapolis, I gloated about the green grass. In return, loved to tell me how sunny it was back home while I was in rainy Vancouver.

“Not today. Sunny and warm. Sorry to disappoint you both.”

We made small talk for a bit, before Ava said, “I hate to cut this short, but I'm going out for dinner with Matt. Mom said you had something to talk about.”

“It's not about your dad's will, is it?” Mom asked. “I thought that was all wrapped up, and I haven't heard anything from the lawyer lately.”

“Nothing like that,” I said as pleasantly as possible. “As far as I know,

everything is done.” I cleared my throat and tried to think up the best approach for this conversation. I’d been doing it for the last hour and kept coming up blank.

“So you know I mentioned the Ravens job to Tangi,” I said.

Mom’s face was blank, but Ava nodded. Of course she knew everything. Well, almost everything.

“Yeah, I thought that was a bit strange,” Ava said. “I’m sure Brandi wasn’t amused.”

It was no secret that Mom and Ava didn’t care for Brandi. They hadn’t come out and said it after meeting her, but it was obvious the way they interacted with her. The phony pleasantness was lost on Brandi, but I could tell. Mom and Ava didn’t have that natural affection toward her like they did with Tangi.

“I mentioned that the Ravens were looking for a new physiotherapist,” I said to Mom. “Their last one retired right before the season. She applied and got the job.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Mom said, not making the connection.

“And the Ravens play in Vancouver,” I said, hoping that might twig something.

“I see,” Mom said. “Where is this going, Ethan? Are you getting back together with Tangi?”

I could hear the hope in Mom’s voice. “No, I’m still engaged to Brandi.” At least for now.

Ava put her hand up to stop the conversation. “I have five minutes before I need to get out of here, so I really need you to get to the point.”

I cleared my throat and swallowed. “Tang is pregnant. I’m the dad.”

At first I thought the screen had frozen and I’d lost the connection. Neither Mom nor Ava moved an inch. When Ava finally blinked, I realized I’d stunned them both into silence. Mom then brought her hand to her face, and I thought she might be crying?

“Wow. I wasn’t expecting that,” Ava said. “Let me get this straight. She’s there with you and you still somehow have a fiancée? Are you poly now, or do you just like having a mistress on the side?”

“Funny,” I said. “Brandi doesn’t know yet.”

“Oh god,” Mom muttered.

“It just kind of happened.”

“You having sex with Tangi *just kind of happened*? Did you both happen to be naked and you what? Fell on top of her?”

“Ava!” Mom said, scolding her with a slap on her hand.

“What? He’s ridiculous. It doesn’t just happen.”

“I thought you had to go to dinner,” I said, trying not to lose my cool.

“I think I have time for this shitshow.”

Mom slammed her hand on the table. “Stop. Both of you!”

We shut up.

“Does Tangi’s family know?” Mom asked.

“Yes. She told them before she came out here.”

“And she’s going to stay out there and have the baby?”

Good question. I didn’t know the answer. “Maybe?”

Mom blew out an exasperated breath. “How can you not know this? Do you plan to be part of the child’s life?”

“Yes, we talked about that, and it’s why I suggested the job in Vancouver. She’s in my condo now, living there. I plan to support the child in every way I can.”

“Were you sleeping with her the whole time you were here?” Ava asked.

Mom shot Ava the death glare, the one that would mean we were in a ton of trouble, but Ava didn’t seem to care or notice.

“It happened once. The day of Dad’s funeral.”

“Oh god,” Mom said again. “You slept with Tangi the day of your father’s funeral?”

“It just happened, Mom. It was magical,” Ava said, fighting back a laugh.

I was going to kill her the next time I saw her.

“That’s enough,” Mom said. “You can go now. You said you had to leave for dinner. Bye!”

She pushed Ava away from the camera, and I was certain I could hear her laughing as she left. We generally had a great relationship, but there were times my little sister reveled in my misery. Mom watched Ava leave and then focused her attention back on me.

“What are you going to do?” Mom asked.

“I told you already. Support the kid and be part of his or her life.”

Mom shook her head. “No. This is a sign, Ethan. This is your dad trying to tell you something.”

Mom wasn’t overly spiritual, so this was a bit odd to hear.

“I have no idea what Dad is trying to tell me.”

“He’s telling you to be with Tangi. You’ve loved her from the moment you set eyes on her. You were miserable after she broke up with you. But now you have this link with her, a link you’ll have with her forever. Don’t let her get away again.”

I sighed. “Mom, Brandi and I are engaged.”

“Do you think Brandi is going to stick around when she finds out about this? I know enough about her that this will bruise her ego and tarnish her reputation,” Mom said, using air quotes. “Not to mention the humiliation. This is your opportunity to make things right with Tangi.”

“I get what you’re saying, but I’ve moved on, and despite being pregnant, I know Tangi has moved on too. I know you want this fairy tale of us getting back together, but it’s not happening.”

“I bet it’s going to be a boy.”

“Mom, I have to go. Brandi is going to be home soon, and I’m going to need to tell her.”

“Just think about what I said. Moms always know best.”

Chapter Eighteen

Tangi

The first few days on the job were a blur. From meeting fellow coworkers to assessing new players. That was interesting. The Ravens roster ranged from young players about to start their careers to longtime minor leaguers right up to players at the end of their careers. Some had been easy to deal with, others cocky, and some downright difficult. It seemed like a few had a problem being examined by a woman, but they were going to have to get over it. To Allan's credit, he'd made sure they understood that I wasn't going anywhere.

After my first few days, I had trouble dragging myself out of bed. A combination of jet lag, long hours, and not taking care of myself had caught up with me, and as I hauled my ass into work Friday morning, I found myself looking forward to having Saturday off. I'd learned the Ravens had a system in place so that there were always at least three at work or on call. That meant we had rotating days off rather than weekends. Saturday was my day along with another day every two weeks. The hours were long, but I did have a few half days and rarely any evenings, so that made up for it. I had to remind myself that I'd have at least two months of vacation every year, and, on top of it all, I was entitled to one year of maternity leave, an amazing perk of working for a Canadian team. Given that I'd only be working six months before the baby was born and that my benefits would be stretched thin based on that, I'd told the Ravens I'd be back at work in September.

Allan knocked on my open office door. I looked up from my laptop and waved him in. The last few days I'd been trying to catch up on the pile of paperwork and files that needed to be updated, along with player evaluations, but I'd carved out some time for him now.

"How are the first few days going?" he asked.

“Busy but good. Everyone has been great.”

“Good. Just know you can holler if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

He didn't get up to leave, so I sensed there was something else. I smiled, trying to coax him to spit it out.

“Brandon Warde is due in today,” he said. “He'll meet with Coach Fontaine, then I'll chat with him a bit about his progress. The Kodiaks are sending along an injury report and what he's been doing post-surgery. He is still under the Kodiaks umbrella, but his day-to-day treatment is now up to us.”

“Okay. I'll take a look at his file when I get it. How far out is he from being on the ice?”

“At least a couple of months. He's been doing some light exercise and aquatics, but I don't think he'll be in skates for a few more weeks.”

I had a feeling another shoe was about to drop.

“I can handle whatever is thrown at me.”

Allan cringed a bit. “About that. He's not exactly happy about starting the season here. I mean, if I were in his situation, I'm not sure I'd blame him. He's a second-line center. He should be rehabbing with the Kodiaks, but I think Coach Anthony has had enough of him and needs a break from Warde and what he brings to the locker room. Anyway, it's probably best he's here where he's not under constant pressure and not pissing off his coach. I only wish he'd see it that way.”

There was the other shoe. It had me thinking that he played the same position Ethan did, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was going to try to steal Ethan's spot for himself.

“I've worked with all kinds. I'll be fine and be nothing but professional.” I'd have to prepare myself for Brandon Warde. I'd do my research on him when I had a chance.

“I think he will too, but he might be a little bitter. Thought I'd warn you.”

“I’m warned. I appreciate the heads-up.”

An hour later, Brandon Warde walked to my office. He knocked on the door and I nearly spilled the water I was drinking. I’d been so absorbed in my files, I hadn’t even heard his shuffling. Per Jim’s suggestion, I’d been prioritizing the player files into those likely to be called up to the Kodiaks during the season, those likely to make the Ravens, then those going down to juniors. The rest were low priority, which was kind of sad.

“Tangy Kildare?” he asked.

Based on the scowl on his face, he had to be Brandon.

“Yes. Brandon? And it’s Tangi. It’s a J sound, not a G.” He said my name like I was an adjective for orange juice.

“Right. Yup, I’m Brandon,” he said without a smile.

Definitely crusty, but at least he was easy to look at, not that I should have noticed that. I didn’t normally when it came to clients, but he had the most intense blue eyes, not to mention the sexy scruffy beard and sandy blond hair that had that just-out-of-bed look. “Why don’t you come in and take a seat.”

“Sure,” he said, maintaining a frown.

I decided that babying him wasn’t the right approach, so I went straight into the details. “So tell me about the injury and your recovery so far.”

“I crashed into the net and my knee blew up. Simple as that.”

“All right. Tell me a bit about your recovery. I’ll be taking notes along the way, but I can assure you I’m listening to everything you say.”

His expression didn’t change from surly as he told me about his delay in getting surgery and how it had “pissed off” Kodiak management. He’d considered a non-invasive approach that a few other players had tried with varying degrees of success, but after speaking to a few doctors and other players, he’d finally opted for surgery. He’d been working diligently for months, and according to his doctors, he was ahead of schedule in his recovery. I wasn’t sure about that, but I’d check into it.

“I’m doing a lot of training in the water and I’ve started doctor-approved exercise. I’ve been told I can start doing some light lower body training and get in some skates in a few weeks.”

I had no idea if he was full of shit, but I wasn’t going to let him bamboozle me.

“I don’t have your file yet, so I can’t really comment. I know you’ve probably been told this a million times, but you don’t want to speed up your return. You could damage your leg permanently.”

“I know,” he said, giving me a cold stare.

“Give me time to review your file and we can start on your next round of physio treatment then. I’m sure Allan will have some suggestions as well, along with the Kodiaks training team. Does that sound like a plan?”

He shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Is there anything else other than the ACL injury that you would like to discuss?”

“No. Right now, that’s the only thing ruining my career.”

Yeah, he was a happy little camper. It was time to put on my sympathetic face. “I know you want to be back on the ice ASAP, and I want that for you too. You’d probably rather be starting the season with the Kodiaks, but getting some ice time with the Ravens is a good start. Think of it as part of your rehab program to ensure the best return possible to the Kodiaks.”

His jaw tensed, and I thought he was going to spit at me. Thankfully, he was more interested in giving me a lecture.

“Look, you don’t need to be all sunshine and rainbows with me, okay? I can’t stand that kind of shit. All I want is for you to be straight with me. I’m tired of the fake promises and phony professionalism. So can we agree to cut that shit now?”

I think I would have preferred if he’d spit at me, but I also respected his honesty. Now it was my time to be real with him, and it started with the nonsense version of Tangi. “Fine, I’m happy to be one hundred percent real

with you. There is no way you are going to be in skates in two weeks. Forget that idea. And don't even argue with me about it. I can tell just by the way you shuffled in here that you're at least a month away. My guess is that one or both of your legs are giving you grief. So stop kidding yourself, and stop pushing yourself too hard. You ruin that knee and you're done. You won't play hockey again. If you want to be playing for the Kodiaks in three months—yes, *three* months—you're going to follow the orders of your doctors and trainers. You won't go rogue. That's the reality. No sunshine. No rainbows."

His expression was neutral, and he took in a deep breath and exhaled. "I'm guessing you've been dealing with a lot of bullshit?"

That almost felt like an olive branch. I offered a smile. "Some. And I've worked with a lot of people who have pushed themselves too hard, too fast. I think you're a prime candidate for that. And I have to wonder if your attitude is the reason you're here with me and not with the Kodiaks PT." He didn't need to know they were sixty-five-year-old pickleballers.

He scratched at the scruffy beard on his face. "I'm not difficult, but I have clashed with the coach. And some of my teammates."

I arched a brow, then had to stifle a laugh when I saw his expression. "Who *do* you get along with?"

The smallest of smiles crept up on his face. "Not everyone, but then, I'm a competitor. I want to win, and you won't believe how many guys play this game for the paycheck and the women. They don't even care about winning or losing."

I pulled a bag of mini peanut butter cups from one of my drawers and handed it to him. "Have a couple," I said. "I find they make me happy when everything around me is pretty crappy."

"I don't really like peanut—"

"Eat one," I said.

He pulled off the foil wrapper and popped one in his mouth without further comment.

“Don’t gobble it. Enjoy it.”

I could see him taking his time, and eventually he cracked another smile. “It’s not bad. A bit sweet. I don’t usually eat sugar—”

“I’m not a therapist,” I said, interrupting him again, “but I’m someone who’s been through a lot of shit. So here is advice you didn’t ask for: don’t take it all so seriously. Enjoy the game, enjoy your life, enjoy it all, because you know this career doesn’t last forever.”

“Are you telling me to stop and smell the flowers?” he said as he grabbed another peanut butter cup.

“I’m telling you to cut yourself some slack.”

He thought about that for a second. “I get what you’re saying. I’ll try to be less uptight about things.”

“Good start. So let me review your file and I’ll come up with a battle plan and have it to you Monday. You’ll be playing with the Kodiaks before Christmas.”

He pulled himself up and grabbed one more peanut butter cup. “I’m holding you to that, Tangi.”

He walked out and I couldn’t help but smile. I’d finally made some progress with one of the players, and I was feeling good about it.

Chapter Nineteen

Ethan

I called Craig at work. He was a sales rep for a sports supplement company, and he was always dropping my name—with my permission—and sending me free stuff, so it was all good. More importantly, he didn't work out of an office, so I could call him anytime. And right now, I needed to talk to him. Brandi was due home in the next half hour, and I vowed to myself that today was the day. We'd have the weekend to hash it out.

“Hey, Ethan, what's up?”

“Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Nah. Just on my way home.”

I kept forgetting the two-hour difference. It was dinnertime for him. “You working late?”

“Yeah. I banked some extra hours. I'd like to take a winter holiday this year, so the more vacation time I've got, the better. I can't do another Minnesota winter without a break. Enough about me. Why the call?”

I groaned. “I'm telling Brandi tonight.”

“Did you hide all the breakables?”

I rolled my eyes. “Funny. I figure if I keep it positive, she won't freak out.”

“I think you should expect a freakout. Let me put it to you this way. Let's say she came home tonight and told you she was pregnant with her ex's baby. What would you do?”

“I'd probably be mad.”

“You'd kick her out.”

No, I'd be relieved. Because if I was honest with myself, it would be a way out, but I'd never admit that to anyone. I'd had a hard time finally admitting it to myself. Then it dawned on me that even without Tangi's

pregnancy, this was how I felt. I wanted out.

“We’d talk it through.”

“You’re dreaming, bro. You’d lose your shit.”

“Then how do I approach this?”

“I don’t think there’s any way you can win here. You be matter of fact and tell her. Don’t get cute about it. Then tell her how sorry you are and that you’ll spend the rest of your life making it up to her. Maybe then you’ll have a chance to salvage your relationship with her, but I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

“Thanks for the words of encouragement.”

“Do you want me to lie to you?”

“No. I have enough people who do that.”

“Look, get the deed done, and if you need to, call me back later and we can talk. Make sure to pick a hotel you’re staying in tonight.”

Craig didn’t know Brandi like I did. Yes, she’d be angry, but once we talked it out, she’d be fine. We’d get through this. We’d move on, get married, and start our own family. So why did that thought bother me?

I worked out in my home gym until Brandi got home. I could hear the pitter-patter of her heels on the floor. She didn’t come down to the rec room, and I waited a bit to let her settle in. I took a shower and headed upstairs to find her rummaging through the fridge, pulling out food for dinner. My heart was pounding at the thought of what I had to do. I couldn’t put it off any longer. News would get out soon.

“How was training camp?” she asked, putting together the ingredients for a salad.

“The same. How was your day?”

“Lots of kids for some reason. You’d think they’d come before school starts.”

Before she picked up a knife to start chopping, I walked over to her and took her hands. I led her over to the dining room table. Maybe the expression

on my face was giving something away because her forehead wrinkled.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“I hope so,” I said, trying to smile.

“But you’re acting weird.”

I tapped a finger on the table. Where did I begin? Did I tell her the whole story or just rip off the Band-Aid? No, I owed her the whole story.

“I know. I’ve been off for a few weeks. A lot has been going on.”

“Is this about your dad? Are you depressed? It’s normal to get depressed after the loss of a parent. It can also be a very stressful time.”

I patted her hand. Fuck, this was going to be hard. “Sort of. When I went back home, a lot was going on. Losing Dad was hard, and it brought up a lot of feelings. Anyway, I’m not going to draw this out and keep you wondering.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. It felt like a golf ball with studs. “You know I hadn’t seen a lot of friends and family for a while, so there was a lot of reminiscing at the funeral. Tangi and I caught up too. I hadn’t seen in her three years, so it felt like the right thing to do. Get closure.”

Brandi’s blue eyes were searching my face. “Okay. Why do I not like the sound of things?”

“She and I talked and it got emotional. Brandi, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, but we slept together.”

Her eyes bulged and her hands flew to her face. I didn’t know if she was even breathing. Finally she took a halting breath. “Why? Why would you do that?”

I tried to reach out for her, but she slapped my hand away, so I gave her space. “I didn’t intend for it to happen. We were talking about Dad and the past, and our lives, and I don’t even know who made the first move. I regretted it right away. It was a huge mistake.”

She was shaking her head now. “I *knew* it. I knew something happened, but I wasn’t sure. I told myself you’d never do that to me. I thought you were

a good one.”

“I got caught up in the moment of grief. I wouldn’t have done it if I’d been thinking clearly.”

She got up and started pacing the dining room. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to deal with this,” she said, wiping at the tears that started to fall. “This is so humiliating. If people found out ... No, no one has to find out.” She turned to me now, pointing. “You will tell her to tell no one. Maybe we can draft an NDA, get her to sign it, and that way she can’t tell anyone. Yes, that’s what we’ll do. I’m not saying I forgive you, but it’s a start.”

Damn.

“Brandi, listen, I—”

“No,” she shrieked. “Don’t even try to tell me that I have to be nice about this. She is not going to ruin my life. You two made a mistake, but I’m not giving up our life together for one screwup. You promise me you will never do anything like that again, because I swear, if you humiliate me like that again, I’ll never forgive you.”

“You didn’t give me a—”

“I don’t want to hear it. If we just forget about this, make her shut up, it will be fine.”

“But you—”

“Don’t say another word! I don’t want to hear how sorry you are.”

I stood up and went to her, grabbing hold of her hands. “Just stop. Listen to me!” I said so loud she finally stopped interrupting me. More calmly, I said, “You need to let me finish. I know this is a shock and you’re upset right now, but there is more I need to tell you.”

Brandi’s eyes searched my face. “You’re leaving me for her.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want to hurt you more than you’re already hurt, but I need to tell you this. Tangi’s pregnant. The baby is mine.”

Tears sprang to her eyes, and I felt like the garage human being that I was.

“No, no, no,” she kept repeating.

“We should have been more careful. *I* should have been careful. I didn’t expect this to happen, and I’ll do anything I need to in order to make it up to you.”

“And she’s having this baby?”

“Yes.”

“Oh god,” she said, turning away from me.

I gave her a minute to absorb this. I expected her to be shocked, but when she turned to face me again, I saw only rage.

“You need to go,” she said, her voice shaky. “I want you gone. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Despite what Ava and Craig had said, I truly hadn’t expected this. “Why don’t I give you a few days to think about this. We can talk again. I know this is a lot to take in.”

“No. We are done talking. I vowed to myself when we started dating that if you fucked around on me or did anything to humiliate me, I’d dump your pathetic ass. So that’s what I’m doing. You will not make a fool of me. We are done. Engagement over. And just to be clear, I’m keeping this house and the engagement ring. I’m going to auction it all off for charity. And you can go back to your little bitch and have a happy life with her. I’m going to leave now, and when I get back, if you’re still here, I’m calling the cops and they’ll get you out of here.”

Stunned wasn’t the right way to describe what I was feeling. Brandi had lost it.

“Like I said, maybe take a few days to think things through—”

“Get your shit out. Take what you need and I’ll have someone pack up the rest and send it to wherever you end up. But I’ve got a good idea where that is. Everyone warned me that a hockey player couldn’t keep his dick in his pants. I didn’t want to believe it, but here we are. I’ll have my lawyer draw up papers for the house and ring. And you will give them to me.”

I was kind of scared of her, but the last thing I planned to do was argue with her.

“Okay, fine.”

“Be out of here in an hour. I mean it.”

I watched her leave, then slowly sat down on the dining room chair. I waited until she was gone to breathe again. What had just happened? How did I miscalculate so badly?

And why was I okay with all of it?

Chapter Twenty

Tangi

My first day off and I had so much planned. Initially, I'd planned to clean the condo, but it turned out Ethan had a service that came in every Friday. So I'd gotten home the night before to a spotless condo. I sort of felt bad that the housecleaner had to do a few days' worth of dishes. But how was I supposed to know?

I wanted to get groceries, then hit the markets and visit the mall to pick up some new towels. I hated the ones in the condo. And I needed to buy some new underwear because my non-maternity panties weren't fitting the way they should.

But that was all turned upside down with a single text.

Can I stay there a few days?

I stared at the message for a few moments. I had a feeling I knew what he had to tell me. He'd finally grown a spine and told his fiancée the truth? I could hardly tell Ethan he wasn't allowed to stay in his own condo.

Sure. Do I want to know what happened?

I'll tell you when I get there. Be by this afternoon after training camp.

I decided not to let him derail my plans completely. New underwear was a priority and so were groceries. Since I now had a houseguest—he'd promised me that this place was mine, and I refused to start thinking like *I* was the guest—I had to get extra food. Knowing Ethan like I did, he would eat everything in sight.

Mid-afternoon, Ethan knocked on the door, then let himself in. I was in the kitchen putting together lunches for the week. I'd made a hearty bean

salad that I'd add grilled chicken to. I'd also made some peanut butter energy ball snacks to keep me going through the day.

I washed my hands and met him in the living room. He had a two pieces of luggage and a garment bag, and he set them down and smiled at me sheepishly.

“Sorry about this. I know I could stay in a hotel, but at least this is home to me, and it's near the rink.”

I hated how handsome he looked. Part of me wanted to hate him so much for screwing around with my feelings, but the other part of me wanted to be in his arms.

Nope. I couldn't go through that again.

“It's your place and you can stay as long as you want. Do you want the main bedroom? I can get my stuff out of there.”

“No, the spare bedroom is fine.”

I headed to the kitchen to finish my energy bites as he got settled. He joined me a few minutes later and rifled through the fridge. “Sorry, I'm starved. Do you mind if I make myself a sandwich?”

“Go ahead.”

“I'll pick up groceries tomorrow.”

“I went this morning. We're fully stocked.”

He made a sandwich and took a seat at the kitchen island. As he ate, he eyed my energy bites. I plopped one down on his plate and grabbed one for myself.

“So what happened?” I asked, leaning forward on the other side of the island.

He looked up at me, his brown eyes giving off a puppy-dog vibe. “I told Brandi.”

No shock there. “I gather that didn't go well?”

“That's an understatement. I don't think I've ever seen her so pissed off. She kicked me out, told me she was keeping the ring and the house, and that

was it.”

I munched on my protein ball, not feeling a bit of sympathy . “That’s too bad,” I managed. “What’s your next move?”

“I’ve got to find a place to live.”

I frowned. “Aren’t you going to try to work things out with her?”

He chewed slowly and swallowed. “I’m not sure what the point would be.”

When I’d walked out on him that New Year’s Eve, he’d spent months trying to get back together with me. He’d called, texted, sent flowers, but not once offered me what I truly wanted—a promise of commitment. And with Brandi, who he’d offered that commitment to freely, he was simply walking away?

“I’m a bit surprised you wouldn’t put up a fight,” I said at last.

“It’s for the best. I don’t think she’s ever going to accept that you and I are having a kid.” And then I saw it. Something in his eyes that looked like relief. He was happy to be rid of her!

Did he see the irony in all this? He didn’t want to marry me, but fought like hell to get me back. Then he proposed to Brandi and moved to the burbs with her, but he was going to let her go without even trying to patch things up. I was suddenly having feelings, none of them good. If he thought we were suddenly going to resume what we had from years ago, that wasn’t going to happen. I may have been having his baby, but I wasn’t taking him back. Not ever.

I pushed off from the island. “Well, you’re welcome to stay as long as you want since it’s your condo. Maybe some ground rules, though? I think we’re both free to do what we want to do, but maybe let’s not bring people back here. If either of us is dating someone, let’s not complicate things by having sleepovers.”

I could see the shock wash over his face. My suggestion had the intended consequence. Despite being pregnant with his baby, I was moving forward

with my life, and I had no intention of including him.

* * *

I kept the primary bedroom, which was nice because it had its own ensuite bathroom and I now seemed to have to rush to the bathroom at least once a night. No matter how much or how little I drank before bed, I had my nightly dash to pee. Annoying.

I got up Sunday morning and made breakfast for myself, trying to be as quiet as possible. Sundays were usually half days at work filled with meetings and optional workout days for the Ravens prospects, so I was going to take it easy on my first half day.

When I got to my office in the practice arena, I was surprised to find a huge bag of peanut butter cups on my desk. Only one person knew about my stash. I passed the gym and peeked inside. A few players were there, but no sign of Brandon.

I headed to the meeting room and found most of the team assembled. I took a seat with my notebook in hand. I looked forward to my first meeting with the training team.

“How did it go with Warde?” Allan asked as me as waited for Victor, the massage therapist.

“It was fine. I think we came to an understanding. He’s eager to get back on the ice, but I made it clear that if he pushes himself, it could be the end for him. He seemed to get the message.”

Allan’s eyes narrowed. “Really?”

“I think so. Why do you seem so surprised?”

“He has a reputation for being difficult,” Jim chimed in. “Great player and could probably play first line on any team, but Coach Anthony sent him down here to knock him down a peg or two. He’s not well liked in the dressing room, and seems to want more from some of the other players than

they want to give. So nobody likes him.”

“Allan mentioned something like that,” I said. “I got the impression he likes to work hard.”

“Well, he’s our problem now,” Allan said. “Hopefully, we can get him out of here before he starts causing any grief with our guys.”

I made a mental note to ask Ethan about Brandon later.

Victor showed up and we got our meeting started. Allan ran through the injury report, which wasn’t very long this early in the pre-season. Jim discussed which players were likely not making the team and which could be coming down from the Kodiaks. We did a short round table before the meeting ended. I imagined as the season progressed and injuries mounted, these things would run longer.

I was heading back to my office when I saw Brandon leaving the gym. I caught up to him and walked alongside him.

“I think you left me some treats?”

He stopped and turned, and I could see a smile forming. “I figured I owed you for putting up with me on Friday.”

“I was just doing my job.” I glanced down at his gym bag. “What are you doing here today?”

“Doing a light workout and following my rehab schedule. I prefer working out here to being at a bigger gym. Less disruptions.”

That made sense. I thought back to the errands I’d run with Ethan earlier in the week. Even in the grocery store he’d gotten stares and people pointing. “I got your file and worked on some new exercises we can try tomorrow.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Jim told me you’d have something planned for me.” He seemed to consider me for a second, then added, “I’m not going to lie, it’s weird that the head Ravens therapist pawned me off to the assistant therapist, but I think I know why.”

His playful blue eyes distracted me for a moment, but then I snapped back to reality. I couldn’t exactly tell Brandon that Allan wanted nothing to

do with him, but based on his smirk, he already knew that.

“You’re in excellent hands with Jim.”

“I got the impression he knows what he’s doing. He mentioned you were pregnant?”

Did Jim have to tell everyone? Maybe the guy could throw me a baby shower or post about it to his TikTok.

“I am.”

“Congrats,” he said without sounding very excited. “I didn’t realize you’re married.”

“I’m not. The baby wasn’t planned.” I winced. I didn’t need to give Brandon all the details.

“The guy isn’t in the picture?” The twinkle in his eyes warmed something inside of me. Nice to know that even pregnant, I could catch a guy’s attention?

“No, he’s not. He plans to be in the baby’s life, though.”

“At least he’s doing that. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right.”

I watched him walk away and couldn’t divert my eyes from the way his ass looked in his jeans. What was wrong with me today? No fraternization with the players, plus, I was three months pregnant. I had bigger things to worry about.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tangi

I got up the next morning with a smile on my face. I'd slept well, having to get up to pee only once during the night. And I was looking forward to going to work. The day was going to be split up working with Brandon on the next phase of his recovery, then meeting with some of the other Ravens players to see how their injuries were faring. The afternoon consisted of more paperwork catchup.

Ethan was in the kitchen making a protein shake when I wandered in to make my only cup of coffee for the day. I planned to have some overnight oats for breakfast while I savored that single cup of coffee.

"Good morning," I said.

He'd showered, and his dark brown hair was still wet. I couldn't help but notice the fitted shirt he had on. Working for a professional sports team meant I was surrounded by hot men. It didn't hurt that he smelled nice, a mix of soap and shampoo.

"You seem chipper."

"I'm looking forward to work. Thanks again for mentioning the job."

"I'm glad you're happy."

I made my coffee and pulled my mason jar of oats out of the fridge. "Any news on Brandi?"

"Other than an email from her lawyer to initiate the title transfer of the house?"

I bit back a laugh. I had to give Brandi credit for not wasting time. She seemed to know exactly how to get what she wanted. I could learn something from her. "She moves fast. Have you tried talking to her?"

He poured himself a cup of coffee. "We aren't getting back together. I think demanding the title to the house pretty much decides that."

The irony.

I sat at the island with my breakfast, scrolling through the news on my phone. Ethan sipped his protein shake and looked at the newspaper.

“What do you know about Brandon Warde?” I asked.

Ethan sneered for a second. “I know he’s a pain in the ass and I hope he gets traded.”

A ringing endorsement.

“I’m sure you know he’s rehabbing with the Ravens.”

Ethan huffed. “That’s because Coach Anthony doesn’t want him around. And he disagrees with everything Nate, our athletic trainer, recommends. He’s a shithead.”

I’d done my homework. Last season he’d been promoted to the first line a few times when Ethan had been slumping. There had to be a bit of a rivalry there.

“I’m working with him starting today, and he seems okay. We had a consult on Saturday, and after some back and forth, we came to an understanding.”

Ethan smiled and nodded. “You put him in his place?”

“I think so. He brought me peanut butter cups.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned that. I hadn’t said it to antagonize Ethan, but his eyes darkened and his jaw tensed. “Don’t expect the good times to last.”

I finished up breakfast and headed to the rink. I had about an hour before Brandon was due, so I went over my plan. Based on what his therapist and doctor had sent, Brandon was making good progress and was on schedule for a December return to the ice. Just as I’d thought. I had a list of the exercises he was doing, and I’d map out what the next steps were once I saw him in action.

I wasn’t the least bit surprised to see him in the gym right at 9 a.m. He had on a Kodiaks T-shirt, which wasn’t going to ingratiate him to anyone. I

vowed not to check out his ass in his black shorts.

“Hi,” I said, as he worked on some stretches. “Before we begin, I’d like to get you on the table and do a physical examination.”

He nodded and followed me to the trainers’ room. I asked him to hop up on the table and lie on his back so I could check out his damaged left leg as well as his right leg. I found with these kinds of injuries, the uninjured leg ended up compensating for the injured one.

“Anything else I should take a look at while I’ve got you here?” I asked.

“I feel fine otherwise.”

That told me to check everything. I started with his neck, where he had a lot of tension, and when I pressed down on certain pressure points it jarred him. I made a note of that. I moved to his injured knee and asked him to do different stretching positions to get a feel for his limitations. He did surprisingly well. I tested the knee’s strength, and it was better than expected as well.

Next, I moved to the uninjured leg. Every muscle was tighter than normal, and as I worked on them, he occasionally winced.

“Tight, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. I guess I didn’t notice.”

“Your right leg is compensating for your left. I’m going to work on it for a bit to try to relieve the pressure. Then I’m going to work on your neck too. Before I do that, I’m going to get you to turn over and see how your back is doing.”

I examined his back and was happy to see no major issues. When I got to his hamstrings, I found they were tight as well. A recipe for an injury if he pushed himself too hard.

“How do you feel about acupuncture?” I asked.

“I’ve had it done before.”

“I use dry needling. Are you familiar with it?”

“I’ve had it done once.”

“Great. So today, I’m going to work on your neck and legs, do acupuncture, then I’m going to show you some new exercises you can do to rehab that knee.”

He grimaced a few times as I relieved the pressure around his neck. He let out a squeak when I hit the most tender points of his right thigh muscles.

“Holy shit,” he said. “I had no idea how much that was going to hurt.”

“Like I said, your right leg is doing extra work for the left.”

I did a little deep massage, and at one point he covered his eyes with one hand.

“I was going to ask you if guys ever got excited when you worked on them, but right now, this is torture.”

I chuckled. “I’ve had a few excited guys come through here. And before you ask, I’m not naming names.”

I finished up on both legs and then prepped my acupuncture needles. Brandon watched, following my every move.

“You’re not afraid of needles, are you?” I asked.

“Nah. I just find the whole thing interesting.”

I rolled my stool and supplies over and started on his neck. The first needle went in and he nearly jumped off the table.

“You all right?” I asked, trying not to giggle.

“I don’t remember it being an explosion in my body,” he said, laughing himself.

“At least I know I hit the right spot.”

He was used to the needles by the end of it. I finished up and put some hot compresses on all his trouble spots.

“I’ll leave some heat on these muscles for about fifteen minutes, then I want to go through those exercises with you. You’ll work on them tomorrow. I want to give your body a chance to rest for a bit.”

“You’re the boss.”

I paused for just a second to ponder that. I was expecting a total pain-in-

the-ass, but Brandon had been a good patient so far. Either his reputation was overblown, or I was doing a good job.

After placing the hot compresses, I got my laptop out to make some notes. I asked him if he had any questions, and maybe I should have been specific about the nature of the questions.

“Yeah, Jim said you used to date Grant.”

I stopped typing. “We dated for a while. We broke up a long time ago.”

Brandon closed his eyes as he relaxed on the table. “Why’d you break up?”

“Before I answer that, do you have a girlfriend? If so, what’s her name? How long have you been dating her? How old is she? What does she do for a living?”

He smirked. “Okay, I get it. By the way, I don’t have a girlfriend right now. The last one was Maya. We’d been dating about a year. She was twenty-eight. She manages a clothing boutique.”

He was a shit. “Fine. Ethan and I were going in two different directions. I wanted to settle down and he didn’t.”

“How long ago did you break up?”

“When did you break up with Maya?”

The infuriating smirk didn’t leave his face. “Right before my surgery.”

“Not too long ago.”

“Nope.”

I continued typing, hoping he would forget about his question. He didn’t, and asked it again.

“Almost four years ago. Just how friendly are you and Jim?”

He laughed out loud at that, his handsome face lighting up. “Look, I spend hours with him. Remember, Allan pawned me off. And if you get Jim talking, he’ll tell you everything he knows.”

Fortunately, Jim didn’t know much else about me, and Brandon stopped asking personal questions. When the fifteen minutes were up, I took him back

to the training area, where a few of the Ravens prospects were working out. They obviously noticed me and Brandon, but none said a word. Brandon had a “don’t fuck with me” aura about him, and that was fine with me.

We went through the exercises, and I had him do a few just for form, although he knew what he was doing. I explained that we’d work through them all tomorrow and told him to rest up and relax for the rest of the day.

“Great session, thank you,” he said, and we both headed out.

After working with a few of the other Ravens players on some minor muscles aches, I sat down to lunch in my office. I was replying to some messages in my group chat with Jill and Wolseley when Allan breezed in, shut the door behind him, and sat in Jim’s seat. I put down my bean salad and waited for him to say something. As usually, he had his Ravens cap on. I was sure it was to hide his receding hair line.

“Someone saw Warde smile today.”

“Is that bad?”

“He never smiles.”

I took a swig of water and shrugged. “Okay?”

“*You* made him smile.”

I was confused. “You’re going to need to elaborate.”

“He pretty much hates everyone. So if you can get him to smile more, we can get him out of here and back to the Kodiaks.”

I got it now. “We came to an understanding. I don’t take his crap and he doesn’t take mine. It seems to be working. So he’s on the right track, and if all goes well, we could have him back on the ice by late November. He’ll be with the Kodiaks in December.”

Allan tapped his chin. “What do we have to do to get him out of here sooner?”

I frowned. “He’s on pace to be on the ice in November. We can’t rush him back. It would be unethical. Now, if he responds to treatment sooner, then he’ll be back sooner.”

Allan slammed his fist on my desk. “That’s right. You’re right! I want you to take over all his treatment and progress. Jim will oversee as necessary. Warde responds to you, which means he’ll respond to treatment. We’ll have him out of here in no time! Good work, Tangi.”

I had no idea what I’d even done. “Why do you want him out of here to badly?”

Allan moved in closer, not that anyone could hear our conversation. “The guys are afraid of him. He expects and wants too much. He’s a grouch. He’s bad for the room. We need him to vanish. So do your magic and make him disappear.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ethan

Coach Anthony gave the veterans a day off from training camp, and after a brutal few days of drills and workouts, I needed it. Even though there wasn't much in the way of nightlife on a Tuesday night, Jeremy, Ryan, and I headed out for dinner at a lounge near the rink. The other guys lived downtown near the rink, and since I was in the condo, I was also downtown, at least temporarily.

I took it as a cheat day and ordered a burger and fries. The guys did the same, along with a round of beers. I chugged half my beer and looked forward to the mild buzz it would bring.

"Any news from Brandi?" Ryan asked, adjusting his ball cap. He rarely went out without it. He hoped to blend in with the crowd, but he was a hulking monster compared to the rest of the guys around us, so I was pretty sure that wasn't going to happen. Like me, he hated being recognized. We were looking for a night out without hockey talk, although that never happened. The same for going unrecognized.

"Just her lawyer."

"So you're really going to hand the house over to her?" Jeremy asked. The guy was all dolled up for the night, looking to land any hot girl who wanted to spend the night with him. His dark hair was slicked back, and he'd shaved and put on enough cologne that you could smell him three blocks away.

"It's easier that way," I said. "I move on and I'm done with this."

Ryan pffted. "Let me get this straight. Tangi dumps you and you do everything in your power to fight for her. We both remember, right Jer?" he said.

Jeremy nodded.

“You did it all, and I gotta say, I wouldn’t have put half the effort in, even for someone as great as Tangi,” Ryan continued. “You basically did everything except what she wanted. Because you were a bonehead. Right? Am I right, Jer?”

“Totally right,” Jeremy said, checking out a brunette who was checking him out right back.

I mumbled an agreement as I finished my beer.

“Okay, so she doesn’t take you back, because come on, you’re an ass for not giving in. Then you meet Brandi, what, a year ago?”

“About that,” I said, waving down the server and pointing to my empty beer.

“And poof. Six months later you get engaged. You’re a bonehead. I think I can speak for Jer when I say that we were fucking shocked. Mr. No Commitment was suddenly going to settle down? And not only that, with a girl who was totally wrong for him. But we didn’t say anything because you’ve got to make your own mistakes. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“Not really. You guys thought she was wrong for me?”

“Totally fucking wrong,” Jeremy said, finally looking at me and Ryan. “As wrong as you could get.”

I was so confused. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“Like you’d listen,” Jeremy said. “You would’ve blown us off. Besides, I don’t get involved in other people’s drama like that.”

Ryan rocked the table with his huge hands to get our attention. “I wasn’t finished.”

We stopped and let him continue.

“You’re a chump. Tangi was awesome, we all loved her, she made people laugh, she kept you in line. Brandi? She was hot. That’s it. She didn’t give any of us the time of day. You were a trophy on her arm. That makes you a chump. And a massive bonehead.”

Jeremy decided to pile on next. “Look, you could have put up a fight to get Brandi back. You didn’t, and I think we all know why. You want Tangi back. You’ve got a perfect opportunity to get her back now. You’re living with her and she’s having your baby. So what are you waiting for? If you don’t move in fast, she’s going to have that baby and land some other guy because she’s hot.”

The server mercifully brought me another beer. “Can’t I just relax for a bit? I just got out of an engagement that cost me a house. I’m not ready to do anything. Not only that, but Tang made it clear that she doesn’t want to get back together. She even said we shouldn’t bring the people we’re dating around for sleepovers while I’m staying with her.”

Jeremy smiled at a blonde passing our table, then focused back on me. “She’s full of shit and you don’t have time to fuck around.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. “What does that mean?”

“I’ve heard some things,” Jeremy said.

I waited for him to elaborate, but he was too busy checking out the ladies. So I pressed. “What things? You just going to leave me hanging?”

“Right, right,” he said, when I punched him in the arm to get his attention. “Leclair told me that Rosseau told him that Warde has been friendly with Tangi.”

I mulled that over for a moment. Rosseau played with the Ravens last year with one call-up to the Kodiaks. He was friends with Leclair, and the two played junior together back in the day. But could that information be reliable? Warde had a history of being friendly with no one.

“How reliable is this info?”

“He saw them smiling at each other. Also said Jim confirmed it.”

Shit. This sounded legit. And then I remembered that Tangi had asked me about Warde. I was so lost in my thoughts that I barely noticed the server setting down our dinners. She was asking me if I needed ketchup. That brought me back to reality.

“If Jim confirmed it...”

“Exactly,” Jeremy said, diving into his burger. “We all know Jim doesn’t lie. But I’m not sure Jim knows Warde all that well either.”

“Jim knows it tall,” Ryan said.

This was bad. Maybe it was better for both of us that we moved on, but the last person I wanted Tangi to move on with was Brandon Warde. The man was an asshole. And what if they hooked up and fell in love? Got married? He’d be raising my kid.

“She just started working with him a few days ago. I’m sure there’s nothing to it,” I said at last.

Ryan looked down his nose at me. “Warde has a way of attracting all the ladies. But you know what, you relax for a bit and see how that goes. Bonehead,” he muttered.

I hated my friends.

Even though I had the next day off too, dinner and two beers weren’t sitting well, so I called it an early night and slowly walked home. So many thoughts were crammed in my head, and I didn’t know what to think. Should I do something? Or was it best to sit back for a while, let life calm down before making any decisions?

When I got to the condo, I found Tangi sitting in front of the TV, although I doubted she was watching it. She seemed more absorbed with her phone.

“Oh, hey,” she said.

“How was work?” I couldn’t just launch into questions about Warde. That would look desperate, and I wasn’t desperate. Not yet, anyway.

“Good,” she said, setting her phone down.

I sat next to her. She smelled nice, a mixture of lavender and lilac? Or was it something else? I always got it mixed up. And before I even knew what I was doing, words came tumbling out of my mouth. “I was thinking, since looking for a place is going to be a pain in the ass right now, and I don’t

want to deal with moving while the season ramps up, how about I stay here for now?”

“Oh,” she said, and I could see the surprise all over her face. “I guess so. But eventually I’m going to need to convert the spare room into a nursery.”

“I’ll make sure I’m out by then,” I said, her words like a gut-punch. Clearly, she didn’t want me around in the long term, but at least I knew she’d be sticking around Vancouver.

“It’s your place, and I don’t want to kick you out,” she said. “Maybe I should look for another place?”

That wasn’t how I wanted this conversation to go. “No, no, I offered this place, and I’m not taking it back. But if I can stay here for a few weeks, just to ground myself before the start of the season, that would help.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“And we’ll both be busy, so we won’t see each other all the time. We’ll both have our freedom.”

Her forehead wrinkled in confusion. “Sure, I guess.”

“I mean, if you want to date again.”

She laughed, and every part of me ached to kiss her. She was so beautiful when she laughed and smiled. She lit up a room. No, she lit up a street block. I’d never been that happy with Brandi. Not even a little.

“I’m pregnant. The last thing I’m thinking about is going on a date.” Then she narrowed her eyes. “Is this about you? If you want to date, go ahead. But maybe give yourself a minute to be alone. You did just get out of an engagement.”

“Right. Sure. I’m taking myself off the market for a bit.”

“Probably best.”

She glanced down at her watch. “I’m going to head off to bed. Good talk,” she said, she patted my shoulder as she walked past.

I hadn’t asked about Warde, but it sounded like nothing was going on. But knowing him like I did, it wouldn’t take him long to move on Tangi, and

I had to decide if I was okay with that.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tangi

After nearly two weeks of being the new Ravens PT, it was time to catch up with my friends. So much had happened, and while we'd texted each other constantly, it was time to sit down for a video call. It was Saturday morning, and Ethan had left for the gym, giving me privacy on my day off.

Jill was first to come online, and she waved when she saw me. Seconds later, Wolseley joined us.

"Any baby bump?" Jill asked.

"Nothing you can really see," I said. "And I'm not modeling for you."

"Party pooper," Wolseley said.

"How are the living arrangements going?" Jill asked.

"Good, I guess. We don't see a lot of each other, and that's fine with me. But he's planning to stay for a while. Something about not wanting to move when the season is about to start."

Jill groaned dramatically. "He's screwing around with you. He wants to stick around and worm his way back into your life."

"What's wrong with that?" Wolseley asked. She'd dyed her short hair pink, and it looked good on her. "They're destined to be together."

"Destined or not, don't jump the gun too soon. The guy just got out of a serious relationship," Jill said, sipping coffee.

"I don't have any intention of getting back together with him. I'm just so ..." I paused for a long time, trying to figure out how I wanted to say this. I didn't come up with anything eloquent. "I'm angry. I'm also bitter that we dated for nearly seven years and he didn't want to get married, and he knew Brandi a whole six months before he popped the question. Does that make any sense?"

I could see sympathy on both my friends' faces, but I knew for two very

different reasons.

“You met Brandi. She probably forced him to do it at gunpoint,” Jill said. “I had one short conversation with her, and she made some suggestions on how to run my event. Do not get me wrong, I’m not cutting Ethan any slack, but she was insufferable.”

“I have a different take,” Wolseley said. Of course she would. She and Jill were about as different as two people could be, yet we had a friendship that was impenetrable. “Three years have passed. Ethan’s probably matured a lot. Why he picked Brandi as a future wife is anyone’s guess, though. But now he’s at a point in his life where he’s not immature anymore.”

“He’s immature,” Jill said.

“You don’t even know that,” Wolseley argued.

“Regardless, don’t fall for his puppy-dog eyes,” Jill said to me. “He’s going to lay it on thick since he’s not moving out anytime soon,” Jill said.

We moved on to talking about Wolseley’s restaurant opening, and then Jill’s job at Richardson’s. They filled me in on the gossip back home, and as we wrapped up our call, Wolseley asked if I was still planning to come to her restaurant’s opening.

“Of course! I’ve only got two days off, a favor from Allan, my boss. But I’ll be there.”

We signed off and I realized how much I missed my friends. With a day off and nothing to do, I explored the neighborhood, had my one coffee of the day, then ate lunch at a small café. I would have killed to have Jill and Wolseley with me to explore, but instead I went home to an empty condo.

I was browsing online for lunch recipes I could make for the week when Ethan got home. He said a quick hello, dumped his stuff, and was gone before I had a chance to ask where he was going. So much for Jill and Wolseley’s theory that he was trying to win me back. He certainly wasn’t showing it.

* * *

Coach Fontaine had begun cutting some players from the bloated training camp roster, sending some to junior and others to the Ravens farm team down in Washington State. Some didn't take kindly to that, and went to parts unknown. I guessed most went to play in Europe and maybe others went to other minor leagues. Maybe some gave up. I wondered how many dreams were dashed during training camp.

Sundays were optional for the players, but as expected, Brandon was there. Nothing was going to stop his progress, and as I got him on my table to examine him, I was happy to see that much of the tension in his neck was gone, and the right leg wasn't so inflamed.

"Would you rather get treatment today and work out tomorrow, or vice versa?" I asked, pulling out my laptop to make a few notes.

"Treatment today, if you don't mind."

"All right," I said, setting my laptop down. "And how were you feeling last week after acupuncture?"

"I was a little sore, but nothing I couldn't handle. I've felt a million times worse."

I got started, massaging the tender muscles and working all the pressure points. He was quiet all through his leg stretches and acupuncture. Not until I was done and had put the hot compresses on his abused muscles did he get chatty.

"How long were you and Grant dating?"

"How long was your longest relationship?" I asked as I made more notes on Brandon's file. I wanted it as detailed as possible for the Kodiaks team when Brandon was called up.

"Almost three years," he said cheerfully.

"Why'd you break up?"

"I got traded here and we couldn't keep the long-distance thing going."

I continued typing, and when I glanced over at him, I saw he was waiting for an answer. I kind of hoped he'd forget.

"Seven years," I admitted.

He whistled. "Holy shit! I thought you'd say a couple of years. And he got you this job? Guys don't usually do that for exes."

That bugged me. "No, he was a reference. He didn't get the job."

"Jim told me he put in a good word for you. Almost held a gun to Allan's head, is what Jim said."

I rolled my stool closer to him. "What makes you think Ethan's got that kind of pull with this team?"

"He's our top center. He's probably the top three guys on our team. Of course he's got pull with our farm team. Just like he can't wait for the Kodiaks to trade me. I'm sure he's in our GM's ear all the time about it. I'm threatening to him."

Brandon was proving to be a wealth of information despite his inflated ego. "I wasn't the Ravens' first choice."

"Yeah, they hired some shmuck who lasted two days. Jim told me. The second person lasted one afternoon."

I stopped everything. I think I stopped breathing too. "I was their third choice?"

"Appears so. But if you ask me, you're one of the best PTs I've ever worked with, and I've worked with a lot."

I'd assumed I was the second choice, but the third? That was a massive blow to my ego. "Well, thanks."

He glanced over at me. "Shit, I shouldn't have told you that. I figured you knew, that Jim had told you."

"Jim has a lot to say, but no, it's news. So much for Ethan having pull, though. You'd think he would have made me their first choice."

"You would have been my first choice."

I supposed that was some kind of consolation.

We finished up with a set of new exercises, and when I was done my paperwork, I headed home in the rain. It'd rained for two days.

Ethan was home, playing video games with some of his teammates. I'd forgotten how often he used to do that, something about unwinding. I slipped off my wet shoes and jacket and headed for my bedroom to stew about being the Ravens' third choice. I must have dozed off because a light knock on the door startled me.

"I was going to make an early dinner. You hungry?" Ethan asked.

I was famished. "Yeah."

"How does my special mac and cheese sound?"

My stomach rumbled at the thought. "Fantastic." Ethan made a mean mac and cheese.

Half an hour later I was eating a bowl full of gooey mac and cheese while he ate brown rice, steamed broccoli, and what looked like the most unseasoned chicken breast I'd ever seen. He'd allowed himself a small scoop of mac and cheese.

"You're not running yourself ragged, are you?" he asked. He was being delicate about it, and I appreciated that.

"Nah. I take breaks, eat well, keep hydrated ... I just had a rough day."

"Do you want to share?"

I'd stuffed a spoonful of mac and cheese into my mouth so I waited until I swallowed. "Did you know I was the Ravens' third choice?"

"I had no idea. I figured you were the second based on when you got the job."

"I was their freaking third choice!"

He smiled at my irritation. "But you got the job, and I hear the players are liking you."

I shoveled another spoonful into my mouth. Ethan was a decent cook, but his mac and cheese was the best I'd ever had. "How do you know that?"

"You don't think players talk? A lot of them know each other. I hear

some of them think you're cute," he said, gently punching me in the arm.

"There's a strict rule about fraternization," I said, punching him back.

"Fair. I wouldn't encourage you to date any hockey players. We're all the worst."

We ate in silence for a few minutes, and I was so hungry after missing lunch that I helped myself to another serving of mac and cheese, making sure I left some for tomorrow.

"A few of the guys mentioned that you've managed to crack Warde's crusty exterior. Is that true?"

I sat back down at the island with my nearly full bowl. "I'm not sure how crusty he is, but he doesn't push my buttons. Or if he does, I clap back."

Ethan got up and brought his empty plate to the dishwasher. He poured himself another glass of water and leaned against the counter, watching me. "He's an annihilator. He chews trainers up and spits them out. His expectations go above and beyond. How were you able to avoid the annihilation?"

I had an idea where this was going, and I enjoyed seeing Ethan get a little jealous. "I told him from the start that I wasn't going to take his shit. Maybe he gets off on women who take charge."

Ethan remained stone-faced. I was loving this little game.

"He's going to try to crush you."

"I don't think so. He knows his place with me. I don't think I'm going to have a problem at all."

When we were together, I had no interest in playing games with Ethan. But now, every time I thought of Brandi getting an engagement ring after six months, it made it so much easier to get my digs in. I wasn't sure I'd ever get past that, or stop feeling so bitter and angry. The one thing I'd always wanted, he refused to give me. Even though we were having a kid together, I couldn't trust him with my heart again, especially when he'd been able to walk away from Brandi so easily.

“At least he won’t be your problem forever. I’m sure once he’s in game shape, he’ll be called up to the Kodiaks.”

“Right. And then he’ll no longer be a member of the Ravens and won’t have to follow their rules. Interesting. Anyway, thank you for dinner. It really hit the spot. I think I’m going to catch up on some reading in my room.”

Yup, I couldn’t keep this up forever, but I was enjoying playing around with Ethan, just like he’d done with me for seven long years.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ethan

I hadn't slept well. I kept replaying the conversation with Tangi in my head. I got what she was implying. She thought Warde was hot, and if he was going to be called up to the Kodiaks, that would make him available to her. Over my dead body. I cared way too much about Tangi to let that happen.

I got out of bed and showered. I had to be at the rink by nine, but as I was heading for the kitchen to make a protein shake, I spotted Tangi out on the balcony. She was leaning over the railing, coffee cup in hand, taking in the scene. The reason I'd picked this place was for the view, and I was glad she loved it as much as I did.

I quickly made my shake and joined her on the balcony. The sliding door caught her attention, and she turned to greet me. Her long, chestnut-brown hair was up in a ponytail and she hadn't done her makeup yet, but she still looked gorgeous.

"Gorgeous morning," I said, standing next to her. After a few days of rain, it was sunny and unseasonably warm, though Vancouver barely saw any snow and never got as cold as Minnesota.

"It is. Kind of tranquil, minus the car noise."

She sipped her coffee, and I stole a glance at her. How had I fucked this up with her so spectacularly? I knew why: because I was a stubborn bonehead.

"How are you feeling? All good?"

"I'm feeling fine," she said giving me a brief look. "I have a doctor's appointment coming up if you're around and want to be there. Just routine, so I can meet my new doctor here. It looks like I'll be having the baby here, so I want to make sure everything is arranged."

I'd figured she'd include me in everything, so this was kind of nice even

though I'd expected it. "Yeah, I'd like to be there."

"My mom plans to come out when I have the baby, to help me for a while. Then I'm going back to Minneapolis for the summer, so I hope you don't mind."

"I figured. I'll probably come home too. I'd like to be there with our baby and help out."

She sipped her coffee. "You could also help me with the nursery. No rush, I'm not forcing you out. Just putting it on your radar."

"Anything you need."

I should have left it there and walked back into the condo and got ready to go to the rink, but I was a glutton for punishment. "Sorry about the Warde thing last night. I didn't mean to imply anything."

She turned to face me now, and I did the same.

"You mean your suggestion that he'll crush me?"

"Wrong choice of words. He's going to try to make a move on you, and I thought you should be prepared."

I noticed the subtle way her eyes darkened and turned cold. Yup, I'd stepped in it. Again.

"I can handle myself. And like I told you yesterday, once he's called up to the Kodiaks, he's fair game, if I'm interested in him. Last time I checked, what I do with my personal life is none of your business."

I should have walked away, but instead I got defensive. "I know it's not my business, but I know the guy. You don't."

She laughed at that, as sarcastically as possible. "For the last three years I've been dating guys. Sleeping with them too. You didn't have an opinion then. What is it about Brandon that bothers you so much?"

I couldn't tell her the truth, that Warde would treat her better than I ever did. That if he treated his girlfriends the way he devoted himself to hockey, he'd make Tangi his first priority. He'd show her the respect she deserved, he'd devote his life to her, and he'd be a stepfather to my kid. Sure, I was

getting ahead of myself, but it all could happen.

“He’s an ass,” I said instead.

“He’s been a perfect gentleman to me.”

I dug in instead, like the fool I was. “He’s going to break your heart.”

She laughed sarcastically again. “That is rich coming from you. I guess you don’t remember all the ways you let me down and broke my heart? You’re the last person I’d take relationship advice from.” She turned to walk away, but then she stopped and faced me again, her face blotched red from rage. I’d seen this before, first on that New Year’s Eve she broke up with me, when I’d said I wasn’t ready to talk about marriage, and then again the night I’d told her I was engaged to Brandi.

“All I ever wanted from you was a commitment, but you refused. I have to wonder if it became a game for you. We were together for seven years, and it was amazing, until you became an asshole. Then some woman comes along who was so fundamentally wrong for you, and poof, six months later you’re engaged to her. So sorry, you’re godawful predictions mean nothing to me. *You* mean nothing to me.”

She stormed off the balcony and disappeared inside. I sat on the patio chair and wondered how I could have been so stupid to bring this all up. I’d gotten what I deserved, and now I knew that she was beyond angry with me. I had a lot of work to do if I wanted to repair my relationship with her. To top it all off, I had a major problem, and his name was Brandon Warde.

* * *

As if the day couldn’t get any worse, I got an unexpected call from Brandi. Had I paid attention to the caller ID, I wouldn’t have answered, but I’d been a scrambled mess all day.

“Hello, Ethan.”

Fuck me. “Hey, Brandi. How are you?” I asked as nicely as possible. A

call from her couldn't be good news.

"I'm great."

She didn't ask how I was. Nope, this was going to be really bad. "It's nice to hear from you," I said, thinking it wasn't nice at all.

"I'm not going to prolong this." The ice in her voice sent a chill through the phone. "I've spoken to my lawyer and a PR firm, and they've given me some sound advice and told me it's best I reach out to you to make this as amicable as possible."

I got in my car and tried to absorb this all. PR firm? Amicable? We weren't married, for fuck sake's. "Okay. I'm listening."

"To spare myself the humiliation of my fiancé sleeping with his ex-girlfriend and getting pregnant, I plan to announce that we have broken off our engagement effective right after your dad died."

This was all so surreal. Did she think she was Kim Kardashian or a member of the royal family? Absolutely no one was going to care that we'd broken up. In fact, this was beyond nonsensical. Then it hit me. She planned to go after Tangi somehow.

"First of all, you went to the Richardson's fundraiser with me. Secondly, what do you plan to say and where do you plan to make this grand announcement?"

"On social media. My PR team is crafting my statement as we speak."

"Do you plan on mentioning Tangi's name?"

"Why? Have the two of you gotten back together?"

"No, but I would appreciate if you kept her out of this."

She paused for so long that I could feel an angry heat rising in my cheeks. She had something planned, and I wasn't going to like it.

"Do you think I want the world to know that my fiancé fucked his ex and got her pregnant? Do I strike you as someone who would want to be embarrassed like that? So no, I don't plan to mention the slut. Why I'm calling you is because I want you to send out the same or similar statement.

My PR team will provide it to you.”

“Oh, and will I have to pay for that?” I asked snidely.

“No. It’s gratis.”

The fact she’d called Tangi a slut had be chafing, but her cockiness was more than I could handle. “Tell you what, I’ll talk to my agent and see what he thinks. You can have your lawyer send him the statement. But if that means we’re officially done and I don’t have to hear from you again, I’m more than happy to do it.”

She gasped because I’d never spoken to her that way before. I’d always put up with her drama, but I was done.

“You aren’t the victim here. You ruined my life.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. You have a five-million-dollar house to comfort you.”

“I’m so glad we never got married. You’re pathetic.”

“Get your lawyer to send the statement quickly. As soon as he can. And goodbye.”

I hung up on her and it felt so fucking good.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tangi

“I’ve been cleared to skate,” Brandon said proudly. “The doctor said I could do some light skating, so I plan to do that later today.”

“That’s excellent news,” I said, working through the tense muscles in both his legs. “You’re making steady progress.”

“Do you think my timeline has moved up at all?”

“I don’t make that decision,” I said.

“But they’ll ask you for your opinion.”

I moved to his left leg and started on some stretches. “I don’t want to get your hopes up, but I’d say you could probably shave two weeks off your return to the game.”

That lifted his spirits, but I couldn’t say it did anything for mine. I was still furious with Ethan for being an ass, but I wasn’t going to let that affect my job.

“You seem out of sorts today,” Brandon said. “You’re usually smiling, and today you’re frowning.”

“I had an argument with—” I stopped myself. Brandon had no idea Ethan was staying with me, and I didn’t want him knowing. He was nosy enough. “With a friend, and I’m upset about it.”

“A guy friend?”

“Why would you assume that?”

“When women get pissed at their female friends, it rarely shows on their face. So who’s the guy?”

“None of your business.”

“Fair enough.”

We finished the stretches, and then it was time to see him in action. We hit the gym where a few of the guys were working out after practice. One was

Garson, an eighteen-year-old with attitude. When I'd done his assessment the first few days on the job, he'd kept smirking and did everything he could not to take the exam seriously. Jim filled me in later. Garson had assumed he'd make the Kodiaks, but Coach Anthony wanted him to start the season with the Ravens, and so far, that wasn't going down well.

"He thinks he should be on a line with Grant. The kid should still be in juniors, but that's just my opinion," Jim had said.

So when Brandon and I walked into the gym, he smirked and elbowed Munroe, another eighteen-year-old. I had no idea what that was about, but I didn't like it.

"I want you to do some standing hip flexion, and we're going to use resistance bands. I want to see your stability."

He got the resistance band and attached it to one of the larger machines. I watched his form, and nodded. He was doing all right.

"Let's do ten reps of that."

He completed the set with relative ease, and I told him to do two more sets, and then three set on the other side as well. Halfway through, I caught Garson and Munroe giggling and looking our way. I stared at them, my face expressionless. I hoped they got the hint.

"That wasn't as easy as it looked," Brandon said, wiping his brow.

"But how are you feeling? I don't want you to strain yourself."

"No, it's fine. Just a challenge."

We moved on to some double legs squats. I was careful to watch his form so he didn't try to use his strong leg. "Remember to distribute your weight evenly," I said. I walked behind him, my hands on his hips to make sure he was doing that. This seemed to be hilarious for Garson and Munroe.

Brandon finished his set of reps, grabbed his water bottle, and downed half of it. He set it down and before I knew what was happening, he was marching over to Garson and Munroe. Munroe slunk back behind one of the chest press machines.

“Got a problem?” Brandon asked.

I wasn't sure whether to intervene or get Allan and Jim. No one else was around at the moment.

“No,” Garson said, still smirking.

The kid was a lightweight at best. Brandon easily had twenty pounds on him and years of experience. Why Garson would attempt to antagonize Brandon was beyond me.

“Listen, you little shit. If you have a problem with me working with our PT, I would love to hear about it. I'm sure it'd be fucking fascinating coming from an overhyped punk like you.”

Garson let the smirk slip away, but cockiness was still written all over his face. “You seem to be spending an awful lot of time with her.”

Brandon stepped closer until their faces were inches apart. He was a few inches taller, and by the look of his balled fists, this was going to get ugly. I pulled my phone out and messaged Jim and Allan to come to the gym ASAP.

“Let me get something through to you, big shot. I'm rehabbing a serious injury so that I can play for the Kodiaks, where I played last year, as the second-line center. You are here, and you're not going anywhere but down. So take some advice from a seasoned veteran like me and know your place.”

“You mean, like, respect my elders,” he said with a chuckle.

This kid was going to get the shit kicked out of him if I didn't do something. I moved closer, though I kept a bit of distance in case this came to blows. “Gentlemen, let's walk away from this, okay? No need to do anything we'll regret.”

“If you ever make it to the Kodiaks, and by the looks of you that's in serious doubt, remember that I've been around a lot longer,” Brandon snarled. “Little shits like you can find themselves in a lot of trouble. Am I making myself clear, or do you want me to wipe that smile off your face? Your choice, tough guy.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Allan asked. He had Jim in tow, and he

turned to him and said, “Go get Coach Fontaine.”

Jim scurried off and Allan put himself physically between Brandon and Garson. I stepped back from the fray, glad this was over.

“It seems we have an attitude problem,” Brandon said. “Garson has trouble with women.”

Garson’s dark eyes were blazing. “He came at me.”

“You’ve been giving our PT a hard time all day.”

Coach Fontaine strode into the gym and took a look around. He pointed to Brandon, Garson, and Munroe. I had to give him credit for being astute enough to know Munroe had a hand in this too. “All three of you in my office. Now!”

I was breathing a little heavily when Allan came to check on me. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. It all escalated quickly.”

“Garson is a pain in the ass and Warde is a hothead. A bad combination. Look, I have a low tolerance for bullshit around here, so I want to make sure he didn’t harass you in any way. Warde can be intense.”

I startled. Warde? “No, Brandon wasn’t the problem. It was Garson and his sidekick.”

Allan’s brow furrowed. “So Warde wasn’t giving you trouble?”

“No. He’s been doing everything I’ve asked of him, totally professionally. Garson is the one with the attitude.”

Allan nodded. “Yes, I couldn’t agree more.”

After all the Ravens had gone home, Coach Fontaine called a meeting with me, Jim, and Allan. I had nothing but respect for the coach from the few times I’d chatted with him. He’d paid his dues coaching in the minors and deserved a shot in the big leagues, and so far that had evaded him. He kept a tight ship and didn’t take a lot of crap. Players respected him.

He massaged his temples and sighed. “I’m going to be honest with all of you. I’m sending Garson back to juniors tomorrow. The kid needs to grow

up. As for Warde, I'm counting down the seconds until we can send him back to the Kodiaks." He turned to Allan. "What's the timetable?"

"Jim and Tangi have taken the lead on this."

Coach Fontaine focused on us. Jim looked at me, so I spoke up. "He's ahead of schedule by a few weeks. He's been doing some light skating. I think he could participate in some non-contact practice in two to three weeks."

"And he's starting light drills next week with me," Jim said.

"This is music to my ears. I need him out. I think if he dispenses one more piece of coaching advice to me, I'm going to beat him with a goalie stick."

I assumed the meeting was over, but Coach Fontaine held me back. We waited until Jim and Allan were gone. He shut the door and I wondered if he was about to give me shit for what had happened. I was well aware that it was easy to blame the woman.

He cleared his throat and I braced myself for a fight.

"Look, I have three daughters. I know that guys can be real dickheads. I'm telling you that I have no tolerance for harassment around here. Not even a little. So if any of the guys are inappropriate with you, I want to know. It will be dealt with."

"Okay," I said, confused.

"Do I need to deal with Warde?" My stunned silence must have alarmed him because he said, "Tangi?"

I snapped out of my shock. "No, he's fine. He's never done anything inappropriate. As for Garson, I'm not sure where he's headed, but he could use some help. But I imagine that won't happen where he's going."

"Likely not. But when he gets back here, he and I will have a chat. In fact, I'll have a chat with him tomorrow before we send him back to juniors."

I left the meeting with Coach Fontaine impressed, and that was hard to do when it came to hockey life.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ethan

I decided to keep my distance from Tangi for a while, to let her cool off. I kept busy with the guys, hanging out after training camp, which for the first time in years was kicking my ass. I usually showed up in top form, but losing Dad and spending the summer dealing with his estate had set me back.

Added to that was Brandi and her statement about the end of our engagement. I couldn't take any of it seriously, and when my agent called to tell me that he'd looked over the statement and didn't think it was a big deal, I texted Brandi to let her know she could go ahead and post it.

I expect you to do the same.

I stared at her text and laughed. I didn't post much on IG or anywhere else for that matter, and I certainly wasn't telling the world my engagement was over.

Nope. Leaving it to you. Peace out.

I had better things to do, like going with my buddies for a much-needed night out. I looked forward to the end of training camp. Just a few more weeks to go. We were leaving for our first road trip the next day, not that any of the veterans were expected to play in any preseason games.

As usual, Jeremy was checking out the ladies as he took a seat next to me at our favorite hangout, Lou's. We'd been eating there for years, and the lounge was hopping and just private enough that fans kept their distance. We could mingle, especially Jeremy, but we were also able to eat and drink in peace.

"I'm about to tell you something, but you can't lose your shit," Jeremy said.

That was a bad way to start a conversation. “Do I even want to know?”

“I think you do. Leclair told me that Rousseau told him that there was a huge bust-up in the Ravens gym between Garson and Warde. From what he heard, Garson and Munroe had been joking around about Warde and Tangi getting close. They didn’t mean anything by it, but Warde got pissed off and almost beat the shit out of Garson. Honestly, that wouldn’t have made me sad.”

That was a lot to unpack. Of course Tangi hadn’t mentioned it to me. Why would she? But I hated hearing this gossip through so many other people. I knew Garson was a little shit. The kid had been our top draft pick and came into camp thinking he was some second coming. Coach Anthony dealt with that chip on Garson’s shoulder pretty quickly and dispatched him to the Ravens.

But most of all, I didn’t want Warde defending Tangi. I should have been there. Except it had nothing to do with me, and I had to accept that. “Do you really think Garson wasn’t trying to rile Warde up?”

“Course he was. Why Garson would take on Warde is beyond me. Munroe said he tried to stop the whole thing but that Warde was freaking out. Allan had to break it up. Tangi got into the middle of it too, nearly got knocked over, according to Munroe.”

Blood rushed to my face. I didn’t know who I wanted to punch more, Garson or Warde for putting Tangi in that position.

“Anyway, Garson is back in juniors. Probably burned his ass, but at least he won’t be around for a while.”

“And Warde got off with no punishment?”

“That’s what Munroe told Rousseau who told Leclair.”

This game of telephone was infuriating. “So Warde nearly gets Tangi hurt and there’s no consequences?”

Jeremy’s baffled expression had me miffed. “Why would be? In a month or two he’ll be back with the Kodiaks. He’s our second-line center. Why

would Fontaine and the rest of the Ravens crew care about it? Look, I don't like the guy any more than you do, but he was defending Tangi. You've got to give him that."

But did I? I ended the outing early because I wanted to catch Tangi before she went to bed. Was it a bad idea to talk to her? For sure. Did that stop me? Hell no. I was so pissed off that this had happened and that I was finding out through five other players. I got to my building and walked around for a bit. The last thing I wanted to do was go storming into the condo with guns blazing. When I thought I'd calmed down enough, I went up to the condo. Tangi was sitting out on the balcony enjoying the warm evening, since there wouldn't be many of those left. She was reading on her iPad.

"Hey," I said.

She jumped at hearing my voice. Shit, I hadn't noticed she had her earbuds in.

"Hi," she said tentatively, taking out her earbuds.

She had on black leggings and a bulky cream sweater that made her look adorable, right down to her thick socks.

"I have a road trip starting tomorrow. It's just four days, but I thought I'd let you know."

"I saw the schedule," she said.

How did I segue into this? I couldn't think of any right way. "I heard about the fight between Warde and Garson."

She stiffened and then slowly got to her feet. She went inside the condo and I followed her. I guessed she didn't want to have another public blow up on the balcony for all to hear.

"Word travels fast. It wasn't a fight," she said with no emotion.

"It was something if everyone is talking about it."

She set down her iPad and faced me, fire in her hazel eyes. "Are we going to do this?"

I threw up my hands. "Why can't I be concerned about you? Despite

everything, I care about you and you're having a baby. The last thing I want for you is to be in the middle of a fight between two guys who are a lot bigger than you."

"First of all, there was no fight. Second, it's been handled."

"Munroe said you were nearly hit and that he had to break up the fight."

Her jaw dropped and then she burst out laughing. Not the reaction I'd expected.

"Munroe? Are you kidding me? The second Brandon started talking to Garson, Munroe hid behind some gym equipment like a baby. So maybe don't get your information from that turd. As for Brandon and Garson, they exchanged some words, nothing more. Allan broke it up, everyone talked to Coach Fontaine about it, and it was over. I wasn't hurt, the baby wasn't hurt, no one was hurt. No one threw a punch. You can stop worrying."

I tended to believe what Tangi was telling me, but she could be covering for Warde. "You can't blame me for caring."

She let out a deep breath. "I don't, but I can also handle myself. If I didn't think I could, I'd have left the job by now. You need to mind your own business. If you don't think you can do that, then one of us needs to find another place to live."

She couldn't be any more serious and the last thing I wanted was for her to live somewhere else. At least here I could keep an eye on her, even if she didn't want me to. "Fine, I'll back off. But if something like this happens again, can you at least tell me about it so I don't have to hear it from ten other people?"

She tilted her head and groaned. "You're not getting it. What happened is none of your business. I don't have to tell you anything. So if you hear gossip from ten other people, that's a *you* problem. I just ..." She trailed off. "I'm trying to move on with my life. We're having a kid together, so that will keep us forever connected, but I can't go back to what we had, and right now, I'm not sure we can even be friends."

"Tang, come on, we'll always be friends," I said, shock reeling through me.

She took another second to collect herself. "I don't think you comprehend how much you've hurt me, Ethan. We were together for seven years and like the idiot I was at the time, I put my life on hold for you. And all I wanted was to get married, and you refused. You said you were never going to get married. And when I'm finally over it, you come waltzing back into my life, sleep with me, and then act surprised that I think it might mean something—and then you tell me you're getting married to *Brandi*. How do you think that made me feel?"

I could see all the pain on her face and it was wrecking me up inside. "Tang, I matured a lot after you left—"

"Screw you! I thought what we had was special, but it wasn't special enough to marry me. So I owe you nothing. I gave you everything I had for seven years. I'm done. So stay the fuck out of my life." And with that she stormed into her bedroom and slammed the door shut.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tangi

Ethan came with me for my first doctor's appointment in Vancouver and we barely spoke to each other the entire time. I was so hurt and frustrated with him. He really didn't see, even now, how he'd strung me along, refused to talk about marriage with me, then turned around and asked someone else—someone who was so fundamentally wrong for him—to marry him? I had no words for it, and it hurt like hell.

I put it all aside for the doctor's appointment. Dr. Mehta was just as lovely as Dr. Duncan. She did an exam and told me everything looked great and that my pregnancy was progressing normally. She scheduled an ultrasound the following month, then asked if I had any questions.

"I know you're saying that everything looks great, but I haven't gained much weight," I said.

Dr. Mehta smiled as she finished typing up my file. "You're in excellent shape, and having a smaller frame, it's normal not to be showing as much. But your baby is right where he or she should be."

I took that as good news because while all my clothes were getting a little tighter and I'd started browsing for maternity pants online, the baby was healthy.

Once we were back at the condo, I went to work. More than ten days had passed since our epic blowout. Fortunately, Ethan had been gone for some of it, but now he was back, and I had a few days with him before I headed to Minneapolis for Wolseley's restaurant opening. I decided to keep my distance and do my own thing.

At work, the Ravens roster was nearly complete. Every day a few more players were let go, and for the some, the Ravens had been a last chance at the big leagues. I'd tried not to get attached to anyone since they could be

gone any second, but it was still sad to see their dejected faces.

“I think Warde is pushing himself too hard,” Jim said when I got to our office. He didn’t always bother with the pleasantries and he didn’t seem to get attached to players either. I had to stop caring too.

“Why is that?” I asked, setting my bag down. I had to edit what I was bringing to work. Between a huge bottle of water, lunch, snacks, ginger candies, and a change of clothes, it was like dragging luggage around.

“He wants to be on the ice by the end of October,” Jim said without looking up from his iPad. “Playing games.”

“I’ve already told him that he’s looking at mid-November. That hasn’t changed.”

“He’s not telling you, but he’s hurting because he’s pushing too hard. If he reinjures himself, that’s on us.”

“I appreciate you telling me. I’ll see if I can get through to him.”

I’d planned to examine him that afternoon and do his treatment, so the timing worked out.

My first Ravens patient was Rosseau, the team’s top left winger, who often went back and forth between the Ravens and Kodiaks throughout the season. He’d been nursing a sore shoulder that needed treatment. Next was Orlov, the young Russian kid who’d nearly made the Kodiaks. He had pulled a hamstring and every time I worked on it, the kid got a little excited, then embarrassed. I was fairly certain he didn’t have a girlfriend or much of a personal life, so any female attention was more than he’d experienced. I made sure to be cool with it because the kid was mortified.

“I am so sorry, Ms. Kildare. Please don’t tell anyone.” There was so much desperation in his big blue eyes.

“Of course not. Don’t worry. It’s all strictly confidential. Tell you what, I’m going to head out for a few minutes to get a snack. You take your time in here, and when you’re ready, I’ll be back to take you to the gym and show you some exercises.”

With that bit of drama out of the way, and after showing Ilya some exercises to loosen up his hamstrings, I prepared my exam room for Brandon.

“Hello, Tangi,” he said with a smile. He knew the drill and got on my exam table without me having to ask.

“Hey, Brandon. How’s everything going?”

“Not bad,” he said, getting himself settled.

I started my exam and was more thorough than ever. Brandon didn’t seem to notice at first, but after I’d covered every inch of his body, and not in any way he’d enjoy, he got a little fidgety.

“What’s up? You seem to be concerned about something.”

“Jim told me you’re working too hard.” There was nothing more satisfying than using the Jim card on him.

He didn’t say anything for a moment before clearing his throat. “I’m doing only what everyone’s been telling me to do.”

If he thought he was going to outsmart me, he had another thing coming. “When you say that, do you do the recommended reps or do you do more?”

More silence. “The recommended reps,” he finally said.

“Funny, my bullshit meter is off the charts right now.”

He grumbled something I couldn’t make out. Then he said, “I really want to get back out there.”

“And you will. You will be cleared for non-contact practice in a few weeks. You’re working with Jim on the ice now. It will happen. You’re doing a great job. Don’t screw it up by coming back too early.”

I realized my voice usually sounded more upbeat, but today it sounded irritated, and Brandon caught that because he asked what was really bothering me. Telling him the truth was a bad idea, so I fudged it. A lot.

“I’m just a bit bummed,” I admitted. “I’ve been here almost a month and it’s been hard not having family and friends around. The good news is that I’m going home for a few days to see everyone and be there for my BFF’s restaurant opening.”

“That’s cool,” Brandon said as I worked on the muscles in his non-injured leg. They were compensating again. He grunted when I hit a tender point. “You probably don’t want my two cents, but when I left home to play hockey, it was the hardest thing I’d ever done. I didn’t know anyone. The family I was staying with was nice enough, but they weren’t my family, you know? But it got easier. I started to make friends, and you will too.”

I rolled out my acupuncture tray. “It’s hard to make friends when I work six days a week. And if you hadn’t noticed, there aren’t many women who work here.” Actually, I didn’t know of any. Some who worked admin came around occasionally, but most were older, and I didn’t see myself making a connection with any of them.

“Are there any wives and girlfriends left that you knew from when you and Ethan were together?”

“Yeah, but I think it would be weird.” Based on what I’d seen on social media, a few were still in the picture, but so much time had passed. Sure, we’d all been friends back then, but I wasn’t part of their sphere anymore.

I started my dry needling and hit some spots that had Brandon biting down on his lip, but he didn’t complain. He was too much of a tough guy to show any emotion, even though I could tell it was hurting like hell. Served him right for training too hard.

“You know,” he said through gritted teeth when I hit another tight spot, “there is this great Italian restaurant I go to all the time. Great family place. Now, I’m not suggesting a date because there is no fraternization allowed, but we could hang out there. Mario has a few daughters your age, sweet, fun, smart girls who I think you’d click with. One is an accountant and does the books for Mario, the other is a financial analyst.”

“You seem to know a lot about them,” I said, moving to his injured leg. “Have you dated them both?”

“Hell no, Mario would kill me. But we can have dinner there, and I can ask Mario to invite them too.”

Instead of asking me out, he was setting me up on a friend date. That was kind of cute. “I’ll think about it.”

“Tell you what, when you get back from your trip, we’ll go out for dinner and you can feel out the situation.”

That was starting to sound like a date again, but it did sound like fun to be out for dinner and not stuck in the condo alone. “All right, I’m up for that. In the meantime, you’re going to take it easy because if you reinjure yourself, it’s not only Jim’s head on the line but mine too. I like this job, so don’t ruin it for me.”

“Fine, I’ll lay off. But I’ve got to say this: Grant was an idiot to let you go.”

Where had that come from? I put down the hot presses on his sore muscles and Brandon closed his eyes as he relaxed. God, he was hot. But there were so many problems with even thinking anything else about him. First of all, I was pregnant. But more importantly, he was Ethan’s future teammate and totally off limits. Or was he?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Tangi

I flew home Friday evening and Mom and Dad picked me up at the airport. Mom nearly started crying when she saw me. I had to stop her from lifting up my shirt to see my slowly growing baby bump. I reminded her that I was barely four months along, so there wasn't much to see.

"You've been eating right?" Mom asked as Dad took my small rolling luggage.

"I've always eaten right," I said as she fussed with my oversized purse. "I can carry that!"

"And those Ravens are treating you with respect?" Dad asked.

With the exception of Garson and a few other Neanderthals, yes, but I lied and told Dad they were all perfect gentlemen. I filled them in on everything while we drove home, and Mom was nice enough to have dinner prepared since with the time difference it was around the time I ate dinner.

"How is Ethan?" Mom asked as I ate her chicken dumpling soup. That soup was the perfect comfort food for a cool Minnesota evening.

"He's fine. He's living with me now." Mom and Dad exchanged looks and before they got too excited, I had to set them straight. "No, we aren't back together and we aren't getting back together. When he told his fiancée that he was having a kid with someone who wasn't her, she kicked him out and took the house they were living in. With nowhere to live, he came to stay with me. The situation is temporary. I would have told you sooner, but it wasn't something I wanted to bring up over the phone."

Mom couldn't hide her devastation. "Well, you never know," she said.

After dinner, Mom took me to the spare room she and Dad used as an office. In the month that I'd been gone, they'd cleared it out. "We thought of putting a nursery here, especially when you come home after the baby is

born. Your dad and I thought it would also be nice to have when we babysit for you.”

For some reason, the barren room made me tear up. Mom didn’t notice at first and kept going.

“You probably don’t know if you’re having a boy and a girl, and knowing you, you’ll want a gender-neutral theme anyway. So what about some pale yellows and greens? I know how much you hate gray. Oh no, honey, are you crying?”

I wiped away a tear. “It’s fine. Maybe some pregnancy hormones. This is great, Mom. Thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me? You’re having my grandbaby! Of course I’d go all out.” She rubbed my back as I took in a centering breath. “How do you feel about the colors?”

“I love them. And whatever you and Dad want to do, I’m okay with it.”

“And if you have some time tomorrow morning, what if we go baby shopping? Just to pick out a crib and changing table, whatever else you think we might need. I don’t mean to presume, but you’ll be coming home for the summer? I know you mentioned it before, but I want to make certain.”

“For sure. Once I’ve recovered enough and the baby is a little older. I don’t want to fly right after the baby is born.”

“Good. And we’ll have this room ready. You still want me to come out at the end of March.”

“Of course! I’m going to need you.”

Mom teared up too, and Dad walked into the room and right back out when he saw the cry fest.

I hung out with my parents for a bit, telling them about my job so far. I texted Jill and Wolseley that I’d landed safely, and Jill demanded we meet for lunch. I told her I would after shopping with Mom.

After Mom and Dad headed to bed, and I decided to wait up for Leah. She was working late, but she’d be home around midnight, and since I was

still on Vancouver time, that was ten. While I waited, I went through clothes and other belongings, deciding if I wanted to bring anything back with me. I'd packed away some socks, scarves, light mitts for those rare days I'd need them, and more hair accessories. Leah knocked on my door when she got home, and I nearly jumped two feet. I hadn't heard her come in.

"How's Vancouver?" she asked.

"Good. How's everything here?"

"The same. How's baby Grant?"

"Fine. Growing."

"How is his fiancée?"

"She is no longer his fiancée."

Leah feigned shock by placing a hand over her heart. "How did I see that coming? So you two back together yet?"

"Actually, no. And I've made it clear to him that it won't be happening."

Leah rolled her eyes dramatically. "I know you really well, so I'm going to predict that by the time the baby is born, you and Ethan will be back together."

She was so confident, with a smirk on her face. My sister was infuriating. "Not happening."

"You know what, let's bet on it. I get to name the baby if I win. And if you win, I'll let you name *my* firstborn. That's how confident I am that you're going to lose."

"Middle names. And fine, you're on."

"Great. I better go pick out a name. Goodnight, sis." She stopped before leaving. "Oh, and it's nice to have you home."

* * *

Mom had mapped out several baby stores she wanted to hit. We left first thing in the morning after she'd made me a hearty breakfast. First, we hit the

paint store to pick some colors. As promised, I let Mom choose them, and the attendant was kind enough to load the paint cans in the car. Next we went to a huge big box store dedicated to baby stuff, where Mom picked out a crib, changing table, and mattress. After that, we went to Richardson's to grab a baby monitor, blankets, a diaper bag, and bibs. I stopped her from buying any clothes because I had no idea what size the baby would need.

“Should we buy you things to take back home? For when the baby comes?”

I hadn't given that much thought, but the thought of lugging it home made the decision easy. “Nah. I'll get things there.”

I couldn't believe how much the shopping took out of me. By the time we got home I was both tired and starving, but there was no way I was missing out on lunch with Jill. I grabbed my car keys— Mom and Dad were keeping my car in the garage for me—and headed to the Nook, a restaurant Jill and I'd both loved back in our university days.

She was already there, and I plopped into the seat across from her and sighed happily. I was looking forward to sitting, eating, and hanging out with one of my best friends.

“I've missed you,” Jill said, getting up and throwing her arms around me. I was too tired to stand.

Jill and I had been friends since middle grade when she moved to the area. She'd come from a dysfunctional home where her dad was rarely around and her mom didn't know how to be a parent. Jill had essentially raised herself, and when we'd become friends that first day of grade seven, Mom and Dad had embraced Jill as their own.

Her childhood explained a lot about her. I understood her mistrust of people because she had never lived in a stable home where she could trust anyone. Her lack of a serious relationship could be traced back to her wandering father, and she had been jaded by her mother's lack of nurturing. It amazed me that Jill had been able to land on her feet, but she had ambition

and drive, and that made up for a lot.

“I missed you too. You don’t know how much I’ve missed you guys. All day I’m surrounded by men, and it gets boring really fast.”

“How is work going?”

I gave her the rundown, complete with the unfortunate Ilya incident. I told her about Garson and his ego trip, and about my budding friendship with Brandon. I saved my bitchfest for last and told her what an ass Ethan was being. She wasn’t surprised.

“I’m only going to say this once because I know you’re smart, but with Brandi out of the way, he’s going to start sniffing around. You have to be ready for that. And...look, you know I’m not his biggest fan because I think he let you down three years ago, but if you want to get back together with him, I’m not going to judge you.”

Jill too! “Why does everyone think that’s going to happen? Mom implied it, Leah came out and said, and now you’re doing the same.”

Jill put on her thoughtful face. “You had a great relationship with him for the most part. The kind of relationship people envy. Yes, he spectacularly fucked it up, but he always loved you, and I think he still does. I saw how he looked at you at his dad’s funeral and at the Richardson’s function. I guess the real question is whether you want to give him a second chance, and you need to be honest with yourself about that.”

I was fairly certain Wolseley and Jill had traded places. “I figured you’d suggest I tell Ethan to pound sand.”

Jill shrugged. “He should pound some sand, but you’re also having his kid, and I think you’d make a great family.”

Why was she doing this to me when I’d firmly shut the door on Ethan? “I don’t know if I can. I get so angry when I think about the seven years we had together and how badly I wanted him to make a permanent commitment to me, and all the bullshit reasons he came up with. That’s all bad enough, but it’s made a thousand times worse by how quickly he proposed to Brandi. I

can't even process it."

"Then take your time with it. There's no rush. If you decide he's not the one you want to spend your life with, that's okay too."

The server came around with drinks and took our orders. I sipped my decaf green tea while Jill sucked back a margarita, which was so unfair.

"Now tell me about this Brandon dude," she said.

I shrugged. "He's a decent guy. Plays for the Kodiaks but is rehabbing with the Ravens to get back into game shape. Everyone complains about him and says how difficult he is, but I think he's nice and we have good talks."

Jill listened to me and suddenly stopped drinking her margarita. She put it down and carefully set it aside. "He knows you're pregnant?"

"Everyone knows."

"And he's still nice to you?"

She had me confused. "Why wouldn't someone be nice to a pregnant woman?"

"Let me rephrase. He could be professional and leave it at that. Guys are rarely *nice* in the way you're describing."

I sipped my tea, trying to come up with an answer that would satisfy her. I was drawing blanks. "It's just a friendship, if I can even call it that. I'm pregnant, so I'm not sure he's looking to date a pregnant woman. He's helping me find friends. He suggested going out to dinner to introduce me to the daughters of the restaurant owner."

Jill nearly spit out her drink. "That's the oldest line in the book."

"It is not!"

"So the guy who's nice to you is going to take you out to eat and to meet people. Come on!"

"The team has a strict policy of no fraternization, and furthermore, do you really think I want to get in a relationship right now? If he thinks it's going somewhere like that, he's going to be very disappointed."

"What's his last name?" I told her, and Jill pulled out her phone and

googled him. She whistled when his picture came up on her phone. “I wouldn’t throw him out of my exam room.”

“Oh stop!”

Jill put her phone down and sucked back more of her margarita. “I get what you’re saying. It’s probably the worst time to date, and last time I checked, hockey players make shitty boyfriends. So why not have some fun with him instead? Go out for dinner and meet these ‘friends,’” she said, using air quotes. “I think you deserve to have some fun, otherwise your current living situation will drive you insane.”

Maybe I would take him up on that dinner date when I got home. I had nothing to lose.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ethan

The condo was different without Tangi in it. Even though she'd be gone only a couple of days, I missed the smell of her perfume or the way she hummed when she made her lunches for the week. She was still pissed at me, but I loved having her around anyway.

At first I thought this trip was Tangi's way of getting away from me, but she'd mentioned in passing about Wolseley's vegetarian restaurant—or was it vegan? Whatever it was, Ava was going too, so it was all legit. Maybe the few days away from each other would do us good. I hoped when she got back that we could talk, that I could try to explain to her why I'd made such terrible choices three years ago. That was if she'd even listen.

We had a preseason game that night, but Coach Anthony had told me I wasn't going to play. I was fine with that. I was nursing a tender shoulder from getting hit into the boards by one of the new kids trying to prove himself. Jeremy had a talk with the kid after practice. While Jeremy was a playboy off the ice without a care in the world, on the ice, he took his role as captain seriously. Not injuring your teammates should have been obvious, but he'd tell the kid anyway.

While I wasn't playing that night, I still had practice to attend. With the season about a week away, the roster was being pared down by the day. Some players were being sent down to the Ravens, while others had opted to play in Europe. Others were outright released. Some good people were leaving town.

I downed a protein shake and headed to the rink. All the guys who weren't playing that night were suiting up. My shoulder was still acting up, so I let one of our assistant coaches know that I was going to check in with Nate, our head trainer. He was in the training room, talking to Peter Ashburn,

one of our top defensemen. Apparently they were just wrapping up whatever they were doing, because Peter nodded at me and left the training room.

“I like you, Ethan, but I hate seeing you here,” Nate said. “It means something’s ailing you.”

Nate had been with the team as long as I had. He treated all the players the same, which won him respect around the dressing room. Too many times a trainer played favorites, but Nate was a good guy.

“That hit the other day, the one from Mitchelson? My shoulder is acting up. Nothing serious, but I don’t want to ignore it with the season about to start.”

“Good plan. Okay, let’s take a look.”

He checked my range of motion and quickly ascertained that I’d tweaked it. “I want you to rest up a few days and then we’ll see if we can get the inflammation down. I’m going to send you to see Dr. Warren in case he wants to prescribe something for it. But nothing is separated, so that’s good news. I’ll let Coach know.”

While the guys got ready for practice, I did some work on the bike and some other lower body exercises. I then watched the rest of practice, met with the team doctor, and went home to an empty apartment.

That night Ryan and I walked to the game. He lived a few blocks away, and it was nice to get some fresh air and hang out.

“What’s up with the shoulder?” he asked.

“Not separated, otherwise I’d pummel Mitchelson into his next life. But it’s inflamed and sore, and Warren has me on some anti-inflammatories for now. I’ll see the PT tomorrow.”

“But you have a live-in one,” he said, arching a brow.

“She’s barely talking to me.”

“What did you do?” he asked.

We got to the arena and passed through security. We could have gone to the locker room to see the guys, but it was a preseason game, so not much

was at stake. Instead, we headed for the Kodiaks box and hung out there. No one else was around yet.

“I didn’t realize how much hurt she still had over what went down between us, or what the engagement meant to her. She let me know in no uncertain terms,” I said, once we had no audience. “Something about committing to Brandi when I wouldn’t commit to her. I tried to explain that it was a different time. When Tang and I were together, we were young. I was older when I met Brandi.”

Ryan’s face looked as if he’d been sucking on lemons. “That’s a bullshit response. You were an ass. You think I don’t remember what happened on New Year’s Eve?”

Fortunately, not a lot of people were still around from that day. Just a handful of guys who either didn’t notice or didn’t care. But Ryan and Jeremy were there, both with their girlfriends at the time. They witnessed me behaving like a fool. I wasn’t a big drinker, not like some guys on the team, but that night I’d been putting a few back. By no means had I been drunk, but I’d had enough to say and do things I shouldn’t have.

Our captain then, Wes Erickson, had thrown the party at his house in Kitsilano. All the players were invited as well as the training staff and anyone else Erickson could think of. Tangi had looked so pretty that night, in an eggplant-colored dress that hugged all her curves. We’d both been having a great night, and even though it was cold outside—by no means anything close to a Minnesota winter night—we stood outside on Erickson’s deck and took in the lights and the ocean. We’d held hands, and I don’t even remember how we’d gotten onto the subject of marriage.

“Vancouver is growing on me,” she’d said. “In the year and a half I’ve been here, I could see myself staying long-term.”

“Good, because I plan to sign an eight-year contract.”

I remembered that she’d sipped her wine and smiled at me. “You know, we should probably think about getting married. Then I can finish school,

work part time, we can decide when we want to have kids. It makes that all easier when I'm legally able to work, get health care, you know."

By that point, she'd been hinting at marriage a lot, but this was the first time she'd come out and said it point blank. Every time she'd hinted it, I'd hinted back that I wasn't interested in getting married. Maybe I hadn't hinted clearly enough.

"Tang, I don't want to get married."

"I'm not saying we have to get married right away. Maybe in a couple of years, but in the meantime, I think our parents would like to see us get engaged at the very least."

I'd laughed, which was probably the exact wrong thing to do in that moment. "No, I mean I don't want to get married. *Ever.*"

She'd stiffened at my side, but at that moment, I hadn't realized how much trouble I'd gotten myself into. The booze had muddled my head.

"When did you decide that?"

I also hadn't caught the way her voice had changed, turning ice cold. I'd only realized it from replaying the memory of our fight over and over. "I know we've never really talked about it, but I'm telling you now. I don't want to get married. I don't want to have kids. I like life the way it is."

She'd taken a step back as if I'd wounded her. "When did you plan on telling me that?"

"I don't know. Whenever it came up."

"Whenever it came up? Are you for real? I've always been clear that I want kids one day. Who did you think I was going to have those with?"

"I didn't really think about it."

"Clearly!" She'd paused. "Wait, are you screwing around with me? Are you trying to be funny right now?"

That moment would have been a good time to save myself, but I had no idea what was about to happen.

"No. I'm serious. I guess we should have had this conversation before."

My bad. I just don't think we need a piece of paper to show that we love each other. As for kids, I like my freedom, and kids are a huge distraction.”

“Ethan, we've been together since high school. I dropped out of school and moved to here to support you! How are you surprised I want to get married?”

I'd been so dismissive of her that night when I'd shrugged it off. “I don't know, but I don't.”

Thinking about it now, the alcohol was talking more than I was. If I'd been fully sober, I would have never said anything like that to her. The way her eyes had burned with rage and had filled with tears, I should have backtracked, but I was an idiot and pushed on.

“I can't believe this. You have unilaterally made a decision and didn't bother to fill me in until I asked? What is wrong with you?”

“I'm sorry you're upset, but if you want to get married and have kids, then it's not with me.”

I had no idea why I'd bluffed with her that night, or shown such a shitty side of myself. I'd known it was wrong, but I was a stupid twenty-four-year-old who was trying to assert myself.

“Why are you doing this?” she said, wiping away a tear.

“I'm not doing anything other than being honest. Tang, I love you. I just don't want to get married and have kids. Don't take it personally. I don't want that with anyone, it's not about you.”

“Maybe you could have made this revelation before I put my life on hold and moved to another country, you asshole!”

“Let's try to have a nice evening, okay? We can talk about this tomorrow.”

By then, everyone on the deck had taken notice. More had come outside.

“No. I can't have a nice evening, not with you. Never again. You've taken me for granted, figured I'd sit by you as what? An ornament? Sorry, but I eventually want to get married and have kids, and you've just made it

clear that it's not with you. So I'm out."

She'd stormed off leaving me open-mouthed. I'd laughed it off with those who'd been watching, and when I'd gotten back to the old condo we'd shared, she hadn't been there, and some of her stuff was gone. I'd figured I'd give her a few days to cool off and I headed out on a road trip. When I got back, she'd cleared the condo of her stuff and I never saw her again. Not until that day at Dad's funeral.

I was jarred from the memory when Ryan playfully punched me in the arm. "Hey, you all there?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking."

"About Tangi?"

"Yeah. About New Year's Eve."

"If you want to make it right with her, you've got a lot of work to do. You really fucked up that night."

"I know."

As we watched the game I had to come up with a plan to fix things with Tangi before it was too late.

Chapter Thirty

Tangi

The opening for Wolseley's restaurant was a massive hit. It didn't hurt that Jill had used her connections to get some media there to cover the event. The mix of vegan and vegetarian dishes had all the guests raving. Ava and I ate almost all the mini vegan burgers, and it also gave me a chance to catch up with her too. We talked about the baby, Ethan, and that she wanted to come visit when the baby was born. I told her I'd love that.

Jill, Wolseley, and I gushed over the reviews the next day over breakfast at a greasy spoon.

"We're booked solid for the next four weeks. We're already taking reservations for the Christmas season! Can you believe it?" Wolseley said as she cut into her vegetarian omelet.

"I've already talked to Richardson's about having you cater some of our corporate events, if you have space for us."

"Of course I do," Wolseley said, her gray eyes lighting up.

As happy as she was, Wolseley looked tired, and not just from one night that had her up until the wee hours of the morning. She'd been running herself ragged. She'd always been the one with all the curves, but even that had seemed to disappear. And her always vibrant gray eyes looked washed-out and worn.

"Don't get mad at me, but you're taking care of yourself, right?" I asked.

Wolseley tilted her head, looking baffled. "Yeah, why?"

"You look exhausted."

Wolseley wasn't the sensitive type, so she took it in stride. "I've been working hard. This restaurant launch has been running me off my feet. Coming up with the perfect menu has also been a huge challenge. But it's going to get easier now. I have a great sous chef who can easily step in when

I need a break.”

I wasn't convinced, but I also wasn't going to challenge her.

We finished up breakfast and I headed home, but not before giving my friends huge hugs and promising to see them at Christmas. I wanted to spend more time with them, but I had a flight in five hours, and I still had to pack up what I wanted to take with me, spend some time with Mom and Dad, and get to the airport.

By the time I got on my flight to Vancouver, I was exhausted. What should have been a short and relaxing trip home hadn't been relaxing at all. I'd spent the entire time on the go and needed a vacation from my vacation. On top of it all, the last thing I wanted to do was deal with Ethan.

My flight landed mid-afternoon, and I took a cab to the condo. Ethan was in the living room alone, but he was playing video games online with his teammates. I'd agreed weeks ago to give up the living room television for his gaming because, in all fairness, it was his condo, and I had the primary bedroom with my own TV.

He glanced up at me, told whoever he was playing with to hang on, and ripped off his headphones and mic. He jogged over to me and all my luggage.

“Did you bring Minnesota back?” he asked with a careful smile.

Time for a truce, so I smiled back. “You'd think so. Thanks for the help. They can go in my bedroom.”

He put the large luggage on the chair where I'd asked him to and my backpack on the floor. I'd stuffed everything to the gills. He headed back to the living room to resume his gaming. I wondered if he was waiting to get back into it with me until his friends left.

I took a shower, then moved on to unpacking. I'd brought some heavier sweaters, light jackets, more pairs of shoes, along with other odds and ends with me. An hour or so later, Ethan popped his head into my bedroom.

“Did you eat?”

“No, but I could.”

“I was going to have the usual, but I can make yours more interesting.”

“Sure, that would be wonderful.” I didn’t have a hankering for steamed vegetables, brown rice, and boring chicken, but I knew he was capable of making it more interesting.

I kind of liked that we’d put hostilities aside for now. I was tired of fighting and being angry with him. I’d resolved to move on, yes, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t be friends. And being friends would make co-parenting a lot easier.

I was finishing up with the big luggage when I smelled basil coming from the kitchen. He knew how to make pesto, but I didn’t think we didn’t have the ingredients for it. He must of have bought some for me—he knew how much I loved pesto. I followed the scent to the kitchen. Ethan had some pasta cooking on the stove. He’d also put together a salad loaded with onions, tomatoes, and cucumbers. All my favorites.

The buzzer sounded and he drained the pasta, added it to the bowl of warmed pesto, and topped it was a generous helping of parmesan cheese. I sat at the kitchen island as he put the finishing touch of a sliced grilled chicken breast on top. He placed the bowl in front of me, then grabbed me a napkin and some cutlery.

“This is so good,” I said after swallowing a mouthful.

“Not the same as the pesto we made with your mom and dad. Remember the summer he planted all that basil?”

I laughed. “I thought Mom was going to kill him. Every leftover planting pot that Dad had left was filled with basil.”

He grabbed me another bowl for salad and went to plate his own dinner. “I think we made thirty or forty small containers of pesto.”

“Yup, and Mom dried the rest of the basil. She was gifting dried basil and pesto to anyone who would take it. I think you and I were the only ones who even liked it.”

“I learned a lot about vegetables, herbs, and gardens from your dad.

When I retire, I'm going to be a gardener."

He sat down to eat and for a few minutes that's what we did. I liked that for once we weren't arguing.

"How was the restaurant opening? Ava mentioned it was pretty great. Awesome food, but Wolseley was always an excellent chef."

"It was great. I worry she's wearing herself thin, but she keeps saying she's got help and she's going to start taking it easy. I hope so."

I'd finished my pasta and chicken and moved over to my salad. Ethan took my plate away even though he hadn't finished eating. He did that a lot, always tidying up. I had to admire that he wasn't a slob and never had been.

"I know we're having a nice dinner, so I hope I'm not about to ruin it," Ethan said.

I groaned. What crap did he have in store for me now? "Do we have to?"

"Yeah, because I've been thinking about it the last few days."

"Fine," I said, bracing myself as he took his empty plate to the sink and leaned over the other side of the island so he could face me.

"I messed up. Like, a ton of times. I know it's ancient history, but what happened on New Year's Eve—"

I put up my hand to stop him. "Please let's not do this. You're going to upset me."

"Just let me try. Okay?"

Anxiety bubbled up inside me. I couldn't trust him not to ruin this fragile truce, but he seemed determined to blow it all up. I sighed. "Fine, go ahead."

He took in a deep breath and I stared at him. He looked sincere as he began. "Like I said, I messed up a lot, and it all started on New Year's Eve." At the look on my face, he added, "Okay, it started before then, but I didn't realize it at the time. I didn't get how much our living situation was bothering you. I don't know why I was being such an asshole that night. I'm not going to blame the booze because I was sober enough to know I was being an ass. But I made a mistake, Tang. I said so many things that were stupid. And my

excuse is terrible. Thing is, I was seeing so many guys around me getting married young and ending up in terrible relationships that were ruining their careers. I didn't want anything to do with marriage, and I should have been honest with you."

All his horseshit had me on edge, but I said I'd hear him out. Keeping my voice measured, I said, "But You knew I wanted to get married. Settle down eventually. But you waited until I prodded you on New Year's Eve to tell me that was never going to happen, and that was so upsetting. I put school on hold for you. I moved away from home *for you*. Both of those things would have never happened if I'd known you just wanted to play house. It felt like you wanted a familiar face while you got your career going, like I had no agency of my own."

He nodded and absorbed it all. "I get it. I never wanted you to feel that way and I didn't think I was taking you for granted. I loved you, Tang, and I wanted you with me, I just didn't want to get married. That's not how I always felt. It was just a couple of years of watching guys fuck up their lives."

I laughed sarcastically. "And you thought you were going to fuck up your life marrying me?"

"No, but I was scared and I thought I was going to fuck up what we had."

I kept telling myself not to get angry. "See, here is the disconnect for me. Two years later Brandi comes along, and you couldn't wait to marry her. And sorry, but she was totally wrong for you. She *was* going to fuck up your life. Does that make any sense to you?"

He looked down at the island countertop. "No, it doesn't. And you're right, she would have fucked up my life. I'm not sure why I asked her to marry me. Look, she's smart, gorgeous, ambitious, so maybe I got caught up in that."

"And I guess I wasn't smart, gorgeous, or ambitious?"

"What? No," he said with surprise. "I didn't mean that at all. I was simply

pointing out who she was to me. You're all that, Tang, and more. I've always trusted you, wanted to be with you, and you challenge me and make me laugh. She certainly didn't do that for me. Why do you think I tried so hard to get you back?"

"And yet despite all that, you still refused to commit."

"I was stupid. I still am," he said. "I'm so sorry I screwed up, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life making it up to you."

That was when it hit me. Where this speech was going. "That's nice, Ethan. I appreciate that you clarified all this for me. I'm happy to put this behind us and move on. I think it's time we found new relationships that make us happy."

Disappointment washed over his face. "Oh."

"You'll always mean a lot to me, and I think we'll do a great job co-parenting this kid of ours, but I don't want to get hurt by you again. You say you trust me, but I can't trust you. You hurt me New Year's Eve, and you did it the day of your dad's funeral. I can't let that happen again."

It broke my heart to say it. I hadn't realized until that moment that deep down, I'd always thought Ethan and I would find each other again. But too much had happened. Opening my heart to him again would only lead to more heartbreak.

"I respect that," he said quietly.

"Good. So let's be great parents and maybe friends too."

Did either of us believe that could happen? Probably not, but I was going to try.

Chapter Thirty-One

Tangi

By the end of October, Brandon was cleared to play for the Ravens. He skated circles around the competition and was lighting up the lamp at least twice a game. He should have started with the Kodiaks. Regardless, he was still with us, and I was still treating him, although now we'd hit the maintenance phase and I was busy writing up a report for the Kodiaks PT. Brandon's call-up was imminent.

"You're playing like a man possessed," I said, as he got settled on my table. I planned to do a brief exam, any necessary treatment, then send him on his way.

"I'm going to be honest. You're pretty much the only person around here I like. And as much as I like you, I want out. Coach Anthony had no business sending me here to rehab. He just can't stand me."

I found a few spots that could use some acupuncture and suggested a cupping session as well in a few days, if he was still with the Ravens. He agreed. Then I addressed his observations with a tactic I'd leaned in some of the psych classes I'd taken for my minor.

"Why can't he stand you?"

Brandon grumbled before replying. "Because I'm the only guy in the dressing room who gives one hundred percent all the time."

"And why is that a problem?" I asked, keeping a lightness to my questions.

"Because I ruffle feathers. Some guys don't like to give it their all. But we have fans who pay a lot of money to see us play. Not fart around."

"Hear me out. How do you unruffle feathers but still get guys to play to their full potential?"

"Beat the shit out them."

I laughed, although I probably shouldn't have. "Besides that. There must be another way?"

I thought he'd started to catch on to what I was doing. "I'm not going to change who I am. If the coach and the other Kodiaks don't like it, they can fuck right off. Or trade me."

"And what if you end up with a team of worse do-nothings?"

"Why are you busting my balls?" he said, but I could see the smile on his face as I plunged a needle into his thigh.

"I'm not. What I want is for you to rejoin the Kodiaks and not be fighting with them all the time. That way you won't be back here tormenting the Ravens." Which he'd been doing relentlessly with all his pep talks about being better and playing better if they wanted to make it to the Kodiaks. He was getting on everyone's nerves.

He thought about this for a while. I could see the wheels turning in his head. But instead of discussing it further, he pivoted. "How about that dinner at Mario's?"

"Oh, right. Sure. And meeting his daughters."

"Let's just do dinner first, see if you like Mario. Then we can figure out the rest."

We were veering very close to date territory. Fuck it. "Sure, why not. When were you thinking?"

"How about tomorrow? Before the road trip."

"Sure. That's if you aren't called up first."

The rumor mill was that he'd be called up before the road trip. The Kodiaks wanted him nearby.

"Even if I'm called up, the Kodiaks are in town. It'll still work out."

I smiled. "All right, then. Tomorrow it is."

* * *

Because it wasn't a date, I wore a pair of jeans that still fit and a cocoa-colored V-neck sweater. I met Brandon at the restaurant because this wasn't a date. He was waiting outside for me in dark jeans and a white shirt with an open gray button down over top. I was so accustomed to seeing him in shorts and T-shirts that he looked a little different, but he certainly cleaned up well.

"Glad you made it. Mario has a table ready for us."

I followed him inside and of course stole a glance at his ass. I really had to stop doing that. The hostess escorted us to a corner booth away from most of the other patrons. She put down two menus and asked Brandon if he wanted his usual to drink.

"How often do you come here?" I asked.

"At least once a week. And I order in a couple times a week."

"Don't you eat like Ethan and all the other hockey players? Lean poultry or fish, steamed vegetables, and brown rice? Rinse and repeat?"

"I watch what I eat, but I also like to move beyond the same shit every night. Mario prepares some dishes just for me so I'm eating well. But I'm counting today as a cheat day. And I'm also celebrating."

"You were called up to the Kodiaks?" I asked, excited for him but a little sad for me. I looked forward to our sessions. He was the only person on the team I loved to talk to. We'd chat about the news, books because he liked to read on road trips, where to go and what to do in Vancouver. And he had started to open up to me about his life and his family. He had definitely moved into the friend category.

He grinned. "Got the call this afternoon. So I won't be on the road trip."

"You won't be a stranger, right?"

"Nah. We're going to be in the same building."

I'd forgotten about that. We'd moved from the practice arena to the small offices allotted to us at Graham Place. Instead of sharing an office with just Jim, I was now sharing it with Allan too. But the facilities were better. The training room was top-notch and the gym state-of-the-art. I had no

complaints. And I would still see Brandon on occasion if our paths crossed.

“Congratulations. It’s where you should be.”

The server came around for my drink order and dropped off Brandon’s beer.

“I was thinking about what you said the other day about expecting too much. I’m wondering if maybe my injury was a blessing in disguise. I’m going to try to ease up on my expectations. Maybe your ex will even start to like me.”

“You don’t get along with Ethan?” I knew that, but I decided to see what he had to say.

“We don’t hate each other, but we’re both centers. I’d do anything to be on the first line and he knows it, so we have a bit of a competition.”

After the server returned with my tea, I said, “It’s funny because Ethan is a competitor too. I’d think you two would get along.”

Brandon shook his head. “Grant puts up with bullshit on the team. I don’t. He’s also in tight with Jeremy, our captain. They’re best friends.”

Right. Jeremy. I knew him back in the day, but he’d been on the team only a few months before the New Year’s blowout, so I didn’t know him that well.

“Maybe you could ingratiate yourself?”

“We’ll see. I have a few friends on the team, and that’s all I need. I don’t plan to kiss ass.”

We got around to ordering, and I couldn’t help but get the gnocchi after Brandon told me they were homemade by Mario’s mom. Brandon truly was on a cheat day because he ordered chicken parmesan with pasta as his side. We decided to share a salad with some garlic toast.

“Speaking of Grant, you never did tell me why the two of you broke up.”

“You’re right, I didn’t,” I said, smiling.

“We can be friends now, hang out since I’m no longer on the Ravens. And friends share shit. So what did he do? It had to be something stupid.”

Brandon hadn't been with the Kodiaks when I'd broken up with Ethan and he didn't have a huge network of friends on the team, so it had probably never come up. But it would be easy enough for him to dig up.

"All right, I'll tell you. We'd been together for seven years, lived together for nearly two. I'd always been open about my expectations for the future. Marriage, kids. He made it clear that he never wanted either of those things. He'd never said so before. So I walked out on him."

A wide smile spread across Brandon's face. "Good for you for standing up for what you want. And he's an idiot for not wanting to marry you. I've always thought he was a bit of a dick, but this confirms it." He paused. "Wait, isn't he engaged to some blonde, though?"

"They broke up."

"And didn't you mention that he recommended this job? So you must have gotten friendly with him again."

I was in very dangerous territory now. "Sort of. We reconnected when his dad unexpectedly passed away." Now it was time to change the subject. Fast. "What about you? I don't even know if you have siblings."

"Right. I'll get into that in a sec. I remember hearing that Grant's dad passed away over the summer. When was that?"

"I don't remember. June. Maybe July. Could have been August. This tea is nice," I said, pointing to my cup.

Then he gasped. Shit. Shit. Triple shit.

"He's your ex. He's the father of your kid!"

I winced. But people would find out eventually. And Brandon was becoming a friend. But could I trust him with this now?

"Please don't tell anyone," I said at last.

"Oh my god," he gasped. "No way!"

The server took that moment to bring out food. She asked if I wanted any fresh parmesan on my pasta, and who wouldn't? She asked Brandon the same thing, and when she was done, he told her he was going to need another beer.

“It just kind of happened. I was at the wake, we got to talking, we went out to eat, and then we were back at his place making a baby, apparently.”

Brandon nodded along. “Then he got you the job to keep you around. Good plan, I guess. How the hell do you afford living here? He must be helping out.”

“I thought you were going to tell me about you.”

“He got you a place.”

I groaned. “Fine. I’m living in his condo. And when Brandi dumped him, he moved in. We’re grudging roommates and we’re figuring out how to co-parent. You are now up to date. Are you happy?”

“I’m fucking thrilled.” And he was beaming to prove it.

I wagged my finger at him. “You are not going to breathe a word of this, right? Not. One. Word.”

“You’re no fun, but of course I won’t.”

As we finished dinner, I learned he was from Saskatchewan and had a younger sister and brother. His brother was in juniors but was up for the draft in June. His sister was in college on a soccer scholarship. Both his parents were schoolteachers, and after he’d signed his first big contract, he’d bought them their dream house. All in all, he was a decent guy.

He walked me back to my car and when we got there, he gave me a warm hug.

“Thanks for a great evening. We should do it again,” I said.

“I’d like that.”

As I got into my car, it finally occurred to me that I hadn’t met Mario, and I was starting to wonder if he actually had any daughters.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ethan

Warde came into the Kodiaks locker room like he'd been named captain, which was certainly never going to happen. He strutted in, greeted all the guys, shook hands, and chatted with a few friends. When he got to me, he had a huge smile on his face that I wanted to punch right off.

"Nice to see you again, Ethan."

"Glad to have you back," I lied through a forced smile.

I'd heard through the grapevine that he'd made quite the impression with the Ravens ... and of course it was a bad one. I was the first to admit that it was stupid that to have sent him down there to recuperate, but Coach Anthony had hoped he'd have some kind of epiphany and start getting along with most of his teammates. Like that was going to happen. No one was going to change a guy like Warde. He came in hot with expectations that were unattainable, and that was why he'd never be captain here or any other team. He'd always be the guy on the team everyone avoided.

While we were having a morning skate before our game with the Renegades, I kept an eye on Warde. He was looking good, but there was no way he was taking the top line from me. I knew that was his end game, so I'd just have to play harder.

Ryan came up to me after the short practice. Warde was still on the ice, getting in some extra practice.

"He looks good," he said, echoing my own thoughts.

"You think I should be worried?"

"Nah, of course not."

Then why had he brought it up?

"I am hearing some things," he added. "According to Lund, he's come up here with a changed attitude. Something about promising to be a team

player.”

That was laughable. “And you think it’s possible?”

Ryan shrugged. “Anything’s possible.”

I went home for my pregame nap and got back to the arena mid-afternoon. Of course, Warde was already there. He was on the exercise bike, earbuds in. I changed into my workout gear and chose a bike as far away from him as possible. When he noticed me, he smiled and nodded. I did the same. No use starting any trouble. I put in my own earbuds and tried to block him out, but not ten minutes later he was standing next to me. I reluctantly took out my earbuds.

“I’m going to start this off by saying that I’m not trying to be an asshole.”

What a way to start a conversation! Of course he couldn’t try because he was an asshole. “Okay,” I said.

“I’ve gotten to know Tangi and we’ve become friends. It’s nothing more, so I wanted to establish that. And I’m not here to try to piss you off. I legit want us all to be a team.”

Friends with Tangi? Yeah right. He had no intentions of being friends with her. A guy like him would do anything it took to get her into bed. And if he did worm his way into her life, he’d be my kid’s stepfather. I’d have to watch him with Tang raise my kid. No damn way. Forget the whole team part of his speech.

“Why do you have to be friends with Tangi?”

That seemed to catch him off guard.

“Why not?”

“She’s pregnant.”

“I know. Jim told everyone.”

I bit the side of my cheek so I wouldn’t punch him in the face. “Look, guys aren’t friends with girls. So maybe stay away from her.”

Warde’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “What? That’s not a thing. Guys and girls can be friends. It happens all the time.”

“No it doesn’t.”

“Grant, she’s pregnant and she’s your ex. You think I want to move in on her?”

“Yeah, I think you do. To get me off my game.”

He gave his head a shake. “You’re nuts. Maybe a little insecure, too.” Then he stopped. “I’m trying to be a better teammate, so that’s why I told you this. She’s the best PT I’ve ever had. She got me back on the ice sooner than anyone thought possible. She’s a nice woman, and I’m trying to do the decent thing by telling you that I may hang out with her. I’m not trying to fuck her.”

He was so full of shit. “Fine. Whatever.”

I tried not to think about it, but that was all I did the entire game. My head wasn’t in the right place. I missed passes, took stupid penalties, and missed a check that led to the Renegades scoring the winning goal. I was pissed off and wondering if Warde had done it on purpose, to get into my head.

I told this to Jeremy after the game when we went for a drink. I needed to unwind.

“Let me get this straight. You think he masterminded your bad game? Ethan, he’s smart, but he’s not that diabolical. You’re giving him way too much credit.”

“He’s trying to fuck me over.”

Normally, I could rely on Jeremy to back me up, but on this, he wasn’t having it. “First of all, you don’t own Tangi. If she decides to date Warde, and that’s a huge leap, that’s her business. You don’t have a say in it. And if Warde decides to pursue her, also not your business. Either you fight for her or you let her go.”

“She’s *pregnant*.”

“What does that have to do with anything? Pregnant women can’t date?”

When had Jeremy turned his back on me, or was I really off-base now? But the thought of Warde and Tangi dating? I couldn’t deal with that.

I left Jeremy at the lounge with a few other guys after one drink. When I

got back to the condo, Tangi's light was already out. I got into bed and tossed and turned. I did manage to get to sleep, but when I heard Tangi in the kitchen the next morning, I got up. I had to be careful and not piss her off, something I'd had a difficult time with lately.

"Good morning," I said, making myself a coffee. She'd already made one for herself and was reading the news on her phone with a bowl of oatmeal in front of her.

"Morning. Rough game. Sorry you lost."

"I played like shit," I said, mixing up a protein shake before I had breakfast.

"There are lots of games left in the season."

I sipped my protein drink and jumped in like the fool I was. "Warde said he's turned a new leaf."

Her face lit up when I said my name, and my blood went cold. Son of a bitch, this was happening, and if I didn't stop it ...

"Good. I really encouraged him about that. He was like my psychological experiment. I'm glad it worked."

"Yeah, he mentioned you two were friends."

"I guess so," she said casually. "He's a nice guy when it comes down to it. You should really give him a chance. I think he's determined to be a better teammate."

I took a second not to lose my shit. "Don't take this the wrong way, but are the two of you dating?"

She tilted her head to one side. "Dating? No. Is that rumor going around? If it is, I'm going to ask him to set people straight. I don't want that kind of garbage circulating."

"No, I just wondered. And before you say anything, I *know* who you date is your business. I'm not going to stop you, but if you're dating one of my teammates, I'd like to know. I'd like to be prepared."

She laughed, and not in any kind of sarcastic way, more in an amused

way. “I’m not dating Brandon. And I don’t really see any of your other teammates, but if on some off chance one of your teammates wants to date pregnant little me, I’ll keep you informed.” She laughed again, as if it was the craziest thing.

“I’m just saying.”

She finished her coffee and stood up, slipping her phone into her pocket. “There is probably one thing you should know. He figured out that you’re the baby’s father. I swore him to secrecy, and if he betrays that, I want to know.”

Warde knew! Not that it was going to be a secret forever, but we’d agreed to keep it quiet for now. I gritted my teeth. “Right. I’ll let you know.”

Maybe that was how I could crush him. If I told Tangi that Warde was blabbing, even though I was pretty sure he wouldn’t, she’d be done with him. But that was petty, and I wasn’t sure I could lower myself to that level. At least not yet. Damn it. I was starting to think I was losing my mind.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Tangi

Neither Ethan nor I had a chance to go home for Thanksgiving, but I'd asked him if he wanted to host a Thanksgiving dinner with me. I suggested he invite a few teammates on the condition that he invited Brandon too. Canadians had celebrated their Thanksgiving six weeks earlier, so it wasn't a holiday, not that any day was a true holiday in the hockey world other than Christmas. Still, Allan had been kind enough to let me have the afternoon off, while Ethan and the Kodiaks had simply gotten lucky by having the day off. So I'd put him to work with a list of things to pick up. If nothing else, I knew I could rely on him to get it all.

Our small dinner party would consist of the two of us plus Jeremy, Brandon, and Ryan and his girlfriend Amanda. She hadn't been dating him while I was around, so I looked forward to meeting her. Maybe I could make a connection and a new friend.

"Does she know about the baby? That you're the father?" I asked as I prepared my turkey for the oven.

"Ryan said she doesn't, and I'd like to keep it that way. She can be a bit of a gossip. So if you could let Warde know," Ethan said, placing some beer he'd picked up into the fridge.

I gave Ethan some instructions on when to put the bird in the oven and at what temperature and then headed out. I had to put in my morning of work.

A month and a half into the season, and injuries were mounting on the Ravens, not that it surprised anyone. Suddenly, my workload had increased, and I jammed in all the injured players who were scheduled to see me, and during a short fifteen-minute break, I sat in my shared office Jim at the practice rink, since we were only permitted to use the Graham Place on game days.

“Hey, Jim, how are you today?” I asked, plopping down in my chair. I guzzled some water and pulled out a bag of cut vegetables to munch on.

“Dube wants painkillers.”

Interesting start to the conversation. Dube was the enforcer on the team, and when the Kodiaks needed some extra muscle, they called him up. He got himself into bust-ups on the ice fairly often, but not once had he ever come to see me for treatment. I assumed one of two things: he either didn’t want to be treated by a woman, or he played through injuries. It seemed it was the former.

“For what?” I asked, dragging my cucumber through some dip I’d brought along.

“He says he’s feeling achy.” Jim’s forehead wrinkled as he spoke. Clearly, he was conflicted.

“Do you want him to come see me?”

“I suggested that. He just wants Warren to prescribe him some painkillers. I told Allan. I think he’s addicted.”

Whoa! When had he made that leap? “Jim, I think you need to fill in the missing pieces.”

Jim blinked a few times. “He asks for them all the time. I told Allan and I told Coach Fontaine last year. Warren stopped prescribing them. I think he’s getting them somewhere else.”

I leaned back in my chair. This wasn’t good. “What do you want to do about it?”

“I’ve seen it before. It ruins players’ lives. We can’t have it start again here with the Ravens. I’m going to talk to Allan and Coach Fontaine again.”

I could tell he was holding something back, which was unusual for Jim. So I prodded. “Are you worried about something?”

Jim focused his gaze on me, something he rarely did. His light brown eyes looked tired. “He’s going to know it’s me.”

“And why is that a problem?”

“He’ll make me pay for it.”

Oh. Now it all made sense. Even if I was the one who went to Coach Fontaine and Allan, Dube would still think it was Jim, and I’d heard he could be a bully off the ice too. “What has he done before to make people pay for things?”

“Keyed a car. Slashed another player’s tires. Pushed them around when no one was looking. No one could prove he damaged the cars, and players didn’t want to rat him out. But I know.”

I was sure he did. “What do we do about it?” I said, including myself now. I wanted him to feel supported.

His mood lifted at that. “I don’t know, but I’m telling Allan and Coach Fontaine today. They have to know.”

* * *

I got home just around two that afternoon. Ethan had put the bird in the oven and was tidying up the living room even though it didn’t need it. I changed out of my Ravens T-shirt and headed to the kitchen to make a quick lunch since I hadn’t brought one to work. While I was eating, Ethan wandered in.

“Do you need me to do anything right now?”

“I don’t think so. I planned to relax for a bit before tackling the side dishes.”

“I may go down to the gym and work out, then.”

“Before you go, what can you tell me about Chris Dube?”

Ethan leaned against the cabinets and shrugged. “Not much. Whenever we need him, he gets called up for a few games, fights a few people, then goes back to the Ravens. Why?”

“If I tell you, it has to stay between us.”

Ethan nodded, concern washed over his face. “Has he been giving you trouble?”

“Nothing like that. Apparently, he told Jim he needed painkillers. I guess he wants Jim to advocate for him. Jim won’t do it. In fact, he’s concerned Dube has a problem because he asked for and received painkillers before.”

Ethan cringed and blew out a breath. “Tang, lots of guys are taking painkillers. This isn’t news.”

“Maybe not, but Jim is afraid of him. He fears retribution. Dube has allegedly keyed cars, slashed tires, and pushed around teammates.”

That caught his attention. “Now that’s not good.”

“I told Jim he had my support, but I’ve never examined Dube and have no relationship with him other than the first time I saw him in training camp.”

Ethan shook his head. “Nope. You should stay out of it. Let Jim, Allan, and Fontaine figure this out.”

I decided not to argue with him, but at least it was on his radar.

* * *

Our guests showed up around six that evening. The turkey was resting, and I’d just finished up all the sides. Amanda came into the kitchen dressed for a night on the town while I was in stretchy black yoga pants and a sweater that was starting to show my baby bump.

“Can I help?” she asked. Her blonde hair flowed down her shoulders and nearly to her waist. One look at her fingernails told me there was no way she could do much of anything. They were manicured talons.

“I think I’m good. I was just going to ask Ethan to carve the turkey.”

“I can carve the turkey,” Brandon said, entering the open-concept kitchen.

Ethan heard Brandon and came jogging over. “No, I’ve got it.”

“You’re busy handing out drinks,” Brandon said.

“I’m done.”

Great. Was this going to happen all night long?

“Would you like to split carving the duties? Or should we draw straws?”

Better yet, let's just let Jeremy carve the turkey," I said.

"It'd be an honor," Jeremy said, rising from the sofa, a huge, smug smile on his face. Both Brandon and Ethan moped, but I didn't care.

As I brought dishes out to the dining room, Ethan and Brandon tripped over themselves to help while Jeremy, Ryan and Amanda took seats and watched. Maybe having Ethan invite Brandon hadn't been such a good idea.

Once the turkey was butchered but carved—I probably should have asked Jeremy if he knew how to carve a turkey—we were ready to eat. Dinner conversation centered around hockey gossip, which seemed lost on Amanda. I was having a hard time keeping up myself, and I had an inside edge. The conversation focused on what other teams were doing, what players were up to, and who was doing things he shouldn't have been doing. But at least everyone was getting along.

"Who wants dessert?" I asked as Ethan and Brandon argued about who would load the dishwasher. Jeremy's and Ryan's hands shot up.

I took the empty salad bowl with me to the kitchen and set it on the island. Brandon and Ethan were in a heated discussion about proper dishwasher loading techniques. I wanted to throttle them both.

"Enough," I said, sounding like my mother. "Brandon, take the pumpkin pie and whipping cream to the table. Ethan, leave the dishes and bring out dessert plates. I'll get the coffee going."

They didn't argue.

I was scooping ground coffee into a filter when Amanda came in with the last of the dishes. She set them down on the island and came over to me.

"Anything I can help with?"

"I'm just waiting for the coffee to finish."

I thought she'd leave, but she didn't. "So what's going on here? Some kind of love triangle?"

I whirled to face her. "Excuse me?"

"Brandon and Ethan can't stop trying to help you. Like two guys

competing for the girl. I also can't help but notice you're pregnant, so, like, what hormones are you giving off?"

I laughed uncomfortably. "What are you talking about?"

"Which part?" she said with a smile. "You're clearly pregnant, at least I'm pretty sure you are. As for the guys, Ryan said you and Ethan were exes, but based on how Ethan is acting, I'd say he's trying to un-ex himself. Brandon keeps looking at you like you're a tall glass of something."

Great. How the hell should I handle this? "So Ethan is my ex, and I am pregnant. I'm not sure about the rest of it."

"Oh, I'm sure. Those guys are going to start fighting soon."

"Maybe there is something you could help me with," I said, swiftly changing the subject. "Do you mind taking out the cream and sugar? And send Ethan back in to get the coffee cups?"

I think she knew what I was up to, but she did as asked. Ethan returned with a frown. I beckoned him closer.

"Amanda was in here poking around. She thinks you and Brandon are both trying to make a play for me. So cut it out before she starts gossiping about it."

He frowned. "Is Warde going to get the same lecture?"

"Yes, he is. Now stop it!"

The rest of the evening proceeded smoothly, but Amanda was watching all of us. At least Brandon and Ethan had stopped one-upping each other, but did Amanda have a point? Was something going on? If so, I had to stop the madness because I wasn't interested in getting into a relationship with either of them. And they both needed to know it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Tangi

A week later, Ethan and I went for my sonogram appointment. We were both a little nervous, but Dr. Mehta quickly found the baby's heartbeat and pointed out all the hands and feet. And then she asked the all-important question.

"Do you want to know what you're having?"

"No," we said in unison.

Ethan and I looked at each other and laughed. We hadn't discussed it before, and it was kind of cool that we were on the same wavelength.

"Then a surprise it shall be. Everything is looking great. We'll schedule your next appointment for the New Year."

We both seemed to skip along to the car, excited that Baby Kildare-Grant was growing normally and that we could see our little one for the first time. I'd teared up a little, and Dr. Mehta had patted me on the hand and told me it was a natural reaction.

"That was amazing," Ethan said, his face lighting up as we walked to the car. "I bet it's a boy."

"Based on what?" I asked as he held open the door for me.

"I don't know. I can just tell."

"I didn't see anything that gave it away. Did you?"

"Maybe it was a finger, maybe it was a dick. Who knows?"

We talked about the sonogram all the way home, and that was when he brought up the nursery and asked what my plans were. I was five months along and I hadn't thought any of that through.

"I think I mentioned turning your room into a nursery," I said carefully, "but that can wait. The baby can sleep with me at first. My mom's coming to Vancouver for a month or so before the birth to help me, and we'll head back

to Minneapolis together. Maybe you could oversee the nursery once we go? It wouldn't take much. Just some paint and furniture."

I was trying to find a way to tell him he had to go when my mom came, and I wasn't sure he'd picked up on that. I'd try again later. We'd had such a beautiful moment and it didn't seem right to shit on it.

"Oh. Yeah, sure. I guess I thought I'd be more involved."

I hadn't intended not to include him, but I had no idea what kind of involvement he wanted. "We should probably have a talk about this. Figure things out. Before I go home for Christmas because I want to finalize plans with my mom for her trip out when I'm there."

He nodded, tapping his finger on the steering wheel. "I could probably see if someone is renting another condo in the building. Maybe selling. I would like to be close to you and the baby as much as I can. I know I haven't said it, but Tang, but I want us to be as close to a family as possible."

So he did get it. That problem was solved. "Okay, I'm good with that. I think it would be great to have you nearby."

"I'll start putting feelers out about a place in the building. But I'd like to be in the condo until you have the baby. Is that all right? I'll sleep on the sofa if I have to."

The fact he had to ask made me sad. "It's totally all right."

We talked about decorating the nursery and he asked how set I was on a design. I really didn't care as long as we kept it gender-neutral. He came up with the idea of hiring someone to do it all. That he'd get them in once I'd gone back home with the baby, and once his season was over, he'd come back to Minneapolis too.

"I promised to be a dad for our kid and I meant it."

I knew he did. "I want you as involved as you want to be."

That seemed to satisfy him, and I was satisfied too.

* * *

Coach Fontaine didn't call meetings with the training staff often, so when he did, we knew it was serious. Allan, Jim, and I were huddled around his small desk as Coach Fontaine tapped a pen on his desk.

"We have a problem and his name is Chris Dube. It has come to my attention that he's been seeking painkillers for some ailments he has but refuses to be forthcoming on those ailments. Dr. Warren told him in no uncertain terms that he would not prescribe them. Dube got very upset and punched a hole in the doctor's door."

"Holy shit," Allan muttered.

"Chris was sent home to cool off pending an investigation. Do the three of you have anything to add?"

Jim cleared his throat. "He came to me. He wanted me to tell Warren to prescribe him the pills for back pain. I told him he needed to be examined for that to happen, but he refused to talk to Allan or Tangi. He thought he could pressure me to do it."

So Jim hadn't reported Dube. I didn't blame him based on Dube's history.

"Anyone else have any interaction with Dube about painkillers?"

Allan and I shook our heads.

"We'll see how this investigation goes."

I raised my hand, and Coach Fontaine nodded for me to speak. "Given this act of violence, wouldn't that warrant being released from the team? Were the authorities called? I'm not sure any of us would feel comfortable working with Dube in the future."

Fontaine pursed his lips. "We're taking this seriously. That's all I'm going to say right now."

I hated his answer, and when Jim and I returned to our office, he shut the door.

"They won't do anything," he said. "He'll be back. They need him until they find another enforcer to replace him."

“But that’s irresponsible. He’s dangerous and unpredictable.”

Jim looked sad. “That’s why Fontaine asked what he did. They’re trying to find a way out of this.”

I didn’t like it, and I told Ethan everything that went down when I got home. He was making quesadillas, which he knew I loved. The more chicken and cheese the better.

“He punched a hole through Warren’s door,” I said spooning a dollop of sour cream and then salsa on my quesadilla wedge. “He should be thrown off the team, not welcomed back.”

“I don’t like it either,” Ethan said. “Especially with you pregnant. Jim is five foot nothing. He can’t protect you.”

“I’m not worried about me. Dube doesn’t give me the time of day. I’m worried about Jim and the other Ravens. The guy should be in jail.”

Ethan sat next to me with his usual dinner and one lonely wedge of a quesadilla. “I hate to burst your bubble, Tang, but you have no idea how much shit gets swept under the rug. We’d be here for hours if I told you all the stories. My advice is to steer clear of Dube when he comes back.”

I was on my third quesadilla wedge when I felt a punch in my stomach. Was it the salsa? No! The baby. It was kicking. I jumped when it did it again.

“Are you okay?” Ethan asked, eyes wide.

I grabbed his hand and placed it on my belly. The baby kicked again, probably pissed that I was eating spicy salsa. I’d have to cut back on that.

Ethan’s face lit up when he felt the small kicks. “We’ve got a soccer star in there,” he said.

“It appears that way.”

Ethan kept his hand there until the baby took a rest. “Wow, Tang. That’s our kid doing that.”

“I know. I carry him or her around all day.”

He put his arm around me and pulled me close, lightly kissing the top of my forehead. “I don’t care how this sounds, but I’m so glad we’re having this

baby. I realize now that there is no one else in the world I'd rather have a baby with."

My bottom lip started to quiver. "Me too," I said, turning and hugging him back. Even after all we'd been through, I would always love him. And maybe that was why we got so caught up in the moment because the next thing I knew, he was kissing me and I was kissing him back. All those old feelings came flooding through me. But one swift kick from Baby Kildare-Grant brought me back to reality.

I pulled back, my heart racing and my breaths quick. One look at his eyes and I wanted to jump back into his arms. "We can't do this," I said instead.

"Why not?" he asked, his hand gently brushing a lock of hair from my face.

"Too much has happened. I can't get hurt again. You mean so much to me, Ethan, but you hurt me. I can't get past that."

"Tang, I'll do whatever it takes to make it up to you. Just tell me what you want."

He knew what I wanted: the same thing I'd always wanted. After all this time he still hadn't figured it out, and now I was pretty sure it was too late.

"Thanks for dinner," I said, taking my plate and loading it into the dishwasher. "I'm going to go sit for a while. I'm a bit tired."

I was glad he didn't come after me. I went to my room and shut the door, my heart still beating like crazy. I sat on the bed and when my phone buzzed on the nightstand, I nearly jumped out of my skin. I grabbed it and saw a text from Brandon.

Want to go for dinner Friday? Mario's? We still need to get you introduced to his daughters.

I'd love to.

Yes, that was what I needed. A distraction and to be far away from Ethan.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ethan

We had a short four-day road trip to play games in Seattle, Calgary, and Edmonton. On the short flight to Seattle, I couldn't help but notice that Warde's social circle had widened. He usually had a handful of old-timers who hung out with him, and maybe a few of the new kids, but this time all the new guys had gravitated toward him. For a guy who pushed so damn hard, this development was unusual.

"What gives?" I asked Ryan, elbowing his arm as he played Candy Crush on his phone.

Ryan glanced up and followed my gaze. "What am I looking at? They're playing cards, aren't they?"

"Yeah, all with Warde. Since when did he get so popular?"

Ryan put down his phone and looked at me sympathetically. So this was going to be a long conversation. "He's been playing nice, like he had a colonoscopy or something."

What? "Do you mean lobotomy?"

"Whatever."

"No, not whatever. They're completely different. A colonoscopy is when they shove a tube up your ass. A lobotomy has to do with your brain when they drill a hole in it."

Ryan scowled at me. "You know what I meant."

"I actually didn't. What does your ass have to do with making friends?"

Ryan clenched his teeth. "Are you fucking done?"

"Fine, whatever. Just pointing out—"

"So, anyway, he's changed his outlook on life. Is that better? He's being nice to people. He's not expecting everyone to put in ten thousand percent. And before you say it, I know, it can't be more than one hundred."

That was his new angle, making friends? It would serve him well. Before he'd come to the Kodiaks two years ago, he'd outworn his welcome in Boston. In one season with the Kodiaks, he'd done the same. Some of the guys were happy when Warde torn his ACL early in the spring. None of us had to deal with him. Why he'd suddenly had this great awakening was odd. Although Tangi *had* said she'd encouraged him to play nice...

"That reminds me. About your Thanksgiving party," Ryan continued as if reading my mind, "Amanda wouldn't stop talking about how you and Warde were making fools of yourselves trying to win over Tangi. She thought it was weird that you'd both be chasing after a pregnant woman."

I turned to face Ryan who had picked up his phone again. "You didn't tell her, right?"

"Hell no! The whole team would know by now. But she is definitely confused and curious. I told her Tangi was single, but I'm not sure she really bought that it was just that. You guys were acting stupid."

"I was not."

"You were. And if you really want Tangi back, which you obviously do, you better get cracking before she goes on more dinner dates with Warde."

I choked on the water I'd been sipping. "Sorry, what?"

Ryan frowned. "You didn't know? They went to Mario's for dinner. I thought you knew. Everyone is talking about it." He stopped as an idea struck him. "Right, I guess they wouldn't talk to you about it. Totally awkward."

What the hell! My best friend hadn't told me Tangi had gone out with Warde? Tangi hadn't even mentioned it. "Spill the details."

"It was a while back. They went to Mario's. Mario told Bell because Bell goes there all the time. He mentioned that Warde was there with someone named Angie. Obviously got her name wrong. Bell told Jeremy and he told me."

"Jeremy knows!"

Ryan smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, man. We figured you knew. That Bell

had told you.”

“Maybe it wasn’t Tangi and really was an Angie.”

Ryan shook his head. “Bell remembers Tangi, and he’s seen her around the arena, so he described her to Mario. Mario confirmed.”

I closed my eyes to hold in my rage. Some friends I had. I took a few deep breaths and opened my eyes. I looked over at Warde again and we briefly made eye contact. He nodded before getting back to his card game. I was going to kill him when I got my hands on him.

* * *

I didn’t get a chance to talk to Warde until we were in Calgary. We had a day off before back-to-back games. The guys had broken off into a few groups to go for dinner and a night on the town. I made sure I was in Warde’s group, and I made sure to drag Ryan and Jeremy along.

Bell had picked the place, an Indian restaurant with a massive buffet. They were going to lose money on us tonight. We had a huge table and some of the guys couldn’t wait to hit the buffet. I hung back, waiting for Warde to be alone. He was talking to Andre St. Hilaire, our goalie, and I waited until they were finished. Then I made my move before Warde wandered off to the buffet.

“Got a minute?” I asked.

Warde stared at me, and I was sure his blue eyes were laughing at me. I wanted to punch him in the gut.

“Sure. Something wrong?”

“I hear you and Tangi went on a date.”

Warde tilted his head, probably to piss me off more, trying to look all innocent. “It wasn’t a date. She mentioned looking for new friends, and I mentioned that Mario has a couple of daughters she might hit it off with. So we went there for dinner.”

“Let’s cut the bullshit, all right? Are you interested in Tangi?”

Warde shifted to plant his feet. “Are you?”

“I asked you first.”

Warde wanted to roll his eyes, I could tell, but he thought better of it. “I got to know her while she was treating me. She’s funny, smart, gorgeous, but you already know all that. But I got to ask why you care if I’m interested or not. Weren’t you engaged five minutes ago?”

I balled my hands into fists, but quickly unclenched them. I wasn’t going to lose my cool around this loser. “She’s pregnant.”

“I know. Congratulations.”

My blood went cold. Tangi told this piece of shit? I fought hard not to look or act surprised, but based on Warde’s satisfied expression, I’d failed miserably.

“She told you?”

“I guessed.”

“We haven’t told a lot of people, so I’d like to keep it that way,” I said, suddenly on the defensive.

“You mean that you slept with your ex while you were engaged, got her pregnant, got ditched by your fiancée, and are now living with your baby mama?”

How could Tangi even want to spend five minutes with this asshole?
“Yes. Do you want to embarrass her?”

“No. I don’t. And believe it or not, I don’t want to embarrass you either. But I think you’ve been screwing around with her feelings for a long time, not that she’s said as much. I also think you’ve had a ton of chances with her, and you’ve fucked up every time. Maybe it’s time for you to step aside and let her try to be happy.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “With you?”

“With anyone but you, actually. I know you think I’m being a jerk for saying this, but I’ve figured this out. She’s loved you for years, and maybe

deep down she still loves you, and that's why she came out here. She thinks subconsciously that there's a possibility of being one big and happy family. But you've had months to prove that to her, and you're still wasting time and pissing all around her to mark your territory. Either you let her go, or you fight for her. And may the best man win."

He patted me on the shoulder and headed for the buffet. I wanted to slam my fist on the table, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of a scene.

"Aren't you going to eat something?" Ryan said, taking a seat at the table with a heaping pile of food. I could smell that he'd gone for all the spiciest stuff even though we both knew his stomach couldn't handle that kind of heat. And I was the unlucky person sharing a room with him.

"Yeah, in a minute."

Ryan grabbed a piece of naan. "What were you guys talking about?" he asked, then ripped off a piece and stuffed it in his mouth.

"The future and how I'm going to have to fight for what I want."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tangi

To my chagrin and utter un-surprise, Chris Dube returned from suspension with a warning. What the warning was, the training staff wasn't privy to for privacy reasons. And that was bullshit. Jim and I bitched about it Monday morning as we waited for Dube to show up for practice. Allan had suggested that Jim take a few days off, but Jim wasn't about to back down. If Dube linked Jim to his suspension, Jim wasn't going down without a fight. An unfair fight, but a fight all the same.

Before and after practice, guys liked to hit the gym, so it wasn't unusual to see a bunch there. I was treating one of our defensemen for some neck and shoulder pain. Rogers was a new kid, one year out of junior, and the Kodiaks had high hopes for him. He liked to play through injuries, so I was trying to relieve some of the strain in his neck with acupuncture. I was applying the heat compresses when I heard a commotion in the gym.

"I'll be right back," I said to Rogers, who already had his earbuds in and was listening to rap music so loud I could hear it.

While he took no notice and seemed oblivious to everything going on around him, I headed to the gym. The first thing I saw made me gasp. Dube had Jim up against a wall. He didn't have his hands on him, but by the pure rage on his face, I was sure he was going to hit Jim. A few of the guys were in the room staring, and one had his camera out. I marched up to him. Figured it would be Munroe.

"Go get Allan and Coach Fontaine," I said quietly. "Right now. If you aren't back in two minutes with them, I'll make sure everyone hears about it. And since you have your phone out, call security."

Even though Munroe was six foot four, he cowered and jogged off. I turned and calmly walked up to Dube and Jim, even though I was internally

freaking out. When I approached, Dube was telling Jim he'd betrayed him and deserved a fist up his ass.

"Hey, gentlemen," I said as lightly as possible. "What's going on?"

Dube faced me, his face red with rage. "Fuck off, you little bitch."

All right, not a good start.

"I don't know what's going on here, but it looks like maybe you both could use some air before we regret anything."

"He said he was going to tear my head off," Jim said. "That's a threat."

I frowned. Jim wasn't helping the situation right now. "I'm sure once we all take a breather, we can forget about what was said, right, Jim?"

Jim swallowed hard and nodded. Great. He was catching on.

"This little punk thinks he's going to ruin my career. So he needs to learn a lesson."

"Chris, you don't want to do this. Besides, Coach Fontaine is on his way, and if he sees this, he's going to jump to conclusions, and you'll be in trouble," I said. "This isn't worth getting pissed off over."

Chris, who had been focused back on Jim, faced me again. "If you don't mind your business, I'm deck you. I don't care that you're a girl."

"Don't touch her," Jim said. "She's pregnant."

Chris laughed wickedly. "What are you going to do about it, shortie? Tell on me again?"

"Chris, stop," I said, and he pushed me. Hard enough to sending me sprawling to the floor with a thud.

Everyone froze, stunned, and just then Ilya wandered in, unaware of what was going on. He said something in Russian when he saw me and ran over to me. Chris pushed Jim up against the wall, and the other onlookers finally sprang into action. Ilya was helping me to my feet when Allan, Coach Fontaine, and two members of security came running in. Once they had Dube off in one corner with two security guards who were even bigger than he was looming over him, all I could think was how happy I was that we were at

Graham Place today with all their in-house security.

“What is going on here?” Coach Fontaine asked, his voice booming through the gym. The veins in his temples were bulging.

“He threatened me,” Jim said. “Then he pushed Tangi and she fell. She’s pregnant!”

“For fuck’s sake,” Coach Fontaine said. He whirled around to Dube. “What is wrong with you! I hope she makes a police report. I want you out of here. And if I have my way, the next time you play hockey, it’ll be in a beer league. Get out now!”

While security escorted Dube out, Ilya kept asking if I was all right.

“I’m fine. Just a little fall.”

“But you’re pregnant. My mother lost a baby while vacuuming.”

That wasn’t helping.

Allan came over and took a quick look at me, not that there was anything to look at. “Tangi, go to urgent care just in case. The last thing we want is for you to be hurt. While you’re there, consider if you want to make a police report. I’m going to encourage Jim to do the same.”

“I think I’m fine.”

Allan put his hands on my shoulders. “Please go. We’d all feel like shit if you and the baby weren’t okay. What if I get Ilya to take you. Maybe Munroe is free—”

“I’ll go with Ilya,” I said.

Ilya and I drove to the closest hospital, which was only minutes away. A TV on the wall of the intake area showed estimated wait times, I and I knew we were going to be here a while. But I’d barely sat down when a nurse called my name. Ilya said he’d wait as she led me to an examining room.

“How did I get in so fast?” I asked.

“The Ravens bypass the line because they pay for all hospital bills.”

Right. Universal health care had taken some getting used to, and not having to pay for my hospital and doctor’s visits. The Ravens were able to

get around that by paying out of pocket for all care. I deduced that if a Raven or Kodiak came in needing an MRI or ultrasound, he bypassed the line too.

After a thorough examination by a lovely doctor, I was told everything was fine, but to keep my eye on any changes for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Ilya was relieved to see me and asked how it went.

“You didn’t lose the baby, right?”

“We’re fine,” I said, giving him a hug. The poor kid was a wreck.

By the time we got back to the rink, most of the players were gone, and Jim had been sent home. Allan asked how it went, then demanded, “What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know. Dube was possessed. I was sure he was going to beat the crap out of Jim. I tried to calm him down, but he wouldn’t hear it. He pushed me, probably harder than he intended.”

Allan pursed his lips. “You should go to the cops.”

“I will if Jim will.”

“Funny, Jim said the same thing.”

“Why don’t I talk to him tomorrow? I think that maybe both of us just want this to be over. And I certainly hope Dube isn’t coming back.”

“I’m pretty sure his hockey career is finished.”

* * *

I had to tell Ethan before he found out from someone else, so I sent a text. There was no point calling him because he was about to take the ice in Calgary. He’d see my text after the game and flip out then. Easy.

I was a bit nervous about what happened, but everything about the baby felt right, and pregnant women took spills all the time, didn’t they? Then I thought of Ilya mentioning his mother had a miscarriage while vacuuming. Why had he told me that?

I texted Jill and Wolseley for support. Wolseley was working at the

restaurant, so I wasn't expecting a text back. Jill immediately sent a video chat invite. I told her the story, and in usual Jill fashion, she told me to make a police report.

"I'd rather it all went away."

Jill frowned. "Let me put it to you this way. If he pushed you, do you really think you're the first woman he's ever done that to, or the last?"

I hated when she made a point. "I'll think about it. In the meantime, for the next forty-eight hours I have to worry about losing the baby."

Jill's face softened and warmed. "Your bambino is going to be fine. Doctors have to tell you the risks because it's their job. Why don't you take it easy for a day or two. Call in sick. They can survive without you."

"And be alone instead? At least at work I'm around people."

"Point taken. But think about it. Instead of letting you worry, I'm going to get your mind off it. Guess who has a business meeting in your neck of the woods in January?"

"No! Really?" The thought of Jill coming for a visit had my heart soaring. A friend to spend time with for a few days.

"I haven't told anyone, but I've been promoted to head of PR for the new Canadian stores."

"That's amazing!"

"I start next week. The job is going to be a challenge since the expansion has been a mess, and store openings are delayed. Three stores were supposed to open this month, and they've all been pushed to January. I can't believe we've missed the Christmas season, but there were some supply chain issues."

"But this is a huge promotion."

She smiled and nodded, but something wasn't right. "It is, but I'm a little concerned about the launch of the stores. We'll see. I can tell you more when you come home for Christmas."

I checked my watch and saw it was nearly eleven in Minneapolis, so I

ended the call because I knew Jill was too polite to. I pulled out a book and tried to read to keep my mind occupied. The baby was kicking up a storm, and I decided that was a good sign. I nodded off at some point, but my trilling phone startled me awake.

“Hello,” I mumbled.

“I got your text. What the hell happened?” Ethan sounded frantic. In the text I’d told him I’d fallen at work, gone to the hospital, and everything was okay. Now it was time for the whole story. I told him everything, without holding a detail back, because it would all get back to him anyway. I was sure I heard him kick a trashcan or something, because a rattling sound reverberated through the phone.

“Dube is finished,” he said for about the fourth time. “I’ll make sure of it. I’m going to talk to the guys. He will be untouchable.”

I needed to be the calm one because Ethan was losing his mind. “I think Dube needs proper intervention. Maybe from mental health professionals. He has clear anger issues that seemed to be fueled by something. If he gets help he might be able to sort out his life.”

“I don’t give a shit about him right now. In the morning, Rothesay is going to hear about this. And I agree with Jill. You and Jim should be talking to the police.”

Why had I told him what Jill had said? “I’m going to sleep on it. Which reminds me, it’s late and I have to work in the morning. I’ll text you how I’m feeling, and we can talk before your game tomorrow. By the time you get back on Thursday, the forty-eight hours will have passed, and everything will be fine.”

He begrudgingly agreed.

I just hoped everything *would* be fine.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Tangi

I felt great the next morning, and when experienced a robust kick, I knew Baby Kildare-Grant was fine too. I headed to work determined to take it easy. I wasn't going to stay on my feet if I didn't have to, and that was easy since I'd be in meetings most of the morning. I had to give Allan, Coach Fontaine, and Clay Rothesay, owner of both the Ravens and Kodiaks, my version of the events. I stayed focused and factual, not letting any emotion in. When I was done, they asked me if I planned to go to the police.

"I'd prefer not to, but if Jim wants to make a police report, then I'll do the same."

If nothing else, the men I was talking to knew all about solidarity.

"I want you to know that we support whatever you decide to do," Clay said. "We've also released Chris Dube from the Ravens. What happened yesterday has no place in our organization, and I want to apologize to you for having to deal with that."

I'd never met Clay before, but I was glad to see he was doing the right thing. "Thank you," I said.

With that meeting over, I headed to my office, where Jim was doing paperwork. He glanced up at me and smiled as I closed the door behind me. I took a seat and a long gulp of water. The meeting had made me thirsty, probably from all the nerves.

"How are you today?" I asked him.

"I'm fine. I had a long talk with my wife and sons. It made me feel better."

I felt like shit. I'd had no idea Jim had a wife and kids. He'd never mentioned them, and I'd never thought to ask, but now wasn't the time to get acquainted with his family tree.

“And what did you come up with? Before you tell me, whatever you decide, I fully support you and will back you up.”

He nodded. “I appreciate that. I’ve decided not to make a police report. I’d like to forget the whole thing ever happened, but I hate that Dube is going to get away with this.”

“He’s not really getting away with it. He torpedoed his career.”

“Maybe, but he scared me and he could have hurt you and your baby. He should be in jail, but I have to be practical. If I make a big deal about this, everyone will find out, and maybe I’d torpedo my own career. You know what I mean?”

I did know. Everyone would think he was a snitch even though Dube’s behavior was abhorrent. “Hockey culture. I know it all too well.”

“It’s best this way. And I appreciate your support. I’m sorry you got mixed up in this.”

“Don’t be.”

The only positive thing about all this was that I felt closer to Jim, like we’d actually become pretty friendly, and that we trusted each other. Deep down, Jim was a good guy with a heart, and he’d finally let me see it.

While I waited for my first Raven client, I asked Jim about his kids. He told me his oldest was sixteen and learning to drive and that his youngest, fourteen, was going on forty.

“I have a great family.”

I had a deeper appreciation for Jim. For so long I’d wondered if he liked having me around, and now I understood him to be a guy who was a little eccentric, loved his privacy, and was looking out for everyone.

With Allan’s blessing, I made it a short day, but it was good to be around other people. When the twenty-four-hour mark hit, I was feeling better. After an evening of reading, eating only the best foods, and having Baby Kildare-Grant kicking up a fuss followed by a good sleep, I woke up knowing it was all going to be fine.

By the time Ethan got home a few hours later, I was already at work.

All is good?

I'd just finished a session with our back-up goalie, who had pulled his groin. Thankfully, he wasn't excitable.

I'm good. We'll talk when I get home.

Allan insisted on another half day for me, which was kind of him even though I was fine. I got home to find Ethan eating lunch and playing video games. When U came through the door, he jumped up and gave me a big, warm hug.

"Everything is good?"

"Everything is great."

I gave him a recap of the last few days and he listened intently.

"I told the guys what had happened. We decided that if Rothesay didn't do something about it, we were, so I'm glad this worked out."

"Jim and I decided not to make police reports. I get where he's coming from, and I didn't push it. But how sad is hockey culture that you can't complain about assault in fear of retribution?"

"It can be that way, but in this case, I think you and Jim would have had everyone's support. I don't know Dube all that well, but the few times he's been called up, he's rubbed me the wrong way. He's too aggressive and always angry. It was about more than the game for him. He has a lot of issues, and drug addiction sounds like one of them."

I left him to his video game and dropped off my lunch bag in the kitchen. I was cleaning plastic containers when my phone chimed.

You okay???

Ethan had confirmed that all the guys knew about the incident, so getting a text from Brandon was no surprise.

I'm okay.

I don't want to be pushy, but if you want to cancel tomorrow I totally understand.

I stared at that text for a long time. I thought about canceling, but how many evenings out had I had? Almost none.

I'll be there. See you tomorrow.

* * *

Ethan was out with the guys before I left, so I didn't have to tell him where I was going, not that it was his business. I'd had a long day at work with the mounting Ravens injuries, so my feet hurt as I slipped on my brand-new maternity jeans. I wore a cute pink knit sweater and blue and pink sneakers. I couldn't believe it was December already and I was still wearing shoes. By now in Minnesota, I'd be pulling on my winter boots.

Mario's was pretty busy, but Brandon was in what I guessed was his usual booth when I arrived. I shimmied into the booth and couldn't hold back a yawn.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It was a long day of one treatment after another. I swear, half the Ravens are injured."

"It's that time of year."

"How is your knee holding up?" I asked, settling into my seat. I grabbed a menu and perused it even though I wanted pizza. I needed all the carbs and cheese I could get.

"Pretty good, although the Kodiaks PT is not as interesting as you."

I wasn't sure how to take the compliment, so I laughed it off and set my menu down. Brandon waved over the server and we ordered. I got my cheesy pizza with salami, mushrooms, and black olives while Brandon ordered lasagna with a side of grilled chicken. We were sharing a salad again, and I

asked for extra garlic toast.

“Didn’t you just order pizza?”

“I did, but I’m eating carbs for two,” I said, pointing to my tummy. “I’m also famished.”

We got our drinks, my tea and his beer, and he leaned toward me. “You’ve got a lot to update me on. What happened with Dube?”

I groaned. “I don’t know what got into him, but Dube was possessed. I was sure he was going to hurt Jim. I tried to talk him down, but when he looked at me, his eyes, they were like a wild animal’s. I don’t know what’s going on with him, but I hope he turns his life around.”

Brandon scratched at the scruff on his jaw. He looked good with the five o’clock shadow. It made him ruggedly handsome, not that he wasn’t handsome before. “I would have decked him. Were the three of you alone?”

Oh boy. “No. There were a few guys, but they all seemed too stunned to react.”

Brandon’s face crumpled in confusion. “Let me understand this. There were guys around, and they were watching?”

“One was recording on their phone.”

“And they let you get in the middle of it?”

I’d opened a can of worms. Thankfully Brandon was with the Kodiaks and wouldn’t have to be in the same locker room as the Ravens. “Seems so. But Ilya did help me when I fell. And he wasn’t one of the spectators. He came in at the very end.”

“Fucking cowards,” Brandon spat. “I know Dube is bigger than me, but I still would have clocked him.”

“It’s fine now. Clay met with us and Chris is gone. How was the road trip?” I had to get him off this subject before he got more pissed off.

“We won all three games, so pretty good. And I had an interesting conversation with Ethan.”

I cringed. “Do I want to know?”

“Guess that depends. Seems he’s worried that I’m trying to move in on you.”

I wasn’t surprised, even though I’d made it more than clear to Ethan that I was done with him. If I wanted to move on with Brandon—and I was mostly sure I didn’t—then it was none of his business. But Brandon was staring back at me, his blue eyes earnest. I liked spending time with him. Since Ethan, he’d been the first guy I’d had fun with. Everything was easy with Brandon. Shit, when had this happened? When had I started liking the guy?

“And what did you say?” I finally got out. I’d let way too much time pass before spitting something out.

“I told him to shit or get off the pot.”

I nearly choked on my tea. Brandon was encouraging Ethan to pursue me? I prodded some more. “And what did he say?”

“He was cagey.”

“Sort of like you’re being now?”

He picked away at the label on his beer bottle. “I guess I’d want to know where your head’s at. You have a long history with Grant, and a future too,” he said, glancing at my stomach.

I leaned back in the booth and sighed. “When he came back home for his dad’s funeral and we made this kid,” I said, pointing to my belly, “I thought we had a chance to get back together. I knew he had a girlfriend, and I guess I tricked myself into believing that it wasn’t serious, that maybe he wanted me back instead. I didn’t know she was his fiancée. The minute I found that out, everything changed for me. It sounds strange, but the part that was holding onto him let go.” I stopped to rub my belly, something I noticed myself doing more and more. “But when I found out I was pregnant, all my feelings got mushed up together. I don’t know what to think or do anymore.”

The server set down the salad and extra garlic bread. I grabbed a slice and tore off a piece, stuffing it into my mouth.

“You’ve got a lot going on,” he said thoughtfully. “I don’t want to

complicate things for you, but here's how I feel. If you do decide you'd like to start dating again, I'd like to be the first person on your list."

His smile warmed my heart. "You would want to date someone who is going to have a baby in four months? Really?"

He stared at me with an intense gaze that made me feel like we were the only two people in the restaurant. "I think Grant is the biggest clown for letting you get away. I think he kicks himself every day for it but he doesn't know how to make it right. I've met a ton of women, and you blow them all away. So yeah, I'd date a pregnant woman who's having my teammate's kid. In a fucking heartbeat."

"Okay." I was blushing hard. "I may be open to that. For now, though, I'm starving. Can we eat?"

He told me stories all through dinner of the crazy things that had happened to him in his hockey career, like the time he'd accidentally locked himself out of a hotel room wearing nothing but a towel and had to explain to the front desk, in said towel with everyone in the lobby watching, that he was getting a newspaper that was farther away than he thought, and the door shut behind him.

Being able to have fun and laugh had me seriously considering a real date with Brandon, and as he walked me to my car, I stopped him on the street.

"What about Mario's daughters?"

"Right. We forgot again," he said with a sweet smile. "Next time. When you get back from Minneapolis."

"Sure. I'd like that."

By my car, he pulled me close and placed the softest kiss on my lips.

"I've been waiting a long time to do that," he murmured. "Thanks for a wonderful evening. And if I don't see you before you go, have a great holiday."

I thought about that kiss on the drive back to the condo. I could definitely see more dinners at Mario's and kisses from Brandon Warde.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ethan

Tangi was pacing the living room, then walking through the kitchen and back out again. Her flight home had been delayed three times, and based on the weather and the snowstorm pummeling Minnesota, I was pretty sure it was going to be canceled. She'd planned to go for only three days, and by the looks of the storm, it wasn't going to be over for another day at the very least.

"Christmas is ruined," she said, throwing herself down on the sofa next to me. "I've been looking forward to this trip for weeks."

"Sorry, Tang."

"Now what?"

The Kodiaks had lucked out this year, and we didn't have another game until December 27. Some of the guys had gone home for the holidays, although I guessed the ones who lived in the Midwest were in the same boat as Tangi. Ryan and Amanda had stayed in Vancouver and invited me and a few other guys over for dinner, not that either of them were making the food. They were catering the whole thing.

"I'm going to Ryan's tomorrow night. You're more than welcome to come."

"I'm assuming Amanda will be there?" she asked, looking at me with her huge hazel eyes.

"Yes."

"I'll pass. It's not that I don't like her, I just don't want to be interrogated all evening."

"So you're going to stay here all alone?"

"I'll be fine. Maybe I'll see if Brandon is around."

She said it so casually, more to herself than to me, but it had me alarmed all the same. I doubted she said it to annoy me because she'd already gotten

up and was wandering away. I had to think fast. The last thing I wanted was for her to spend more time with Warde.

“You know what, let’s make the best of this. I’ll cancel my plans with Ryan tomorrow. It’s not like I don’t see him all the time. Why don’t you and I have a nice evening together? I’ll make mac and cheese, you make a ham, we’ll go buy dessert, watch Christmas movies together, and make our own holiday celebration. And we’ll make sure to video chat with our families.”

Her face lit up and I silently whooped. “Okay, that works. I think we still have some lettuce and maybe some frozen peas. I’d like to incorporate more vegetables into that dinner.”

“Let’s hit the grocery store now while they still have some decent desserts, otherwise we’ll be eating fruit cake.”

“I actually don’t mind fruit cake,” she said as she grabbed her bag and a light jacket.

Yup, I’d finally gotten something right for once.

* * *

While we’d been shopping for groceries, we’d also popped into a few other stores to get each other Christmas gifts. We were lucky a few of them were still open a little later on Christmas Eve. What Tangi didn’t know was that I’d already gotten her some stuff, but I shopped for a few small things at a store I couldn’t really understand. It sold all sorts of housewares, jewelry, craft supplies, hair care products, and other odds and ends. It wasn’t quite a dollar store, but it had that feel. I got Tangi a few pairs of socks and some hair accessories, along with what looked like a water bottle cleaner.

We got back to the condo and ate the rotisserie chicken we’d bought at the grocery store, and then Tangi went to her room to unpack. I could hear her chatting with Jill and Wolseley. I couldn’t help but smile that I had her for the holidays. I was determined to make it memorable, and not the way

New Year's Eve had been. I sent Ryan a quick text.

Can't make it tomorrow. Tangi's flight was canceled.

Ryan responded within minutes.

You can both come here.

She's not up for it. Sad about not spending time with her family.
I don't want to leave her alone. Next year.

With that out of the way, I played a video game and when I was sure Tangi was asleep and her light was off, I wrapped all her presents. I had never bothered with a tree because who would see it? So I pulled out a sheet of copy paper and drew one. I wasn't an artist, but she'd get the idea.

The next morning I wandered into the living room and she was staring at the paper tree with her arms crossed over her tiny but burgeoning belly.

"I came up with it at the last minute."

"It's unique," she said with a giggle.

"You work with what you've got. How about pancakes this morning?"

She turned to me with a smile. "We really are eating like crap today, aren't we?"

"It's Christmas."

I was throwing some frozen blueberries into the batter when she came up next to me and put her arm around my waist.

"Merry Christmas, Ethan. Thank you for not making the holiday suck."

I leaned over to kiss her forehead. I missed these moments between us, and having her for the whole day was the perfect opportunity to show her how much she meant to me.

She poured us each a cup of coffee and we dove into the pancakes. She updated me on Wolseley's restaurant, which was booked solid all through the holidays. She'd had some favorable reviews from restaurant critics and hoped to keep the momentum going.

“And Jill’s coming to Vancouver in a few weeks,” Tangi said, grabbing another pancake and slathering it with butter and maple syrup. Richardson’s promoted her to their fledgling Canadian division, but she thinks something is up. I’ll get more details when she gets here.”

“Is she being transferred here?” Jill kind of scared me. I could handle Wolseley anytime, but Jill was a nutcracker, and not the Christmas kind.

“No, but they’re having some meetings here. Maybe a grand opening? I can’t remember. My mind is a sieve lately.”

“When is she coming?”

“First week of January, I think.”

Perfect. I’d be on a road trip.

After breakfast, I insisted we open presents. She opened the socks and gave me socks too, along with a container of protein powder. She’d bought me some protein bars that looked pretty good. She opened the hair accessories and bottle cleaner, leaving the biggest present for last. She tore off the paper and opened the box to find another wrapped box inside. This went on several more times with several cartoonish glares shot my way each time she discovered another wrapped box inside the previous one. When she finally got to the last box, she bit her lip in consternation.

“Is this a jewelry box? Because I didn’t see any jewelry stores open.”

“I guess you’ll have to find out. I bought it a few weeks ago.”

She looked at me with a playful grin as she ripped off the paper and stared at the black velvet box. When she opened it, she gasped. Inside was a gold necklace with a T pendant. I knew she hated flashy, but it was simple and sturdy.

“I should have imposed a spending limit,” she said as she gently ran her finger along with gold.

“You’re special, and I wanted you to know it.”

She kissed my cheek and gave me a hug. She smelled so nice, that lavender and citrus scent. Was it lime? Whatever it was, I didn’t want to let

her go.

“Thanks. If I’d known, I would have gotten you another protein powder. I’m starting to feel a little cheap.”

“Cut it out, and come over here so I can put that on you.”

She lifted her hair and I fastened the necklace in place, wanting to run my fingers along the nape of her neck. Her skin was so incredibly soft.

“I’m going to look at it in the mirror,” she said.

I watched her go, feeling my cock twitch. Shit, I had to keep myself under control or I’d blow this. When she returned from her room with a smile, I smiled too.

“It’s beautiful and way too generous.”

“You deserve the best, Tang.”

She looked out the window and I could see her face brighten with an idea. “Christmas is never this warm in Minneapolis, so why don’t we go out enjoy the day? We could walk down to the marina and do whatever we want.”

“That’s a great idea. I’ll grab our jackets.”

Two hours later, our faces were ruddy from the brisk ocean air, but neither of us were cold. People were on the waterfront, and we wished them all a merry Christmas. A few recognized me, and I took pictures with some and signed autographs for others. We found a sandwich shop that was open even on Christmas day and bought hot chocolate and sandwiches. By the time we got home, Tangi was exhausted and went for a nap. I figured it was a good time to text Craig. It’d been a while since I’d talked to him.

Merry Christmas!!!

He texted back a few minutes later.

Back at you! How are things going? You and Tang kill each other yet?

Nope. All is good.

But New Year's Eve is around the corner ...

Why did he have to go and ruin a good moment?

I'm not fucking up this time.

We'll see.

While Tangi slept, I got online and played a video game with Craig and some of my teammates. I don't know how much time had passed but I heard the shower running in Tangi's room and checked my watch. Shit. It was almost five o'clock. Where had the day gone?

I told the guys I had to go and logged off. Minutes later, Tangi came out of her room, her hair still damp and falling in waves around her. Fuck, she was gorgeous.

"That helped," she said. "I needed the sleep. I'm going to get started on the ham. It's probably too early for you to prep the mac and cheese?"

"Yeah, but I think I'll hit the shower too. I want to smell clean for dinner."

She giggled a little and my heart soared. But all I could think about was Craig telling me that New Year's Eve was right around the corner. Why did he have to jinx it?

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Tangi

I put the ham in the oven, thankful it was just a small one that wouldn't take long. I'd napped for a while. I blamed the exercise and the fresh air. We'd also been lucky to be blessed with a sunny day.

Next, I rummaged through veggies we'd bought yesterday. I figured I'd steam them and come up with some kind of garlic butter sauce to make them more exciting. As I shut the fridge door, I spotted my reflection in the stainless steel. I touched the necklace he'd given me and felt warmth surge through me. He'd actually put thought into the gift, like he'd cared. Maybe he really did care, more than I was giving him credit for.

He came into the kitchen and went straight for the fridge. He pulled out a few different cheeses and started grating them. He smelled so nice, like soap and cedarwood. I shook the thought from my head.

"How hungry are you?" he asked.

"Lately, I can eat everything."

"Got it. I'll make extra."

I worked on my garlic butter sauce while he boiled pasta. When I was done, I switched over to a salad since we needed to eat something with nutritional value. The buzzer on the stove went off just as Ethan was putting the pasta in the boiling water. Perfect timing. I shut the stove off but popped in the cherry pie we'd bought so it could warm while we ate.

"I got this," Ethan said, holding up sparkling cider. "It's like not drinking but pretending to."

"Oh, I like that."

He poured two generous glasses and we toasted to Baby Kildare-Grant's health. It seemed appropriate.

We sat down to dinner and my plate was just as big as Ethan's.

“Where are you putting all that food?”

“I don’t know, but I’m eating every last bite.” And I did. Every. Last. Bite.

“I have an idea,” he said. “Let’s not do the dishes until tomorrow. Let’s watch a movie now, then have dessert, and watch another movie?”

“You read my mind. *It’s a Wonderful Life* or *Miracle on 34th Street*?”

“You pick.”

“*Miracle on 34th Street*.”

We at least brought our plates to the kitchen and put away the leftovers that I was sure to devour the next day. We settled on the sofa, careful not to touch each other. I knew that if we got too close, things could happen, and I wasn’t ready for that. So while we watched the movie, I tried not to think naughty thoughts, focusing instead on the movie and cherry pie I was going to have later. The last few weeks had felt like old times with Ethan, and I understood how dangerous that was. I was pissed about missing Christmas with my family, but these few days with Ethan had been almost magical. Every part of me wanted to cuddle in his arms, feel his body next to mine, but I couldn’t go down that path. Way too thorny.

When the credits rolled, I jumped up and suggested we have that pie. I needed some space and sugar.

“I’ll get it,” he said. “Want some tea too?”

“Just water and pie. A large piece,” I said, calling after him.

He came back with our dessert, and we ate in silence as *It’s a Wonderful Life* started. Of course I wasn’t thinking about the movie. My mind wandered to the evening of his dad’s funeral when we’d made love. Everything about it had been explosive, as if we’d never have sex again. And maybe it was because he knew that. But still ... my stomach fluttered at the memory and Baby Kildare-Grant gave me a swift kick to bring me back to reality.

“Good pie,” Ethan said.

“Yeah, good,” I said absently.

He took our plates away and when he came back, he sat on the sofa and motioned for me to move in closer. I froze for a second, unsure of what to do, but my hormones, the ones I thought would go dormant during pregnancy, had me cozying up to him, and damn, it felt so good. I closed my eyes for a second and let out a contented sigh as I rested my head against his firm shoulder.

“Such an inspirational movie,” I said as the credits rolled later. I sat up and stretched, working out the kinks.

“Let’s hope we all earn our wings,” Ethan said.

He stood up and went to the kitchen, and I couldn’t help but wonder what he meant by that. I followed him, thinking to ask, but instead watching him start on the dishes.

“I thought we were leaving this until tomorrow.”

“No one wants to wake up to this mess.”

He had a point, so I helped by drying.

“Despite how shitty this started, Christmas was pretty nice. I enjoyed spending time with you,” I said.

He smiled as he washed a pot and handed it to me to dry. He then gently hip-checked me. I laughed and hip-checked him back, and when he tried to splash water on me, I ducked out of the way and slapped him on the ass with the tea towel.

“Now you’re in trouble,” he said, dropping the serving spoon he had in his hands into the soapy water. He chased after me and cornered me just outside the open kitchen.

I gasped as I looked up into his deep brown eyes. All the fun times we had together came flooding back, and when I leaned in to kiss him, he kissed him back hungrily. He pulled me close, and I would have straddled him if my growing belly hadn’t gotten in the way. I don’t know what came over me, but I wanted him. For so long I’d tried to push those feelings aside, but to hell with them now.

We broke apart, our gazes fixed on each other. My chest was heaving as I gave the slightest nod. He knew what he meant, and he swept me up into his arms and to my bedroom.

I didn't want to waste time or consider changing my mind. I yanked off my oversized sweat top and T-shirt, then slipped out of my comfy maternity yoga pants. Hardly sexy, but I was pretty sure he didn't care. He seemed to be reveling in the sight of me in my bra and panties, even with my baby belly.

"You look like you want to eat me," I teased.

"I do."

I blew out an excited breath as he pulled off his shirt and jeans. I got onto the bed and he joined me, lying next to me at first, kissing my neck and reaching under me to unhook my bra. Once he had it released, he helped me out of it and threw it on the floor. When his tongue circled my nipples, I sighed, feeling them form hard peaks. As he sucked and nipped at them, I closed my eyes and basked in the pleasure.

He stopped to gently caress my rounded stomach. He kissed it and my heart nearly burst.

"Time to get you out of these sexy panties," he said.

"Stop," I said, playfully punching his arm.

"They definitely are the sexiest maternity panties I've ever seen," he said, slowly sliding them down my legs.

"They're the only maternity panties you've seen. Right?" I mean, I really didn't know the answer to that. I had no idea who he'd had sex with after me.

"True, but still."

With my panties gone, his hand found my wet core. As one finger lazily circled my clit, two more found their way inside me. A soft mewl escaped my lips as he found the spot that made me stop thinking straight.

"I've also never fucked a pregnant woman," he whispered in my ear.

I pushed down on his fingers, wanting them deeper inside me. But each

time I did that, he pulled them out just as much. He planned to torture me tonight, but two could play at that game. I turned onto my side to face him, running one hand down his rock-hard abs, then into his boxer shorts. I grabbed his rigid cock and ran my thumb over its tip. He grunted his pleasure.

“I want you inside me.”

“What’s the rush?” he asked through halting breaths.

“It’s been a while and I know you know what to do.”

He smiled. “Any rules for having sex with a pregnant woman?”

“None that I know.”

I sat up and his amazing fingers slipped out of me. But I’d remedy my emptiness soon. I shoved him down on his back and straddled him. I guided his cock between my lips and slowly pushed down. Inch by glorious inch he filled me. His cock felt so good as I let myself adjust to his size, and then I pushed those last few inches, Ethan seated inside me to the hilt.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he said. “Be gentle.”

I chuckled as I leaned back, resting my hands on his thighs. Then I slowly moved up and down, realizing I wasn’t as limber with a belly. Ethan didn’t mind, growling with each thrust. When he reached between us and started playing with my clit again, I saw stars. I didn’t know how long I could hold off an orgasm. I bit down hard on my lip, trying to keep my climax at bay, but when Ethan began to meet my thrusts, I came completely undone. He sat up and effortlessly had me on my back, slamming into me a few more times before we rode out our orgasms together.

My chest was heaving as he leaned over to kiss my forehead. Damn, sex with him was so good.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

He returned with a warm, wet towel and wiped me clean. Then he settled in bed with me, pulling the covers around us. He said something as I drifted off to sleep, but I hadn’t caught it. Something about love, or was it about

Christmas? I was too sleepy to remember.

Chapter Forty

Ethan

She must not have heard me. I was convinced she hadn't because she didn't react to it. Maybe that was a good thing. I'd told her I loved her spontaneously, and hadn't taken even a second to think about it. I tried not to think about it too much now as I closed my eyes and fell asleep with Tangi in my arms. I awoke hours later, Tangi still snoring softly, her back up against me. My cock was hard and needed relief.

I brushed the hair away from Tangi's neck and kissed her nape. She stirred a little, but when I reached under her arm and to her right breast, caressing her hardening nipple between my thumb and forefinger, she roused, rubbing her gorgeous ass against my rigid cock.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice heavy with sleep.

"I hope foreplay?"

The hand that had been playing with her nipple now slid down to her pussy, and based on how wet it was, she was into it just as much as I was. She shifted a little to give me better access, and I slid two fingers inside her to get her prepared. The way she groaned had my cock begging for release. I changed my position to run my cockhead up and down her sopping wet slit. Slowly, I eased into her. I planned to draw it out this time and enjoy Tangi's tight pussy for as long as I could. She seemed to have the same idea as we slowly rocked together until my cock said it was time to go.

I changed my angle, hoping to hit her G-spot. I started playing with her clit, too, fucking her a little harder now. She gasped and groaned and I couldn't hold back any longer. I fucked her as hard as I could in that position until my cock exploded. With a few final thrusts, we were both spent.

"I love morning sex," she said and sighed.

"I didn't have a condom on, so I hope you don't get pregnant."

She laughed and I so loved her laugh.

We stayed that way for a few minutes and decided it was time to shower. She took a shower first, and while she was doing that I made coffee and took out some eggs and leftover ham. We both needed a hearty breakfast. I got into the shower, feeling like life was finally on the right course, and when I got back to the kitchen, Tangi was prepping the eggs. Scrambled for her, sunny side up for me.

“I was going to do that,” I said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

“I thought I’d get started.”

She finished up the eggs while I cut some ham and tomatoes, and we both sat at the kitchen island for breakfast.

“What should we do today?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe another walk? Have lunch, spend the rest of the day in bed?”

She sipped her coffee, then put down her fork. Something about the expression on her face told me I was about to get bad news. I sucked in a breath and braced myself.

“Last night was amazing. It really was.”

Shit.

“I just don’t want to rush things, okay? I don’t want us to get caught up in emotions and the holidays.” She fully faced me now, her large hazel eyes full of uncertainty. “You just got out of an engagement, one that ended because of me. And I don’t want you jumping back into a relationship with me because it’s safe, or because I’m pregnant with your baby. And I’m not interested in playing house or just having a good time. I’m going to be a mom in four months. I need stability and a partner who is serious.”

I was taken aback by the last part of her statement. “I’m not serious?”

She regarded me for a moment. “I’m not sure. Are you? Or is this a game for you? I’m not sure if you’re competing with Brandon or feeling lonely without Brandi or you really want to be with me. If we’re ever getting back

together, I have to know it's for the right reasons. It's not just about me anymore. We have a baby to think about."

How stupid had I been to think everything was going to work out? But I wasn't going to argue with her because when she made up her mind, there was no changing it. "Okay, I'll do that."

"Good. It's the right thing to do."

No, it was what she wanted to do. I wanted to be back in her life, back in her bed, and back together, and I had no idea how to prove it to her.

We didn't say much else, and when we finished breakfast, I said I was going to hit the condo gym. What I really did was grab a jacket and take a walk to clear my head. The streets were crowded with people shopping for post-Christmas deals. I put up my hood and walked to a nearby park. I sat on a bench and grumbled to myself. Then I texted Craig. I needed a friend who would give me intelligent advice, and that wasn't going to come from Jeremy or Ryan.

You around to talk?

He replied almost instantly.

Got the day off. Didn't you hear about the storm?

Right, how could I forget it. I gave him a call.

"How's it going there?" I asked. "You digging out yet?"

"Finally stopped late last night. I did some shoveling this morning, and I'm going to head over to your mom's to help out there."

"That's nice of you, but I hired a service for her."

"Yeah, well, they are behind, and she says she needs to get out. I'm not sure where she needs to go, but I didn't push it."

I had an idea where. Dad's grave to wish him a merry Christmas. She was probably devastated she couldn't get there. "Thanks, man."

There was a reason he'd been my friend for so long. We'd been through

everything together, including hockey, but he'd quit when he couldn't make a junior team. I'd told him to keep trying, that we'd train together, but he was tired of trying and I couldn't blame him.

"What's up?"

I filled him in on Christmas with Tangi and what she'd said this morning. Craig listened without interrupting. He cleared his throat when I was finished, and I braced for a lecture.

"She's not wrong, Ethan. Brandi dumped you less than three months ago. The last thing Tang wants is for you to get back together with her just to realize that's not what you want."

"But I do want her. I'm serious this time."

"Then do what she wants. Take a month or two to figure your shit out. And if you still feel the same way about her, then go for it."

"And what happens in those two months? She keeps going out with Warde?"

"Ahh, so that's what you're worried about. That she'll dump you for your rival?"

I groaned and got up from the park bench to take a walk. Thankfully, the park wasn't that busy. Just a few people walking their dogs and the odd jogger. Everyone else was out shopping.

"A little. He's different, and I hate to admit, good-looking. He's also tenacious. She obviously likes him. If I take a step back, I may lose her."

"And if you smother her, you lose her."

"So just hang back?"

"No, not necessarily. But be yourself. Be the guy she fell for. And when you decide you want to be with her, because I'm pretty sure that's what is going to happen, make sure you give her what she wants. And if you have to ask me what that is, you're more hopeless than I thought."

"I know what she wants."

"Good. So do us all a favor, me, you, Tangi, your family, her family, the

entire world ... don't fuck this up. And don't mention New Year's Eve."

Chapter Forty-One

Tangi

The day before New Year's Eve, Ethan left for an eight-game road trip that would keep him away for two weeks, and the distance had come at the right time for a few reasons. First, it was the anniversary of our breakup, and it best we weren't around each other on that day. Second, I'd spent a lot of time trying to figure out what my heart wanted. It wanted to trust Ethan, to welcome him back into my life, but I couldn't do it. I'd opened myself up to him once before, only to find out he thought we were having closure sex and that he had a fiancée.

So I wasn't ready. Not yet. I had to know he was in the right headspace and not getting caught up in baby madness or jumping from one relationship to the next. I also owed it to Baby Kildare-Grant to make the right decision.

I made sure to go to bed before midnight on New Year's Eve. I wanted nothing to do with the day. I then threw myself into work and dealing with injuries. I was counting down the days until Jill came for her short visit. She'd be staying one night, so I prepared Ethan's room—with his permission—and picked out a great Greek restaurant to eat at, but when Jill was due at my place, she texted to say she preferred we hang out and order in. So I arranged for the restaurant to deliver. From her text, I could tell Jill was exhausted. Her words were brief, and refusing a night out meant she'd had all she could take.

I met her in the lobby of the building, and when she got out of her Uber, I was vibrating with excitement. By the time she got to the door, I was squealing. We threw our arms around each other.

"Look at you!" she said, leaning back to take me in. "You finally look pregnant. Sort of."

"I may not be big, but that's all baby in there! Now let's get you out of

the rain.”

“I prefer it to all that snow we had,” Jill said as we walked to the elevator. “It took days to dig out, and I hate that you weren’t able to come home.”

“I was pissed too. It would have been nice to see everyone. It gets pretty lonely around here sometimes.”

Jill arched a brow. “But it seems you made the best of it.”

“Right. We’ll talk about that inside.”

Jill took one look at the condo and let out a long whistle. She dropped her bag and headed straight for the balcony, not caring that it was cool and rainy. She stood out there a few minutes, taking it all in.

“That view!” she said.

“I know. It’s gorgeous. Aren’t you cold?”

“My thick Minnesota blood can take it. And in my next life, I’m going to come back as a hockey star so I can live in a place like this.”

While she took in the view, I poured her a liberal glass of white wine along with a tall glass of sparkling water for me. I got her back inside and we sat on the plush sofa and sipped our drinks, although mine was hardly interesting.

“Tell me about work,” I said, wanting to avoid the Ethan conversation for as long as possible.

Jill drank some wine, then set it down on the coffee table. Her grim expression told me everything.

“Ever hear of the glass cliff?” she asked.

“No.”

She got more comfortable on the sofa. “It’s when a woman or someone from a visible minority is promoted to a position, usually something high up, where the chances of failing are high. Think Theresa May or Ellen Pao. They’re good examples. The company or political party is usually in some sort of crisis, so they make a ‘diversity’ hire so the company looks progressive, except what they’re really doing is setting up that person to fail.

And when the business fails, who gets the blame?”

I winced.

“Yeah. Hence the glass cliff, because that’s about the only time we get promoted to positions like that. We’re expendable.”

I had to google Ellen Pao later, but I nodded along. At least I knew who Theresa May was. “What’s going on at Richardson’s?”

“The Canadian expansion is a mess. The supply chain is a mess. I think the mastermind who came up with expanding to Canada has never been here. This isn’t the United States. For one, the land mass is larger and the population is ten times smaller. We can’t get stock to stores in time. Stores are half empty. The company has lost millions, and soon it’ll be billions, and they want me to be the PR face of it. And I’ve stupidly gone and accepted the job.”

“Oh shit. I’m sorry.”

“I knew it was going to be bad, but I had no idea what a catastrophe it is. I’m only telling you this, but I don’t see these stores making it to next Christmas. And that means I’ll be canned and blamed for not spinning it correctly. I know what they’re up to.”

I felt for her. She’d worked so damn hard for this job, and Richardson’s had screwed her over.

“They’re jerks. Can you look for another job?”

“I plan to, but it’s hard when they have me shipped off to Toronto, to their Canadian HQ.”

I leaned over and gave her a hug. If anyone was going to land on their feet, it was Jill, but this was the kind of setback she’d always feared.

“If there is anything I can do, you let me know.”

“Enough about me. It’s too depressing after sitting through meetings for three days. What’s going on with Ethan?”

I’d already told Jill and Wolseley about the Christmas tryst in a video chat, so now I was only filling in the details. “Now he’s gone for another

week on a road trip, and I think that distance is good. By the time he left, it was getting a little awkward. He assumed that one night of sex meant we were getting back together. Which is ironic since that was what I thought when we slept together last summer.”

Jill sipped more of her wine and leveled me with a compassionate look. “Do you want to get back together with him?”

“Like I told him, he needs to be ready for that. He just got out of a long-term relationship.”

“Tang, he knows you. It’s different. You’re not some rebound.”

I tapped my fingers on my glass. “It’s more than that. I want a commitment. I’ve never stopped loving him, but if he’s in, he has to be all in.”

“He can be a bit thick, so does he know that?”

“I don’t know, but I shouldn’t have to tell him.”

“Fair point.”

The downstairs buzzer went off, and we went down to get our food. As we chowed down on souvlaki and lemon potatoes, Jill dove back into the conversation.

“What about this Brandon guy?”

“What about him?” I asked, reaching for more lemon potatoes.

“Does he stand a chance?”

“I don’t think so. He’s great and has the nicest ass. Maybe if things were different and I wasn’t pregnant.”

Jill tilted her head. “You don’t think so? That’s not a great answer. And being pregnant shouldn’t matter.”

I hadn’t given him much thought. I was far too busy sorting out my feelings for Ethan. “He’s amazing, but life is just too complicated.”

“Then it’s Ethan or nothing. Is that what I’m hearing?”

Did I want to close the door on Brandon? It wouldn’t be fair to keep him as my back-up plan, so that was another thing to consider in the next few

days. Why did Jill have to scramble my brain like this with her logic?

“Now I don’t know.”

Jill grabbed some salad and scooped the olives onto my plate. I loved them as much as she hated them. “Do yourself a favor—with the time you’ve given Ethan to get his shit together, get your shit together too. Because if there’s a chance this Brandon dude is a good guy, you shouldn’t throw it away hoping that Ethan figures out that what he wants is a commitment to you.”

My best friend was brilliant. “Okay, that’s what I’ll do.”

At the end of the day, I had to figure out what was right for me, and maybe that meant ending up with no one at all.

Chapter Forty-Two

Tangi

When the Kodiaks got back from their road trip, they had a few days off. That had me putting my plan in motion, the one I'd come up with after my evening with Jill. I texted Brandon to see if he wanted to hang out. I needed to see how I felt about him, and if I wanted to pursue something with him. It seemed like the right thing to do—I didn't want to leave him hanging either way.

He texted back and we arranged for a skate at the Robson Square rink. I got there first and rented some skates since I hadn't brought those along from Minnesota. The weather had finally dipped below zero and was perfect for a day on the ice. Christmas lights were still up, giving the square a winter wonderland look. I was taking it all in when Brandon met me at the skate rentals.

He hugged me, lifting me right off my feet.

"It's nice to see you again."

"That was a long road trip," I said as he set me down.

"It never seemed to end."

He had on a black beanie that was hiding his sandy-colored hair. I watched him lace up his skates and felt my heart tug just a little. In a different life that didn't include Ethan, I would have jumped into a relationship with him, but I had a baby to consider. And an ex who was his teammate.

Once he had his skates on, he grabbed my hand as we made our way to the rink.

"Did Grant teach you how to skate?"

"Nah, I'm from Minnesota. I played hockey for a few years. Our high school had a girls' team. I even played a year of college hockey, but I wasn't that good. I was usually on the fourth line."

“I’m learning a lot about you.”

“I loved playing sports.”

We hit the ice and he made sure to keep holding my hand. He asked me more about growing up in Minneapolis, and I asked him about growing up in Saskatchewan. Once we’d had our fill of skating, our faces red from the cold, we found a nearby coffee shop and got some hot chocolate.

“I still haven’t met Mario’s daughters, you know.”

He smiled. “Right. We need to get on that. I did promise.”

“He does really have daughters, right?”

He laughed now. “Yes, he really does.”

I knew the time had come to have some kind of talk with Brandon. I didn’t want to lead him on or be dishonest, but I also didn’t even know what I planned to tell him.

“I enjoy hanging out with you,” I said.

“And I love hanging out with you.”

I bit the side of my lip. Why did this have to be so hard? “But... things are complicated for me. I have a baby coming and now isn’t the right time for getting into a new relationship. I feel like I have to tell you that because the last thing I want to do is string you along.”

“I respect that.”

“I also have to think about Ethan and the relationship I have with him.”

He shifted his posture, clearly irritated at hearing Ethan’s name. “I get the feeling he wants to get back together with you. Is that something you want? And before you answer,” he said, stopping me from speaking, “I can handle it. It’s okay to want to get back together with him. You have a ton of history with him. But please promise me if you do, it’s for the right reasons and not just because you’re having a kid with him.”

Why was he such an amazing guy? He was going to make some woman very happy one day, but I knew my heart was spoken for.

“I don’t know what I want, and I know I need to figure that out.”

He reached out and touched my hand. “It’s okay if you pick him. I’ll be okay. Look, we haven’t really dated, so it’s not like we’re breaking up.”

“Stop being such a great guy.”

His blue eyes glinted in the light and his smile was so playful. “Do you mind telling that to all my teammates?”

We finished our drinks and as we got ready to leave he pulled me close.

“In case I don’t get a chance to do this again,” he said, pausing for a moment before leaning in to kiss me. He was so damn good at kissing.

We parted ways and those pregnancy hormones kicked in again. I had to wipe a few tears away, but I kept on walking. I had to. As wonderful as Brandon was, I was pretty sure he wasn’t right for me.

* * *

I looked at my phone calendar. Two and a half months to my due date. How had that crept up on me so fast? I had nothing for the baby and little spare time to go shopping, so I spent my entire day off buying baby stuff online. I’d visited a shop first, but their stock had been limited. They had mentioned trying their online store. At least I had an idea what I was buying by at least seeing some floor models. I got only the essentials because I couldn’t decorate the second bedroom with Ethan in it. Decisions had to be made, and they had to be made fast. Either he stayed forever or he had to go.

We hadn’t crossed paths a lot. He was respecting my request for space and time to think. But he had a week off coming up, something each team had once during the season. Maybe then he and I could figure out what to do with that room and what would happen with him. With us. In the meantime, that would mean knowing what I wanted, and I was no closer to that.

Ethan wasn’t home yet when I got in. He had a later practice since there was no Kodiaks game that night. Maybe it was time to extend an olive branch, so I texted him to see if he was going to be home for dinner. When he

text back that he was, I offered to make dinner for us.

I marinated some chicken, pulled out the brown rice, and figured out what vegetables to steam. Lately, I'd been having heartburn issues, so I stuck to bland food and nothing too heavy, which was pretty much his hockey diet. That meant no more mac and cheese.

I hoped our dinner would be a way of bridging the gap that had grown between us. I didn't think the tension was healthy for anyone, including Baby Kildare-Grant. It also ramped up my heartburn.

He got home and went straight to his bedroom. I didn't think much of it, but he was home later than usual for a practice. I started the brown rice since it would take forever to cook. He came out of the bedroom twenty minutes later, wearing a baggy hoodie and with a weird look in his eyes. I frowned. Something was wrong.

"Thanks for dinner. What are you making?" he asked as politely as possible.

"Your usual. I need to eat light too. Heartburn."

He nodded absently, then grabbed plates and cutlery and set them down on the island. He wandered off to watch TV while the damn brown rice took forever to cook.

Half an hour later, we finally sat down to eat. Neither of us said much, and I hated the tension. I thought to ask him about yesterday's game or what he planned to do for his week off, but nothing seemed right. Finally, he pushed his plate away.

"I can't do this anymore."

I startled. "Do what?"

"Do whatever we're doing. I know you told me to take time to think, but I'm done thinking. I've been done thinking since last July." He got up and pushed his chair away. Before I could comprehend what was happening, he was on one knee and pulling out a black velvet box from his hoodie.

"I love you, Tangi Kildare. I've loved you since I was eighteen. I don't

want to spend the rest of my life with anyone but you. Will you marry me?"

I dropped my fork. "What are you doing?"

His eyes bugged out at my reaction. I should have been more thoughtful, but this had come out of nowhere. "This is what you want. This is what you've always wanted. I was too stupid not to give it to you, and I nearly lost you once. I won't lose you again."

I panicked. Not once had I concocted this scenario in my head. "Ethan, I ..." I froze. Then I spoke before I thought about it. "I'm not sure."

He blinked a few times, and I wanted to kick myself.

"You're not sure?"

I covered my face with my hands. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. It's just ... unexpected. Can I think about it?"

His mouth hung open in shock. A few seconds passed before he regained his composure. "Oh, okay. I guess I'm a little stunned right now. I thought you wanted to get married. I thought that was what was keeping us apart."

I put my hands over his. "I want you to want it too."

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't." His voice now had a sharp edge to it. This was going to go south very quickly if I didn't back off.

"Just give me a few days to think about what I want. Okay?"

He didn't say anything else. He took his half full plate to the sink and left the kitchen. He retreated to his room and didn't come out again that night. Why did I feel like I'd screwed up spectacularly?

Chapter Forty-Three

Tangi

I sat in my office Monday morning and brooded. I had a rare hour off as all the injured players were in a team meeting. The Ravens were on a bit of a skid, having lost six of their last seven games, and Coach Fontaine was giving them a lecture. Jim managed to avoid the team meeting and wandered into our office with a coffee and a muffin.

“You look unhappy,” Jim said without much emotion.

“I’m tired. And frustrated.”

“With which guy?”

“Ethan.”

“You’re taking on Kodiaks now?”

“You meant work life, and I meant my private life.”

“I see,” he said, sitting down and pulling the head off his blueberry muffin. “Who are the two guys?”

Like I’d tell Jim. The whole city of Vancouver would know by the end of the day, but I had brought it up. Not a smart move on my part. “You don’t have a great history of keeping secrets.”

He nodded. “That’s because people don’t specifically ask me to keep a secret. If you ask me to keep a secret, it will be a secret. You have no idea what I’ve got stored up here,” he said, pointing to his head.

“All right,” I said, playing along. “I would like you to keep this a secret.”

“Done.”

We’d see about that. I just wouldn’t give him any names and see if he still spilled his guts. “I’m torn between the guy I’ve loved all my life and whether I should move on to someone else.”

“Grant and Warde. Go on.”

I gasped. “I didn’t say it was them.”

“Fine, let’s pretend it’s them. It gives me a visual.”

He was such a shit, but over the last few months he’d grown on me. But I couldn’t tell if he was lying or not, so I went with it. “The first guy, Ethan, since you need a visual, has been through a lot. He was recently dumped by his fiancée and even though he says he loves me, I’m not sure he’s ready and able to love me. My concern is that he’s giving me lip service.”

“I met Brandi once. The Ravens and Kodiaks were doing a charity golf tournament. She ignored me. He’s better off without her.”

I gave Jim the sternest of looks, but he didn’t seem to notice. “The other guy, Warde, again, a visual for you, is sweet to me, kind, and doesn’t appear to have any baggage. But I have to wonder if he’s ready for a girlfriend with a kid.”

“Probably not, although he’s good with kids. Always the first to volunteer in any event to do with kids.”

“Do you see my dilemma?”

“Actually, no.”

I leaned in closer to him as he sipped his coffee. “No?”

“It seems crystal clear to me.”

But he didn’t elaborate, so I motioned with my hand so he’d continue.

“Grant is the father of your kid?”

“Maybe. Yes, for the sake of this conversation,” I quickly added. “But I don’t want to get back together with him just because he’s the father of my baby. He did ask me to marry him, but did he do that because he wanted to do, or because he feels obligated to?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Jim said, popping some muffin into his mouth.

“But you’re not saying anything at all!” For a guy who aired everyone’s dirty laundry, he was being a little cagey right now.

He swallowed his mouthful and sighed heavily. “You could have gotten a job anywhere, but you came here because he’s here. He could have said nothing about the job, but not only did he tell you about it, he put in a good

word for you. You have to ask yourself, would a guy who was engaged to someone he didn't want to marry really rush into another marriage proposal with someone else he didn't want to marry?"

"Does everyone know I was the Ravens third choice?"

"It wasn't a secret, so I don't know, but you still got the job. Furthermore, you're living with the guy."

"I didn't tell you that."

"Warde did."

I rolled my eyes. "Guess he didn't tell you to keep that a secret."

"Oh, he did, but I figured since I'm trying to make a point, I can tell that secret because you already know it. The two of you have been living together, I presume you've been going out with Brandon, or whatever you're doing with him, and you're still living with Grant. That tells me you're where you want to be."

"But his baggage."

"Brandi isn't baggage. She was barely carry-on luggage. Thank god you got pregnant and she kicked Grant to the curb. He probably would have married her otherwise and been miserable for the rest of his life."

"And Brandon?"

"Like I said, good guy, not right for you. He needs someone who will kick his ass, and I know you can, but you've got a baby that's your priority. You two will never work, but that's just my observation."

I was mesmerized by this conversation. "How did you come up with all this?"

"I was an Ethan Grant once, except I didn't get my ex pregnant. And every day I think of how lucky I am that my wife picked me and not that idiot coworker of hers. He was totally a Warde and completely wrong for her. We've had twenty happy years so far."

I thought about my conversation with Jim all afternoon, and I knew what I had to do. I drove home with a purpose, and of course traffic was the worst

I'd ever seen. The first thing I did when I got home was pee because that was all I ever seemed to do. Then I ran to Ethan's room and stopped mid-stride. He was packing.

"What are you doing?"

"I figured you wanted to make this into a nursery, so I'm going to stay with Ryan until the end of the month, then find a place to stay for the rest of the season. He broke up with Amanda, so he'll enjoy the company. If you still need me to help with the nursery, I can do that."

"No, no, no."

He looked at me with exasperation. "Fine, I won't help."

"That's not what I meant. Sorry. I came home with a speech planned that I hadn't even thought through, and then I had to pee because I pee every hour, and now I've messed this up, so I'm going to start over."

Now he was completely baffled.

I rubbed my forehead and tried to formulate a coherent thought, and it wasn't working, so I started talking and hoped I'd make some sense.

"I had an amazing talk with Jim today. Apparently, he can keep a secret, but who really knows. He seemed to have me all figured out, better than I have myself figured out. In fact, he has you figured out too, and I'm not even sure you know him all that well."

Ethan sat on the bed, probably trying to work out where the hell I was going with all this.

"Okay, what if I get straight to the point. I want to be happy twenty years from now, and the only way that happens is if it's with you."

"What?"

"I thought that Brandi had you all screwed up, but I don't think so. I think I had you all screwed up, just like you had me all screwed up. I don't always think things happen for a reason, but maybe this baby did. Maybe that's what was needed to bring us together, and maybe your dad had a hand in it too. The point is, I want to be with you, raising our baby together. Coming home

to you, going to bed with you, and waking up with you. That's if you still want me."

He got up and nearly ran for me, swinging me through the air. He kissed me and I held on to him for dear life.

"I love you, Tangi. I never stopped. I should have never stopped fighting for you," he said, showering my face with kisses.

I started to cry and he wiped away the tears. "Let's forget all that and move forward."

"Wait," he said, setting me down. He ran over to his duffel bag and pulled out the box. "Let's try this again." He got down on one knee. "Tangi Kildare, will you marry me?"

"Hell yes!"

Epilogue

Ethan

“Why does Madeleine have Leah’s middle name and not mine?” Ava asked.

“Take that up with Tangi. She’ll explain.”

My sister marched off toward Tangi while I cradled Maddy in my arms. Our little Madeleine Kildare-Grant. She was barely three months old, but thankfully she looked like her mom and had her eyes too. We’d only been home about a week, but it had been chaos. Leah and Ava were throwing a baby shower, while Mom and Tangi’s mom were planning a wedding for next summer.

Tang and I were looking for a house here and one in Vancouver, although she said she was going to miss the view. Maybe we’d put that on hold in Vancouver. But she definitely wanted a house and yard in Minneapolis, a place for Maddy to play.

“I’m so glad this worked out,” Craig said, gently patting me on the back so as not to wake a sleeping Maddy.

“I can’t take credit. I’ve got to thank Jim. Maybe I’ll ask him to be my best man,” I said with an arched brow.

“Then we’d stop being friends.”

Mom came over to steal Maddy, and I was sure the baby would cry, but she only fussed for a second before settling in Mom’s arms.

“She’s going to want to eat soon, but she’ll let you know,” I said as Mom showed off her new granddaughter.

Maddy was a good little screamer when she wanted Tangi’s boob.

Craig got into a conversation with Matt, and that was when I spotted Leah alone. I hadn’t been able to talk to her since coming home, and now was a good time to corner her. She saw me coming and I thought she’d make a run

for it, but she frowned instead.

“Hey,” I said.

“You may have made a super-cute baby with my sister, but I’m still pissed at you.”

“I’m sorry I messed up. I wasted four years paying for it, but I found my way back.”

“You’re so lucky she didn’t meet an amazing guy. Unfortunately, she kept finding losers.”

I didn’t even want to think about all the guys Tangi dated. I still wanted to kill Warde, but at least he and I had come to an understanding. We’d be teammates, but we’d never be friends.

“What do I have to do to make it up to you? You already got to pick our daughter’s middle name.”

“I don’t know, but when I figure it out, I’ll tell you.”

I put my arm around her, pulling her in for a hug. “Can we be friends again? Because I missed you. And you’re going to be my sister-in-law next summer. We’ll be family. You can’t hate your family.”

“You can, but I guess since you *will* be my brother-in-law, I can forgive you.”

Just then I saw Tangi with my aunts. Poor thing couldn’t get away from either one of them, so I went to save her. I told my aunts that Tangi had to feed the baby even though we had at least another hour for that.

“Were they talking your ear off?”

“They’re sweet. It’s fine.”

“We can get out of here if you want.”

“Your mom arranged this coming home party, and you want to duck out early?”

I didn’t even have to think about it. “Yeah, I do.”

“Give me a minute. I have to talk to Jill. Turns out Richardson’s is pulling out of Canada, and she’s out of a job. I’m devastated for her. I said

we'd hang out tomorrow to commiserate. Wolseley is coming too."

"Tell her I'm sorry to hear that. What did she do there?"

"PR. They sent her to the Canadian division to prop up the expansion team even though they knew the whole thing was imploding."

"Interesting. The Kodiaks are hiring someone in public relations." I might still be scared of Jill, but I knew how much having her friend spending time in Vancouver had meant to Tangi.

"Hmm, I'll have to tell her about that. You're like the Kodiaks classified. Anyway, be back in a bit."

She kissed me on the cheek, and I couldn't help but smile. This was how life was supposed to turn out. There may have been some speed bumps and razor-wire fences along the way, but I was in a good place with the woman I loved, and I was never looking back.

The End

If you enjoyed this book and want to read a bonus chapter about Tangi and Ethan, check it out on [Ream](#). It's free to read if you follow me there. Following doesn't cost you a thing.

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About the Author

Anna was born and raised in Canada. She's a prairie girl who loves the city.

From new adult to chick lit and everything in between, Anna writes contemporary romance and women's fiction that makes people laugh and love.

When Anna isn't writing her latest book, she's enjoying a cup of tea while attempting to create a culinary masterpiece.

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