



**fooling  
the  
forward**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JACOB  
CHANCE

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This book contains mature content.

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# CHAPTER 1



# RYDER

RACING FORWARD, I skate toward the middle of the ice, trying to create as many options as possible for my teammates. With two defenders on me, I slide the puck to Darius on my left side and he sends it off running around the end of the rink. Kaiden gains possession on the other side of the ice while I scramble forward, finding an open lane. He deftly passes the puck to me and I fire it off without hesitation. Time slows down to a crawl as I watch for the red light to go off above the net. When it does, I'm so stunned it takes me a moment to react. The crowd goes wild, cheering as if their lives are dependent on how loud they're shouting.

I throw my arm up in the air just before Darius thumps me on the back. Kaiden, our captain, joins us. "Fellas, let's finish this out before we get carried away celebrating" he says, reminding us we're not done yet.

As the clock ticks away at the final two minutes of the game, we stay on task, holding our opponents off from scoring any more goals. Emotion wells up in my chest. This season has been the best of my career. Everything has clicked for us as if it was meant to be. Especially after the crushing feeling of defeat we experienced last year when we got knocked out in the second round of the playoffs. The memory of that loss has been the driving force fueling us through this championship series.

I watch as the clock counts down, five, four, three, two, one, zero. *The Cup is ours!*

Every member of the Coyotes team races onto the ice. We all fall together in a jumble, tears rolling unheeded down our

cheeks as we celebrate being world champions.

*It's the best feeling ever. Nothing compares.*

By the time we get back inside the locker room, the champagne is being passed out. Murphy, our goalie, grabs a bottle and pops the cork. With his thumb over the opening, he shakes it vigorously, then lets the spray fly in every direction, hitting as many of us as he can.

Licking the champagne from my lips, I drop my helmet and gloves onto the bench. I drag my sweat-soaked jersey over my head and remove my shoulder pads before peeling off the long-sleeve compression shirt.

I sink to the bench with a relieved sigh. Now that the game is over, every part of my body is sore. Murphy falls onto the wooden surface next to me, beaming.

“Dude, we fucking won.”

My lips part in a wide smile. “We sure did. 'Bout time too.”

Kaiden sits on the other side of me, shaking his head as if he can't believe the outcome. “This is so surreal.”

I give him a quick pat on his shoulder. “It's real, Cap. We're the motherfucking champs.”

“Damn right,” Darius says, stopping in front of us. “I don't know about you guys, but I'm ready to celebrate.”

---

Brain Fog Pub is packed with Coyotes fans who cheer when we walk in. A slew of high fives are doled out as we wind through the crowd toward the long table in the back that's reserved for us. It used to be a smaller table, but now that my teammates all have significant others, the size has increased.

I take one of the end chairs and get comfortable. Murphy lowers onto the seat to my right and says, “Dude, I'm starving. It feels like I haven't eaten in days.”



“I hear ya. I’m ready to order every appetizer they have.” My stomach grumbles as if to say *better make that double*.

“You guys were amazing tonight,” Wendy says.

“Thanks.” I clasp Murphy’s shoulder, giving it a quick squeeze. “But we know our man over here is the star of the night.” I watch Wendy and Murphy make fuck-me eyes at each other.

“Thanks, but it was a team effort,” Murphy replies, never looking away from his woman.

Honestly, these two always seem like they’re on the verge of tearing each other’s clothes off at any second. The vibes they give off can make it feel as though you’re intruding on a private moment even when you’re out in public. It’s disconcerting. It hasn’t been easy for me to get used to my wingman being out of the game. But after an entire season of Murphy being off the market, I’ve had to.

I glance around the table at my other teammates paired up, and shift uncomfortably on the hard seat. I’m the lone wolf, the last man standing, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.

The waitress, Nikki, comes over and takes our order, even though she knows we always get the same things after home games.

Once she walks away, Kaiden leans forward, his blue gaze singling each of us out. “I just want to say, you guys made me so fucking proud this season. You always have, but the way we fought to the end and came out with the Cup, is something I’ll never forget.”

“Aww, Cap, are you going soft on us?” I tease, to lighten the emotion of the moment. I’m pretty sure if he continues on with the compliments we’ll all break down and cry.

Kaiden’s lips curve. “I’m not going soft, per se, but I don’t know what the future will bring. Since we’re all here together, I wanted to tell you how much I’ve enjoyed this season.”

“You’ll enjoy the next one even more, Cap,” Murphy says, but we’re all silently wondering if this was Kaiden’s last

season.

“Is this a celebration or what?” Wendy asks, looking around the table. “You guys are extremely reserved for a team that just won the Cup.”

“They’re on their best behavior because we’re here,” Evie offers in explanation.

“Yeah, normally Ryder would be *riding her good* by now,” Murphy says, pointing at Cate, a regular here, who I’ve messed around with in the past. Everyone at the table other than me laughs.

I don’t react beyond giving a careless shrug. Little do they know it’s been months since my dick’s been touched by anyone besides me, and I’m not exactly sure why. It’s not like I set some goal to not have sex for a certain amount of time, and I’ve certainly had opportunities.

“Don’t be mad, bro. You were destined to be a hockey legend with a name like Ryder Goode,” Murphy says, leaning his elbows on the table.

Nikki drops off our drinks and I eagerly reach for my beer. Raising the bottle to my lips, I swallow down a large gulp of the brew. “Damn, that’s good.”

“There’s nothing like an ice-cold beer when you’re thirsty,” Murphy says, tapping the neck of his bottle to mine.

“Yeah, or when you’re world champs,” Darius adds.

“Hell yeah,” Kaiden agrees.

“So, Evie, is your dad going to retire now that they won the Cup?” Wendy asks.

My ears perk up at the question. Coach Carling has been with the Coyotes organization for at least twenty-five years. Now that the team has won another championship, it’s possible he might want to go out on the highest note.

“What makes you think he’d tell me?” Evie asks. “He may be my dad, but we don’t discuss hockey—ever.”

“You guys play for him, what do you think?” Wendy asks.

Murphy scratches his chin. “I figure there’s a fifty-fifty chance he’ll retire.”

Darius crosses his arms. “I hope he doesn’t, but I think there’s a high probability he will.” He glances at Kaiden. “Do you have any insider information on this, Cap?”

Kaiden shakes his head. “I really don’t, but I agree it’s likely he will.”

“He’s going to do whatever he thinks is right for him, so maybe you guys should focus on your victory and savor the feeling,” Rori suggests.

Kaiden wraps his arm around her shoulders and presses a kiss to her temple. “My girl’s right. This is a time for celebrating.”

Nikki delivers our food, and all conversations cease as we make short work of devouring everything. I’m mid-chew when Cate shows up and tries to sit in my lap. I hold my hand up to block her and she gives me a questioning look.

“I’m celebrating with my friends,” I say.

She pouts her full lips and leans forward, placing her cleavage at my eye level. “We’re friends too.”

Her obvious flirtation annoys me, and I’m questioning why I ever hooked up with her before.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but this is a private party.”

Her flirtatious manner flips to one of anger as she straightens up to her full height. “Fuck off, Ryder,” she says before stomping away.

Murphy lets out a quick laugh. “Well, that went well.”

“You could’ve pulled up a chair for her,” Wendy says. “We wouldn’t mind.”

Murphy taps Wendy on the nose. “Sparky, if we added a chair for every one of his *Goode Girls*, we’d need to add some more tables.”

“More like we’d need every seat in the bar,” Darius jumps in.

“Come on. I’m not that bad,” I defend myself. I know I’ve had my share of no-strings sex, but I’m not as horrible as they’re making it seem.

Darius clears his throat loudly and deliberately. “I hate to interrupt, especially when Ryder is in the hot seat, but I’d like to propose a toast.” He raises his beer, holding it toward the middle of the table. “Here’s to teamwork and being world champions.” There’s a clinking of glass as we all come together.

“To teamwork and being world champions,” I echo before taking a sip.

“I have a toast too,” Evie announces, raising her glass. “To hockey season being over.” She grins as our drinks meet in the middle.

“Now that’s an awesome toast,” Rori says.

“Hell yes,” Wendy agrees. “I love watching you guys play, but hockey season is long as fuck. I’m looking forward to some quiet time with my man.”

“What are you planning to do with me?” Murphy asks, wiggling his eyebrows lecherously.

“All right, we don’t need details,” Evie cuts in before her best friend can elaborate. “We’re all glad our guys will have a break.”

“I can’t wait to relax on the beach with you,” Rori tells Kaiden.

He leans over, pressing a brief kiss to her lips. “Me too.”

The conversation continues around me as I sip my beer. They’re all looking forward to the offseason so they can spend time together. This will be the first summer with all my friends in serious relationships, and I’m not sure what that’s going to look like for me. As happy as I am for them, I can’t help but mourn the good old days.

*Change sucks.*

# CHAPTER 2



# CALISTA

“HI, MOM,” I say, squeezing her tightly. “It’s nice to be home.”

When we part she cups my face. “Thank you, gliko mou. I love when you visit us.”

I smile. I’m thirty-one years old and she still calls me sweet girl. “Where’s Dad?”

She waves her hand toward the windows. “He’s out back with everyone.”

“The boys are already here?” I ask, referring to my younger brothers.

“They are.”

I’m sure my face shows my surprise. “Wow, that’s a first. I never thought I’d see the day they’d be on time.”

“Well, Darius has Evie to keep him on schedule, and Christos and Orion could smell the food for miles,” she explains.

“Yeah, no doubt.” My stomach rumbles loudly, reminding me I haven’t eaten yet.

“Are you hungry, gliko mou?” she asks.

“Yeah, with the catering job I had today, I didn’t have a chance to eat.”

“Let’s get everything set up outside on the table,” she suggests.

“I’ve got this.” I march over to the open sliding glass door. “Boys, get your asses in here and help out.”

Evie is the first to hurry over. Her lips curve as she slides the screen open. “I didn’t know you were here.” Once she’s inside, she gives me a quick hug.

“How have you been?” I ask.

“Great, thanks. And you?”

“Working hard, but I’m not complaining. It beats being unemployed.”

“Right? Or working a job you don’t like.”

“Exactly,” I reply, nodding. “How’s Tillie?” I inquire about her daughter.

She beams. “She’s wonderful. She’s with her dad today.”

My brothers finally filter inside one by one, hugging me hard enough to make me wince. The three of them are tall and heavily muscled. I’m five feet eight and they tower over me.

“Get this food to the table on the deck as quickly as possible,” I order. *Being the oldest has its perks.*

Surprisingly, they do as I say with little to no grumbling. I’m sure it has to do with the fact that my mom is an excellent cook and they want to eat as soon as possible. I carry out plates, plasticware, and napkins and set them on the side table. While everyone lines up to dish out their food buffet style, I find my dad and give him a hug.

“How’s my girl?” he asks.

I smile. “I’m well. How are you doing, Dad?”

“I’m wonderful now that all my kids are here.”

As soon as everyone is seated at the table, my dad clears his throat loud enough to gain our attention. “I’d like to say a few words, so bear with me. Congratulations to Darius, not only for winning the Cup, but for all the hours of practice and training you’ve put in over the years that brought you to this point.”

“Thanks, Dad. But it takes an entire team, not just me.”

“Regardless, we’re all so proud of you.”

“I’m not,” Orion deadpans, lightening the moment. “Can we eat now?”

“Yes, you may,” Dad says, picking up his fork.

We dig into the pastitsio and horiatiki as if we haven’t eaten in days. My brothers scarf it down at an alarmingly fast pace. It’s a shame they’re barely taking the time to chew, never mind appreciate it, but this is what happens whenever we all get together in our childhood home.

“Mom, this is delicious,” I say.

“Thank you.”

“It really is,” Evie adds.

The guys grunt their agreement like a bunch of neanderthals. I roll my eyes in my mom’s direction and she smiles back at me.

“I’m going to need to learn how to make all these Greek dishes,” Evie says.

“No you don’t,” Christos jumps in. “Darius is the baby of the family and *Mommy* will make him anything he wants. Right, Mom?”

“He is the baby, and I will make him whatever he wants, just like I will for any of you.” Her answer may be politically correct but we all know Darius is her favorite. The fact that he’s a hockey superstar could also play into why us siblings all feel he’s her pet. How do our average jobs compare to his astounding achievements?

“Mom, did you find a dress for Darius and Evie’s wedding?” I ask.

“I did. Remind me to show you later.”

“I want to see it too,” Evie says.

“Of course.” My mom smiles at her.



“Who cares about the wedding? Everyone knows the bachelor party is the real event,” Orion chimes in.

“Pfft.” I release a puff of air. “When are you going to stop making these ridiculous blanket statements? Just because you feel a certain way doesn’t mean everyone else shares your views.”

“Anyone with a brain does,” he retorts, making me lose a little more hope for the male species.

“I have a brain and I don’t agree,” Evie states.

“Maybe it’s a guy thing,” he backpedals.

“No, maybe it’s a *you* thing,” Darius corrects.

Orion points his fork at him. “Of course you’d say that. You’re getting married.”

I laugh. “Well, what do you know? I guess not all guys share your viewpoint.”

“I certainly don’t,” my dad says. “I didn’t even have a bachelor party.”

“That’s because they didn’t have them back then,” Orion says, and we all laugh.

“Calista, how’s your business doing?” Darius asks, changing the subject.

After working for a marketing firm since I graduated from college, last summer I decided it was time to do something with my love of cooking. I dipped into my savings and started my own personal chef/catering business.

“I have a few clients who purchase weekly meals from me and I’ve been catering a lot of parties,” I say.

“That’s great. It’s too bad Ryder never cashed in on his weekend with you as his personal chef,” Darius says, referring to the auction prize I donated that his teammate placed the winning bid on.

My heartbeat trips at the mention of his name. Ryder Goode has been my celebrity crush since he began playing for the Coyotes. Unfortunately, my entire family is aware of this.

Darius even gifted me with a Coyotes hoodie with Ryder's last name on the back.

"That's okay. The money went to charity and that's what matters," I say.

Christos chuckles.

"What?" I ask.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Ryder will be calling you any day, sis," he says, sarcasm dripping from each word.

I roll my eyes. "I'm sure." It's not like I expected Ryder to follow through. However, if I'm honest with myself, I was hoping he would. But at the same time, part of me was dreading the call because it would mean being in his company for a weekend. I'm not sure I'd be able to get my brain to function if he was within twenty feet of me, never mind prepare his food.

"Oh, for sure," Orion nods. "Their season ended a week ago. He'll be dialing your number in no time."

"Ha ha," I say, narrowing my eyes at him.

"What?" Orion holds his palms up. "I'm being serious."

"Hmm." I know he's not. Christos and Orion like to make me the butt of their jokes.

"I can remind Ryder, if you want," Darius offers.

I shake my head emphatically. "No, please don't." That would be all kinds of embarrassing for me.

"Good. I don't want you within fifty feet of him," he says.

"Why's that?" Mom asks.

He gestures at me. "Cause she's my sister and he's a guy."

My mom smiles. "Agóri mou, you can't protect your sister from every man."

Darius shrugs. "Maybe not, but I can keep her away from the ones who are players. And I don't mean hockey, Mom."

While I appreciate his good intentions, I'm also perturbed by them. I'm thirty-one years old for God's sake. I'm not some

innocent wallflower he needs to protect.

“In case you’ve forgotten, or maybe you choose to ignore it, I’m a grown-ass woman who’s been taking care of herself just fine. I don’t need my *youngest* brother to shelter me from the big, bad men of the world.”

“Tough shit. You’re getting it anyway,” he states, but the smile that follows belies his harsh tone.

“Lucky me,” I grumble, looking back and forth between my parents. “Why couldn’t you two have given me sisters?”

“Gliko mou, you’ll have to trust me when I say sisters come with their own set of problems,” my mom says. I’ll take her at her word since she knows from experience.

*But brothers aren’t exactly a picnic.*

“You could’ve made me an only child.” I smirk.

“Hey, then I wouldn’t be marrying the man I love in two weeks,” Evie points out.

I tip my head toward her. “That’s fair. I meant to ask you if Tillie is excited to be the flower girl.”

Evie’s lips curve. “She can’t wait. We bought her dress last week and every day since she’s asked if she could try it on again. By the time the wedding happens, it’ll probably be covered with stains.”

“Regardless, she’ll be adorable.”

“Thank you. She’s more excited about her friend, Three, being the ring bearer than she is about the wedding itself.”

“Three? That’s his name?” I ask.

Smiling, she shakes her head. “It’s actually Levi, but he’s a third generation, so they call him Three.”

“That’s adorable,” I say.

“His dad is Levi Mason, a running back for the Charleston Pirates,” Darius explains, knowing I don’t follow any sport besides hockey.

“Well, look at you, brother, name dropping and hobnobbing with the rich and famous,” I tease.

“Why wouldn’t he? He’s one of them,” Christos says.

Darius rakes a hand through his hair. “Can we not talk about me like I’m not here? You know I’d play hockey no matter what the salary is. Money hasn’t changed who I am.”

“That’s because you’ve had us to keep you grounded,” I say, winking.

“Is it time for dessert?” Orion cuts in.

Evie’s expression is one of disbelief. “We just finished dinner.”

Orion’s grin is quick. “You should know me by now, sis-to-be. My stomach is a bottomless pit.”

“So is your brain,” Christos adds, smacking him upside the head.

Orion raises his hand to retaliate, but my dad puts an end to it by saying, “Don’t even.”

“He started it,” Orion justifies.

“And I’m ending it. Now, please help your mother clear the table before we have dessert.” Rising to his feet, my dad loads his arms with plates and carries them inside. We all follow suit, and in a matter of minutes there’s a round cake set in the middle of the table. The words CONGRATULATIONS DARIUS are written in a red scrolling font and the Coyotes logo is situated underneath.

“How pretty. Calista, is this your work?” Evie asks.

I nod. “It is.”

“Thank you, sis,” Darius says. “I bet you put a lot of time into making this.”

“It wasn’t so bad. The logo was the hardest part.”

Orion rubs his stomach. “A lot of work or not, I can’t wait for this cake to get inside my belly.”

My mom adds slices to plates and I pass them out. I deliberately make Orion wait the longest for his.

“You’re mean,” he says, snatching the plate from me, and I snicker.

Grabbing a piece for myself, I return to my chair and take a quick glance around the table to make sure everyone is enjoying the cake. Nothing makes me feel better than knowing someone is enjoying food I created.

“This is amazing,” Evie says as if she read my mind. “I’m so glad you’re handling the cake for the rehearsal dinner.”

“Thank you for asking me. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Of course we asked you. I only wish we could’ve had you do the rehearsal dinner and the wedding reception too, but the hotel has their own caterer.”

“Most wedding facilities do. But, honestly, I’m not equipped to handle something as large as a wedding. At least not yet.” And I don’t know if I ever will be. Having employees would mean I’d have to be making a substantial amount of money in order to pay them. I’d like to get to that point, but it might take some time.

“Darius, are you getting cold feet yet?” Orion asks with a mischievous smirk hooking one side of his mouth.

“Not even a little bit. If I didn’t know Evie was the one for me, I wouldn’t have asked her to marry me.”

“We’ll see how you feel the night before,” Orion continues.

“I already know I’ll be excited to marry the woman I love.” He wraps his arm around Evie’s shoulders.

“Is there anything that still needs to be done?” my mom asks.

Evie shakes her head. “No, everything’s taken care of at this point, but thank you for asking.”

“You’re going to be a beautiful bride,” my mom adds.

Darius pulls Evie closer. “She sure is.”

I love seeing my brother so happy, and Evie is everything I could hope for in a sister-in-law. They're so comfortably in love with each other. There's an ease to their relationship I admire and even envy. Sometimes I wish I had a man to lean on, but then I remind myself I can handle whatever life throws at me. Men only complicate things.

# CHAPTER 3



# CALISTA

HUMMING ALONG to the soft music playing, I press the rolling pin downward as I move forward and backward over the pie crust. I've been baking all morning and it looks like a hurricane blew through my kitchen. The counters are wearing a bit of every dessert I've made.

The shrill ringtone on my cell phone halts my rolling.

"Shit." I dust my hands off on my apron and look at the screen. I don't recognize the number, so hopefully it's a new client. "Hello," I answer.

"Hi, I'm looking for Calista," a deep voice intones.

"This is she."

"This is Ryder Goode. I won an auction—"

"Yeah, sure. Ha ha, very funny. Which one of my asshole brothers put you up to this?"

"Uh... I really am Ryder Goode," he replies, keeping up the charade.

"And I'm J-Lo. Piss off, loser." I hang up and set the phone on the counter, shaking my head. I'm going to strangle Christos and Orion when I see them. This has their names all over it. Especially when last night they were telling me he was going to call. This is low, even for them. In my mind, I start composing a list of possible retribution methods. I'm only at option two when the FaceTime ringer goes off. I snatch my phone from the counter and peer at the screen. It's the same number as before. Now, I'm confused as to why they'd FaceTime me. Obviously I'm going to see them.



Unless my brothers are there and they want to rub in how they duped me. Yep. *Those fuckers*. I might as well get this over with.

Raising the phone up in front of me, I accept the call. “You dickheads,” I say before I see a pair of brown eyes go wide and black eyebrows raise.

“Uh, I can call back if this is a bad time,” he says.

*Oh my fucking God, it really is Ryder Goode. Bury me now because I’m too embarrassed to go on living.*

My head falls forward until my chin touches my chest and then it snaps up again when I remember he can see me. My eyes lock with his and widen, and my eyebrows fly so high I’m sure they’ve disappeared into my hairline. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I thought you were my brothers pranking me.”

“No worries. I’m just glad you weren’t really calling me a dickhead.” He smiles, and my knees turn to rubber. Leaning forward on the counter, I brace my elbows on the granite and hold my phone in one hand. “Can we please start over?” I ask.

“Sure.” He shifts his position and I notice he’s outside.

“It’s great to meet you, Ryder.”

“And you, Calista.” My name sounds like a dirty promise coming from his masculine lips.

I sweep a dangling strand of brown hair away from my eyes. “I assume you’re calling about the auction prize you won.”

“Yes, I am. But I realize it might take some time before you can fit me into your schedule.”

“I actually had a last-minute cancellation for this weekend,” I say, lying. In reality, I purposely kept the two days open so I could have a little staycation and hang out with a couple of my friends. But now, that’ll have to wait. Cooking for a high-profile client like Ryder is an unbelievable opportunity that could bring more business my way. “Does that work for you?”

He smiles. “Absolutely. What time should I expect you?”

“That depends on what your schedule looks like. I’m going to text you a link for a questionnaire. If you could fill it out as soon as possible that would be helpful. Once I read through your answers, I’ll text to let you know what time I’ll arrive and what meals I’ll be preparing. That way if you’d like to make any changes to the menu, you can.”

“Don’t worry about letting me know what you’re making. I’ll eat anything. Oh man, I can’t wait. I’m sick of take out.” He grins, showing off perfect teeth, and I find myself smiling back at him.

“So, you don’t do a lot of cooking?”

“Not if I can help it. I know how to make the basics, but it’s not something I enjoy doing. Especially during the hockey season.”

“That’s understandable.”

“I know you’re busy, so I won’t keep you any longer,” he says.

“As soon as we’re done, I’m going to send you the questionnaire. Is this the number I should use?”

“Yep.”

“Okay. It was great talking with you. I appreciate how forgiving you were when I yelled insults at you.”

He laughs. “No problem. Besides, I’ve been called worse.”

“Well, you were very nice about it all. I look forward to meeting you in person.”

“Me too, Calista.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“Bye.” His brown eyes lock with mine and then the screen goes dark.

Setting my phone down, I cross my arms on the counter and lie my head down on top of them, groaning. “Just kill me now, God.” Never in my life have I been so humiliated by something I’ve done. I lift my head and send Ryder the form

link. “Oh well.” I push off the counter. “It’s not the end of the world.”

I make my way to the bathroom, and when I flip on the light, I get a good look at my appearance. “Fuck me.” Shaking my head, I stare at my disheveled reflection. My long, brown locks are in a haphazard knot on top of my head with loose strands hanging around my makeup-free face. There’s a smudge of flour on one of my cheeks and a streak of smeared chocolate on the other. And if that’s not enough, I’m wearing a tank top that says *Whisk Taker* across my chest.

*I’m dead.*

He must think I’m a hot mess. No, make that a crazy hot mess.

*How will I ever face him?*

---

My stomach dips and whirls like I’m on an amusement park ride instead of driving my mini van along South Carolina Highway 162. I’m a nervous wreck, and no amount of deep breathing can calm me down. Not even the fact that I’m well prepared seems to make a difference.

Before I left my home, I triple checked my list to make sure I have everything I need, but the irrational side of me is convinced I forgot something.

In the days since Ryder and I spoke, I’ve been busy with my regular clients and making sure I have all the supplies necessary for this weekend. I wasted an embarrassing amount of time trying to choose between chef coats. I finally settled on a navy blue chambray short-sleeve one. The mesh side panels help to keep me cooler, which I’m sure to need being in his company.

My GPS tells me to take the next right, that I’ve arrived at my destination, but there’s no house in sight. Continuing along the driveway, I take in the beautiful land flanking either side of

the road. The endless green fields with small groves of trees interspersed throughout remind me of a time gone by.

I'm convinced the GPS made an error and I'm in the wrong place. I can't imagine Ryder Goode, hotshot hockey player and life of the party, lives so far removed from the city. I might only be thirty minutes from Charleston, but it feels like another world.

Up ahead I see a large red barn with fenced in paddocks on both sides. When I get closer, I notice they're both occupied with animals. Pressing on the brake, I slow down and check out the small cows in the first one and the handful of miniature ponies inside the other. *They're so cute.* I hope I get an opportunity to see them up close.

Once I'm ready to focus on the road in front of me, I move along toward the large gray farmhouse straight in front of me. I follow the driveway as it curves to the right around an island of flowers and greenery, then park behind the lone vehicle.

Before I get out, I check my hair and makeup in the visor mirror. I need to make up for the horrible first impression I made on him. With my hair slicked tightly back and knotted on top of my head, I look neat and professional.

I climb out and shove my phone into the pocket of my black chef pants. I'm not going to empty out the back until I make sure this is the correct address. A huge part of me is having trouble believing Ryder lives on a farm.

I climb the stairs to the wraparound porch and ring the bell before I can chicken out. My foot taps against the stone surface while I wait. It's only a few seconds before the dark blue door opens in front of me, revealing Ryder in living flesh. *Holy sexy guacamole.*

"Hi, I'm Calista." I hold out my hand, shocking myself at my ability to speak clearly.

He wraps his large, warm hand around mine and smiles. "Hi, Calista. I'm Ryder. It's nice to officially meet you."

I return his smile. "And you too."

He releases my hand and steps backward, welcoming me inside with a flourish of his arm.

I hold up one finger. “Before I come inside, I need to empty out my van.”

“Let me help you,” he says, moving toward me.

“There’s no need. I do this all the time.”

“Well, you’ll have some help today.”

What usually takes me three trips is accomplished with one. He carries the majority of the bags while I follow him to the kitchen. I try not to ogle his bulging biceps. *Try and fail.* But how can I resist when they’re literal arm porn? *Is arm porn a real thing?* If it isn’t, I bet Ryder could make it one.

He sets everything on the huge island in the middle of the room and I do the same.

“I hope you read the part on my form about cleaning out your refrigerator and pantry,” I say.

He nods. “I did.”

“That would make you an anomaly, right? Since most men don’t read instructions.” I smile.

“I’m great at following them.” He winks, and my pulse kicks into a frenetic rhythm.

“Good to know,” I say, but it comes out in a breathy tone that sounds like a bad Marilyn Monroe impression. And even worse, it sounds like I’m flirting—well, trying to flirt—but that’s never been a skill I’ve mastered. I clear my throat. “I’m going to unpack all this stuff before I make your breakfast.”

“That works. I’ll leave you to it.”

“I’m not trying to give you the boot from your own kitchen. I just want you to know my plan.”

He opens a cabinet, grabbing two mugs. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, please. That would be great. I didn’t have any this morning.”

He moves over to the Keurig, and I notice how wide his shoulders are compared to his hips. His black basketball shorts conform to the muscular contours of his ass. Seeing him this close up is more impressive than I imagined. *And I imagined plenty.*

“Me either. During the hockey season, I drink some as soon as I wake up. It helps to get me going. But when I’m not playing, I don’t need as much.”

“What do you eat for breakfast when you’re in the thick of the season?” I ask, removing items from the bags and setting them out on the island.

“I usually eat a banana and a protein bar. Sometimes, I’ll grab an egg sandwich at a drive thru.”

“What about lunch?” I ask.

He shrugs “It varies. Sometimes the Coyotes organization provides food and other times I’ll grab takeout.” He turns around with the two coffees in hand and he sets one down in front of me.

“Do you want cream or sugar?” he asks.

“No, thanks. I like it dark and strong enough to burn a hole in my gut.”

He smiles. “A woman after my own heart.”

*I’ll take any part I can get.*

I sip from my mug, enjoying the scent of the hot brew as much as the taste. My view’s not bad either.

“Back to what you normally eat. What about dinner?” I ask.

“It varies. Sometimes I’ll make a pot of spaghetti and meat sauce and that will last me a few nights. Most of the time, I end up eating takeout or frozen meals.”

He doesn’t eat like a professional athlete should. He needs more protein, and vegetables are sorely lacking from his diet.

“What?” he asks, noticing my furrowed brow.

“Nothing important.” I wave my hand dismissively. Who am I to tell a hockey god what he should be eating?

“You sure about that? You seemed deep in thought.”

Pausing the unpacking, I grip the edge of the counter with both hands. “I think this weekend of home cooking will be good for you. I’ll make you healthy meals, and if you want, I can teach you how to meal prep for the week. That way you’ll have everything ready to pop in the microwave when you come home from practice. What do you think?”

# CHAPTER 4





# RYDER

NOT ONLY IS *she beautiful but she looks like she belongs in my kitchen.*

“Well,” she prods, waiting for a reply.

“I agree, this weekend will be good for me.” *What could be bad about a stunning woman cooking for me?*

“So, no to the part about me teaching you to cook?”

“I’m not against learning how to prepare food, but I don’t enjoy cooking.”

“I’m not afraid of a challenge,” she says, her rosy lips curving. She carries an armload of items and places them in the fridge.

“Let me help you with this stuff,” I say, picking up some dry goods. “I cleared a shelf in the pantry for you.” Opening the door, I set the items down on the long shelf.

“Thank you. That’s perfect. I’ll know just where to find everything.” She continues putting produce in the fridge while I clear the island of everything else.

She takes a sip of coffee before she bends down, searching through the cabinet beneath the stove. She sets a frying pan on the burner and grabs a sharp knife from the block on the counter. “Do you have a cutting board?”

“Yeah, it’s right here.” I pull a rectangular piece of wood from one of the lower cabinets and set it down in front of her.

“Thank you.”

Grabbing my mug of coffee, I head around the other side of the island and sit on one of the leather stools. “What are you making me for breakfast?” I ask.

“A vegetable and cheese omelet.” She dashes around the kitchen from the fridge to the sink and back to the island to chop up a plethora of mushrooms, peppers, and onions.

“No bacon?” I ask.

Her amused gaze raises from the cutting board to connect with my disappointed one. “No bacon today. Just trust me. I promise you’re going to love everything I make for you.”

“Okay,” I agree.

I watch her add the pile of vegetables to the pan along with some olive oil before she cracks three eggs into a bowl. She removes cooking utensils from a black canvas bag and lays them out on the island. Plucking one from their midst, she vigorously whisks the eggs.

“You brought your own tools of the trade,” I observe.

She smiles. “I wasn’t sure you’d have everything I need. It was easier to come prepared. Not having to search through your drawers saves me time.”

I like the thought of her searching through my drawers—and I don’t mean the kitchen ones.

“That makes sense. My sister made sure I had the basics when I moved in. She insisted we go shopping and loaded up the cart with stuff I’ve never used.”

“Yeah, I noticed your pan is practically brand new.”

I rub the back of my neck. “I don’t think I’ve ever used that one.”

With a small curved spatula, she moves everything around in the pan. “This is ideal for me. I brought some cookware in case you don’t have everything I need, but I left it in my van for now.”

“How often do you go to clients’ homes to cook for them?” I ask.

“This is the first time.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I have clients I provide weekly meals for, but I make everything at my place. Aside from that, I do mostly catering for parties and different events.”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” I say.

She nods. “It can be, but I love cooking.”

“Did you go to school for it?”

“No. My mom taught me.” Her lips curve as if she’s lost in the memories for a moment. “I went to college for marketing and joined a firm after graduation. It’s only in the past year that I left that job and decided to take a chance on a new career.”

“Good for you. It’s like that saying: *risk big, win big.*”

“Yeah, I felt like I was becoming one of those people stuck in the endless loop of being at the office sixty hours a week. I’d go home to eat and sleep and then go right back in the morning. I had no social life whatsoever. By the time the weekends rolled around I was too exhausted to do anything.”

“What made you decide to go for it?” I ask.

“My thirtieth birthday was approaching and...” She pauses, shaking her head. “I don’t know. It just seemed like such a significant number to me. It gave me a sense of urgency that if I didn’t do it now, I never would.”

“Are you happy you made the career change?” I ask.

“Absolutely,” she says with conviction. “I miss the steady paycheck and health insurance, but I don’t miss the relentless pace or the monotony of being at the office day in and day out.”

“Do you miss interacting with other people?”

“Yes and no. There were a few coworkers I really liked, but there’s always the bad apples too. Now I don’t have to worry about who’s sucking up to the boss to get the new client, and I don’t have to be nice to people I don’t like. Ass kissing

and being polite to jerks aren't my strengths." She titters, and I find myself smiling along.

"I can't imagine working a corporate job. I'd go crazy if I was stuck in an office all day. I need physical activity to keep me sane," I say.

She pauses the vegetable stirring, pointing the spatula my way. "I think it's safe to say, you found your place in life."

"Yeah, at least for now. I plan to play hockey for as long as I can."

"You're young. You have some time before you need to worry about what's next," she says.

"I'm thirty now. If I'm lucky, I'm only halfway through my career."

"My soon-to-be sister-in-law says hockey years count like dog years." She laughs as she scrapes the vegetables into a bowl.

I nod. "That's pretty accurate. Are you excited about the wedding?"

"I am. I never imagined Darius would be the first one to get married, though."

"Who did you think would be?"

"I don't know for sure. I'm the oldest, so it feels weird that it's not me. Not that I've got any prospects." She snorts.

"I can't imagine you're lacking attention from men or women," I say.

She pours the egg mixture into the pan. "That's nice of you to say, but I've been told I give off a bitch vibe that keeps men away."

"What?" I laugh. "Who told you that?"

"My neighbor, Lucy, who's one of my best friends."

"I'm a man and I don't think you give off a bitch vibe at all. Although, you did hang up on me and call me a dickhead."

“Oh my God, I can’t believe you brought that up. And here I am thinking you’re a gentleman,” she wails, her cheeks turning pink right before my eyes. I find it adorable.

I aim a skeptical look her way. “If you’re familiar with my reputation at all, I doubt you expected me to be a gentleman.”

“Pfft. I don’t believe things posted on social media. I judged you from our interactions, and you’ve been nothing but polite with me. Until a few seconds ago, anyway.” She playfully narrows her eyes at me.

“Some things posted on social media are true,” I warn. After all, I earned my reputation when it comes to women. I’ve never been a relationship type of guy, and in the past I’ve taken advantage of what’s been offered freely.

“Well, you’re clearly generous. I know what you paid for this weekend,” she says.

“Naw, it was motivated by purely selfish reasons. I already told you how much I dislike cooking.”

“Hmm,” she hums, and I hear the doubt in the vibrating tone. She adds the cooked vegetables back in, sprinkles some cheese on top, then folds half the egg mixture over. If omelets can be beautiful, this one is.

“Damn. How did you do that so well? It never works for me,” I say.

“If you don’t use enough eggs it can make a difference. Also, if you try to fold it too early it can break apart.” She pulls a larger spatula from her bag of utensils and carefully transitions the omelet from the pan to a plate. A sprinkling of parsley on top is the final touch before she grabs a fork from the drawer and delivers my breakfast to the other side of the island. She sets the plate down in front of me.

“Thank you so much.”

“What would you like to drink?” she asks.

“I still have some coffee left.”

“It must be cold by now.”

“That doesn’t matter to me.”

Giving a quick shrug of her shoulders, she retraces her steps around the island. As much as I appreciate the perfection of her work, I can’t wait to try a bite. Cutting off a piece of the outer edge, I pierce it with my fork and shovel the steaming food into my mouth without blowing on it first. Getting burned seems like a small price to pay for the reward. Chewing, I close my eyes as I take in the various flavors. It’s so delicious, I expect angels to sing, but I’ll have to settle for the sound of me humming. Swallowing it down, my eyelids raise and I find Calista leaning on the island across from me. Head canted, she’s studying me.

“Well?” she asks.

“It’s fucking amazing. Couldn’t you tell from my reaction?” I ask.

“You looked like you were enjoying it but I didn’t want to assume.” She starts to clear things away, placing the pan and utensils in the sink while I continue to wolf down my breakfast. I watch as she bustles about, taking in the way her slim black pants contour to her long legs. Her top is meant to be utilitarian, but even the plain design can’t hide the soft treasures hidden underneath.

“Oh man, I can’t wait to see what you make for lunch and dinner.”

Shutting off the water, she peers over her shoulder and smirks. “I think I’ll surprise you.”

“I’m okay with that. It’ll feel like waiting for Christmas morning.”

She wipes her hands on a towel and turns around. “You flatter my cooking. That’s quite a comparison.”

“No, I’m complimenting you. Your cooking is the by-product, but you’re the one who makes magic happen.”

Her eyes widen. “Wow. Magic? I might need you to give me an editorial quote to post on my website.”

I swallow the final bite and groan. “You can have whatever you want. Hell, I’ll give you my first-born child.” An unbidden image of her with a rounded stomach and abundant curves comes to mind. It should be a massive turn-off for me. Especially when I’ve always been extra vigilant to make sure that doesn’t happen. But for some reason it’s the opposite with her. It’s amazing what a delicious home-cooked meal can do.

*At this rate, by the time the day ends, I might be proposing marriage.*

# CHAPTER 5





# CALISTA

HE BRINGS his empty plate over to the sink where I'm washing the dishes.

"I'll take that," I say, plucking it from his hands.

"Thank you." He turns around and leans back on the counter. "I've got to tell you, that was the best omelet I've ever had. I didn't even miss the bacon."

"Really?" I run the sponge all over the plate and fork before rinsing them.

"Well... I really love bacon, so that might be a stretch." He smiles.

I shut off the water and dry both items before putting them away. "I'll make it a point to add some to tomorrow's breakfast."

"Or tonight's dinner," he suggests, sounding hopeful.

My lips twitch before a quick laugh slips from them. "I hate to disappoint you, but I can't put bacon in tonight's dinner."

"Is there some 'no bacon at night' rule I don't know about?" he jokes, nudging my arm with his.

Turning my head, I look up at him. The kaleidoscope of brown tones swirling inside his dark orbs distract me for a moment. "Not that I'm aware of, but bacon doesn't go with the meal I have planned."

"I could argue that bacon makes everything better, but I won't."

“You sound like my brothers. My poor mom would stand at the stove every Saturday morning frying bacon for an hour straight.”

“Why didn’t she throw it in the oven? That’s what I do.”

“Because my brothers Christos and Orion were brats. Sadly, Orion still is.”

“My sister, Alice likes to get her way too.”

“Is she older or younger than you?”

“Older. She’s married and they have three kids between the ages of six months and five.”

“Is she your only sibling?”

“Yep, but she’s so headstrong, she’s the equivalent of four siblings,” he says, shaking his head.

I snicker. “Too bad she’s married. It sounds like she and Orion deserve each other.”

“I don’t know if I’d wish her on anyone. My brother-in-law is a great guy. I always tell him he must have some bad karma from another life to make up for.”

“Oh jeez, that’s harsh.”

“My sister is the first to admit she’s a lot to handle. She also knows how much I love her, despite how much shit I give her and vice versa.”

I nod. “Yeah, same with my brothers. Insulting each other is the equivalent of giving out compliments.”

“So, I was thinking I should show you around while you have a break between meals,” he says.

“Yes, I’d love that.”

“We should start with the downstairs since all you’ve seen is this area.” He gestures at the open floor plan that in addition to the kitchen includes a large living room. Built-in bookshelves flank either side of the brick fireplace, and there’s a large sectional that looks like it would be a wonderful place to nap on a cold winter’s day.

I follow him back toward the entryway and he points out the bathroom as we pass by. We stop at a room with open french doors.

“As you can probably tell, this is my office.”

“What an impressive piece of furniture,” I say, gesturing at the substantial desk.

“Thank you. I had it made from trees that came from this property,” he says.

“That’s amazing.”

He moves over to open the front door and we step out onto the stone porch. His eyes scroll up and down my frame. “You’re not really dressed for roaming around the farm, but it’s been dry out, so you shouldn’t get too dirty walking to the paddocks. We can stay on the paved road most of the way.”

“A little dirt never hurt,” I say, my shoulders bouncing with a shrug. “Trust me, chefs know all about getting dirty.”

He chuckles. “That’s good to know.”

“Wait. That didn’t sound the way I planned. I meant dirty as in covered with food, not...” I wave my hand.

“Down and dirty?” He waggles his eyebrows.

My cheeks heating with a combination of attraction and embarrassment, I look out at the beautiful view. “How long have you owned this property?”

“A little over three years.”

As if by some unspoken agreement, we descend the porch stairs and follow the curved driveway until it straightens out.

“Did you renovate the house?” I ask.

“When I purchased this place the house was literally falling down and the barn was dilapidated. I knew what I wanted everything to look like, so I hired an architect and a contractor to make my vision come to life.”

“Was the original house knocked down?” I ask.

“Yes, it had to be. The barn was salvageable, though,” he says as we approach the closest paddock with the miniature ponies.

“Were the animals part of the purchase?”

“Nope. These guys are all rescues in one sense of the word or another. They’ve come from all over the country.”

“Is there a significance to them all being miniature breeds?”

“My mom was fascinated with them and she always wanted to own some. But she passed away when I was in high school.”

“That must’ve been difficult,” I say.

“Yeah, teenage boys are a mess in general between all the raging hormones and thinking they know everything. I was no different in that way.”

“What happened to your mom? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“No, not at all. My dad came home from work and found her on the floor. She was already gone. The autopsy found a brain aneurysm.”

“Your poor dad. That’s horrible.”

“He took it really hard. They’d been together since high school and they were happy. The two of them were always laughing about something.”

Ryder drapes his arm on the top rail of the wooden fence and I do the same. The ponies run over, eager for some attention. Bending down, I reach between the two posts to stroke a reddish-brown muzzle.

“So soft. What a cute little thing you are,” I say.

“That’s Ginger. Her owners were moving to the city, so I took her in. She’s a sweet girl.” Reaching over, he scratches behind her ears and she nickers with contentment. I can’t blame her. God knows what sounds would come out of my mouth if his hands were on me.

“And who are you?” I ask when a white pony nudges my hand.

“That’s Daisy. She came here via Kentucky. Her owner passed away and his daughter didn’t have a place for her.”

“What a cutie,” I say, stroking her soft muzzle.

Ryder whistles and a dark brown pony comes running over. “Hey, boy,” he says, smiling. “This is Bear.” He caresses a hand from the top of Bear’s head down to his back. “He was abused by his previous owner. When he first came here he was skittish and stayed to himself. But now, he knows no one’s ever going to hurt him again. Isn’t that right, Bear?” He speaks in a babyish tone, and I smile. It’s endearing to see this softer side of the bad-ass hockey player.

“Is he your favorite?” I ask.

“Shh.” He hushes me with a finger in front of his mouth. “They’ll hear you.”

I giggle. “That means your answer is yes.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny.” His lips tug at the corners, as if he’s holding back a smile. “He’s come a long way in the two years we’ve had him.”

“We?” *Does he have a secret wife or girlfriend no one knows about?*

“My dad lives across the street.” He turns and points at a white ranch house with a front porch.

“I didn’t even notice that on the way in. I was too busy looking at the animals.”

“He sold the house I grew up in and was trying to figure out where he wanted to settle. I may have given him the nudge he didn’t need by having a house built for him. But he loves helping out around here.”

“Geez, it sounds like you’re the ideal son. He’s lucky to have you.”

“He’s a great dad. I’m the lucky one.”

“Does your sister live here too?”

He barks out a laugh. “Hell no.”

“You have a lot of land here. I didn’t know if she had a house off in the distance somewhere.”

“Her husband has a great job and provides well for her and their kids. He’s not the type to want help, and since they don’t really need any, I spoil their kids instead.”

“One of the most exciting things about Darius and Evie getting married, is I’m gaining a niece,” I say.

“Tillie’s a great kid.”

“She is. I love her to pieces.”

“How are you doing on time? Do you want to meet the cows?” he asks.

I glance at my watch. “Yes, please. I’d love that.”

“They’re right this way,” he says, and I walk along beside him. We pass by the massive red barn before we reach the second paddock. We lean on the top fence rail and the miniature cows come running over as soon as they notice us.

“Oh my God. They’re so freaking cute,” I squeal. “I’ve never seen a mini version in person before. What breed are they?”

“These are all teacup minis.”

“Are they full grown now?”

“Yep. The average size is similar to a large dog.”

“Are they just like full-sized cows as far as what they eat?”

“Yeah, they graze on the grass and we feed them hay and grain too. They also have salt blocks and mineral supplements. And even though we don’t have any females, these guys have been snipped so they can’t reproduce.”

“You don’t have any females at all?”

“Not yet. I’m not opposed to taking one in, but then you have to milk them twice daily, and that complicates things. We’re not set up to pasteurize milk and would have to find a way to keep it all from going to waste.”

“I didn’t think of that. But the thought of baby teacup mini cows would be hard for me to resist,” I say, smiling. “I bet they’re the cutest little nuggets.”

“I agree they’d be cute, but I’m not looking to get into selling cattle. This farm’s function is to make the rest of their lives enjoyable.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“We’ve got a system that works, and I don’t want to complicate things. When I purchased this farm, it wasn’t with the plan to make money. If anything, this place is a money-suck.” He laughs. “I only wanted to get away from the city so I’d have some space between my work and my home life.” He waves his hands toward the paddock. “Although this wasn’t part of my original plan, I’m extremely satisfied with where we’ve ended up.”

One of the steers lets out a bellowing moo, as if to state his approval, and another one wanders over to us. Slipping my hand between the rails, I run my fingers through his thick brown fur.

“Hey, handsome. What’s your name?”

“This is Moose. He’s the biggest of the bunch, hence the name.”

“Are you fat shaming this poor little guy?” I tease.

“Not at all. Besides, my dad’s the one who named him.” His lips part with a quick flash of his teeth.

“Hanging your old man out to dry, huh?”

“Hey, I make enough bad decisions in my life. I’m not taking ownership of anyone else’s.” His brown eyes are contemplative as they linger on my face. “I bet you don’t have much experience with that.”

“With bad decisions?” I ask, and he nods. “Of course I do, and so does everyone else. Making poor choices is part of growing up, and I assume it’s something that never stops. At least until we’re no longer here.”

He grimaces. “That’s a horrible thought.”

“Is it, though? I like to think of life as a journey of learning. We’re not supposed to be perfect, and we can’t be, even if we try our hardest. The equivalent of being human is being flawed, right?”

“I don’t know, but you’re making me feel better about myself already,” he jokes, jostling my arm with his elbow.

“I try to own my shortcomings and make changes when needed. In this world of social media, everyone tries to appear like the best version of themselves. When in reality most of us succeed and fail on a daily basis.”

“I don’t have any social media accounts. It’s been a bone of contention between me and the Coyotes PR team. But I learned in college, having an online presence meant being tagged in posts, and a lot of times those posts involved me partying. It made me regretful and anxious. Not enough to stop partying, though.” He laughs.

“I did my share of partying in college too. It’s like a rite of passage. Unfortunately, we’ve all been taught that making mistakes is the end of the world, and as a result, anxiety is running rampant. Failing at something doesn’t make you a failure in life. I guess that’s what I finally came to grips with right before I made the decision to start my business.”

“Well, judging from breakfast, I’d say you’re going to be a huge success.”

“Thanks. Which reminds me, I should head back inside and prep some things for lunch.”

He rubs his hands together. “Let’s go.”



# CHAPTER 6



# RYDER

“HEY, HONEY, I’M HOME,” I call out as I enter Murphy’s home gym above his garage.

“You’re early. Does this mean you miss me?” he asks, smiling.

“No, it means I needed to get out of my house ASAP.”

His eyebrows pinch together. “What’s going on?”

“Darius’s sister, Calista, is my personal chef for this weekend.”

“And she’s annoying?” he guesses.

“No, not at all. Just the opposite. Her cooking is unbelievable and she’s beautiful. She also happens to be nice and easy to talk to.”

“So, what’s the problem? You usually love being around attractive women.”

“I know. But she’s...” Struggling to find the right words, I thrust my fingers through my hair, tumbling the thick mass into more disarray. “She’s perfect. Literally fucking perfect. If I didn’t leave my house when I did, I was afraid I’d do something crazy like kiss her or propose marriage to her.”

Laughter roars from Murphy. “Dude, that’s hilarious.”

“No, it’s not. What am I going to do? I’ve still got dinner tonight and then three meals tomorrow to get through.”

“All you need to do is imagine how Darius will tear your limbs from your body if you step out of line.”

“Yeah, that’s not the deterrent you think it is. I wouldn’t just stand there and let him kick my ass. In a match up between us, I like my chances.”

“Then think about the team, man. We won the Cup and we could repeat next year. We don’t need any strife amongst the players,” he tells me.

“Yeah, you’re right. I knew you’d help me see clearly.”

He thumps my back with his palm as he walks past me. “Think with your big brain, Ryder.”

“That’s what got me into this mess,” I say, smirking.

Murphy opens the refrigerator. “Here, have some water. It’ll cool you off.” He tosses me a bottle before grabbing one for himself. We’re both drinking from them when Kaiden and Darius walk in.

I raise my hand. “Hey, guys.”

“Hi,” Darius says.

“What’s up?” Kaiden asks.

“Same old,” Murphy says. “But our boy here has news.” He tips his head my way.

*This motherfucker.*

I shrug. “It’s nothing big. I was telling Murphy how your sister is my chef this weekend and I’ve never eaten so well.”

Darius’s dark eyes intently peruse my face. It’s all I can do to remain still and not fidget under the heaviness of his stare. “Calista learned everything about cooking from our mom.”

“You’re a lucky bastard. You’ve been eating well your whole life.” My own mother was loving and kind, but a talented cook she wasn’t.

“Are you behaving around my sister?” Darius asks.

“Of course I am.”

“You better not be saying that to appease me. Calista is the salt of the earth. She’s a good girl and way out of your league.”

“She’ll soon be a *Goode* girl,” Murphy says, stoking the fire.

Darius looks at our goalie. “Stay out of this.”

Murphy raises his hands in front of himself. “Okay, no more jokes.”

Darius’s gaze returns to me. “I’m dead serious, Ryder. Keep your hands to yourself.”

“It’s not his hands you should be worried about,” Murphy drolls. “Ba dum tss.” He air drums.

“Are you done now?” Darius barks at Murphy, and Murphy nods. I’ve never seen our winger so worked up before. He’s usually one of the calmer heads on our team.

“Can we get busy working out? I haven’t stepped foot in a gym since before we won the Cup. I need to get back into the grind before I decide to retire for good,” Kaiden says.

“Yeah, let’s do it,” Darius agrees. Turning his head, he sends a questioning look my way, as if to ask, *are we good?*

Nodding, I let him know, his words have been taken to heart.

“Just so you know, Cap, you’re not allowed to retire. At least not until we win another championship,” Murphy says.

“I agree with that statement,” I back him up.

“Then I suggest we win the next one, because there’s a good chance this coming season will be my final one. Obviously, I’m not sharing this information with anyone else on our team, but it’s an assumption they’re most likely making on their own.”

Moving across the room to the treadmill, I place my feet on the outer edges as I punch the keys on the pad. When the running deck starts moving, I step onto the black surface and walk at an accelerated pace.

Murphy gets busy on the treadmill beside mine and Kaiden and Darius climb on the stationary bikes.

“Are we doing fifteen minutes?” I ask.

“Sounds good,” Kaiden replies.

I up the speed until I’m jogging at a steady pace. My thoughts stray to Calista and I ponder what she’s doing at this very moment. I picture her in my kitchen like she was when I left. *God, she’s stunning.* But her brother’s right. She’s out of my league and deserving of a far better man than me.

We’re all unusually quiet as we slog through the initial warm up. I return to a walk for the last two minutes to cool down, and when that’s done, I shut down the treadmill. When I step off onto the matted floor, my legs are unusually tired. Kaiden’s not the only one who’s been slacking on the gym front. Today is sure to be a painful reminder I need to get back on track.

My ears are met with pain-filled groans as my friends finish up. I guess I’m not the only one who’s already hurting.

“Maybe we should do some stretching before we get into the weights,” Murphy suggests.

“As much as I hate stretching, I’m game,” I say.

Kaiden twists from side to side, wincing. “My entire body is tight.”

“Okay, then. Let’s start with touching our toes and holding the position,” Murphy says. He’s the most flexible of the bunch. Being a goalie means being limber so you can make those hard saves in clutch moments. And that’s something he excels at. “Bend your knees and straighten. Again, bend and straighten.”

Darius releases a drawn out sigh. “That feels better already.”

“Your left hand goes to the outer ankle on your right foot. Extend your right arm straight up behind you, turn your head and look at your hand.”

We hold the move until Murphy directs us to do the same on the other side. When we’re finished he lowers to the mat, sitting with the soles of his feet together in front of him. The three of us mimic the position before he instructs us to bend forward.

“Darius, are you excited for your bachelor party?” Murphy asks with his forehead resting on the mat. He’s one flexible fucker.

“I’m not having one,” he grunts out his reply.

“We’re going to a cigar bar,” Kaiden interjects. As the best man, I guess he knows. Until now, all we’ve been told is to keep that night open but no concrete details were given out.

“You can straighten up,” Murphy instructs. He stretches his legs out into a V position and we mimic his movements. “I haven’t smoked a cigar in ages. You know what we should do?” he asks, then continues before anyone replies. “We should get some good weed for that night.”

“Oh, man.” I try to recall the last time I smoked, and from what I remember, it was back in college. *Those were the good old days.* “I miss weed.”

Kaiden shrugs. “I was never much of a smoker. But the night we go out, there won’t be any substances that could make us pop on a piss test.”

“Fair enough,” Murphy says. “Although, the chances of us being tested during the offseason are fairly slim.”

“Do you want to take that risk? Especially when we’re the current champions?” Kaiden asks.

“Which is all the more reason for the league to ‘randomly’ choose one of us to test,” Darius points out.

“Yeah, I say we avoid that situation altogether. We don’t need anything casting a pall of suspicion over the phenomenal season we had. We earned those results the old fashioned way—with ball-busting hard work,” I say.

“Goddamn, Goode. Since when are you the voice of reason?” Murphy asks.

“Holy shit, you’re right,” Darius agrees. “Are you feeling okay?” He places his palm on my forehead.

“Knock it off,” I tell him, batting his hand down. “You know I’m always up for a good time—”

“A *Goode* time,” Murphy corrects, cutting me off.

“I’m always up for some *fun*, but after the gains we’ve made, I don’t want anything ripping them away,” I say.

Kaiden lays his hand on my shoulder in solidarity. “I agree. How about we talk less and stretch more. I’d like to get home before bedtime.”

Murphy shakes his head. “Cool your jets, grandpa. It’s only two o’clock.”

Kaiden, smiling good naturedly at the ribbing, retorts, “Yeah, but I go to bed at five.”

Murphy finishes making us contort into positions our bodies weren’t meant to do and then it’s time for my favorite part of working out—lifting heavy shit. I put my earbuds in, get my music going, and get down to business. Grabbing two fifty pound dumbbells, I get situated on the black padded bench and lie back. Calista slips into my thoughts again, but I focus on pressing the weights directly above me and keeping my back on the bench. Slowly, I pull the weights down, touching the dumbbells to the sides of my chest before pushing them back up again. I repeat this exercise fourteen more times before moving on to the next one. By the time I’m finished with my routine, an hour has passed and my shirt is soaked with sweat. I’m weak with hunger and my entire body hurts. But it’s the kind of pain I thrive on. I fucking love this feeling. And now, I’m about to go home and eat like a king. *Life is good.*

# CHAPTER 7





# CALISTA

WITH MY EARBUDS blaring one of my favorite Prince songs, I dance around the kitchen, collecting ingredients for dinner. My hips rock side to side as he sings about how it doesn't matter how much money a woman has, she can be his girl.

Returning to the island with my arms full, I carefully extricate each item from my hold. My hips swaying to the beat, I measure out seasonings and add them to the bowl.

Ryder went to work out a couple of hours ago and I'm not sure when he'll be back. But it's coming up on dinner time, so I might as well at least get a jump on preparing the meal. I can throw it in the oven once he's back.

Dancing backward for three steps, I drop it low as Prince passionately sings about women ruling his world. Balancing on my toes with my legs spread wide, I drape my hands over my knees and bounce my ass up and down while belting out the lyrics. I'm in the middle of a particularly enthusiastic booty pop when I notice Ryder watching me. Seeing him not only throws off my rhythm, but it causes every ounce of coordination I possess to disappear in an instant. Tumbling sideways, I fall to the floor with the grace of a toppling stack of bricks.

Ryder is next to me in a flash, kneeling down to help me sit up. He places an arm around my back and gently tugs the earbud from my ear. "Are you okay?"

My initial reaction of horror and embarrassment is quickly replaced by amusement when I become aware of the look of

concern on his face. You'd think I'd fallen from the second story instead of a matter of inches. And of course he saw my less than stellar dancing skills. This is right on par with every other embarrassing thing that's happened to me in front of attractive men.

Yanking the other earbud free, the absurdity of my situation hits me full-force, causing uncontrollable peals of laughter to spill from me.

Once Ryder realizes I'm not hurt, he guffaws right along with me. It's the loud, gut-aching kind of laughter that seems as if it's never going to stop.

With the weight of his arm around me and his warm breath fanning over my cheek, reality slowly creeps back in. Our eyes meet and the laughter abruptly cuts off like a switch has been flipped. A powerful need curls in my stomach. All I want is to lean forward and press my lips to his. But that can't happen, no matter how much I'd like it to. Acting on my attraction to him would be unprofessional, and since I'm here in a business capacity, I mustn't cross any lines.

Shifting to my knees, I push myself to my feet and straighten up. "How was your workout?" I mention the first thing that comes to mind.

He bounds to his feet in one smooth motion. "It was great, thanks. I'm going to grab a shower while you make dinner. Do you need my help with anything before I go?"

"Nope. I'm all set. Thank you for offering, though."

"No problem." His closed lips curve into a smile that seems forced before he leaves the kitchen.

Bending over, I drop my head to my forearms on the counter with a soft groan. Maybe if I slip out while he's in the shower he won't notice until it's too late.

*Stop the nonsense. You're too old to tuck tail and run. Besides, this is a business obligation I must fulfill.*

And does it matter if he saw my horrible dancing?

*Not really.*

But it does to me.

And why do I care if he saw me fall over like an overloaded trash bag?

*Because I like him.*

He's sexy and kind. Dammit, I need to get a grip and stop thinking about him in any capacity besides a professional one. I'm here to feed him, not fuck him—no matter how tempting the latter option is.

My come-to-Jesus self-talk serves as the kick in the rear I need, prompting me to jump back into preparing dinner. I'm assembling all the cooked ingredients in a large baking pan when he returns.

“Damn, that smells amazing. What are you making?”

My eyes flick to Ryder as he comes to stand beside me. His wet hair is slicked back from his forehead, emphasizing his angular features. And as far as I'm concerned, he smells better than anything I'm cooking.

“It's pastitsio, which is basically Greek lasagna,” I explain.

He noisily smacks his lips together with anticipation. “How long until it's ready?”

“It's going in the oven for about a half an hour.” He makes a disgruntled sound and, pointing my finger, I direct him to a barstool. “Go sit down. I figured you'd be hungry when you came home, so I made you an appetizer to have while dinner cooks.” Removing the cover from the small container, I push it to the center of the island and he snatches it up like he hasn't eaten in days.

“What is this?” he asks, then proceeds to take a bite before I can answer.

“It's tiropitakia, which are mini feta cheese triangles wrapped in phyllo pastry.”

“Oh my God, it's so good,” he says between chews. He can't seem to eat them fast enough, which pleases me.

I occupy myself by moving the dishes from the sink into the dishwasher. I'll start it up when I leave and unload everything when I return in the morning. I hear Ryder's sigh of contentment followed by the scrape of his barstool sliding back on the floor. Seconds later, he appears at my side and loads the empty container and the cover onto the dishwasher's top rack.

"You're an angel," he states. My gaze swings to his handsome face while my lips press together in a line of skepticism. "I was about to perish from hunger, and you saved my life."

I snort. "I don't think going five hours without eating can kill you." Shutting the small door, I turn to face him.

"You don't know how many calories it takes to fuel this body." He runs his hand down his flat stomach, and estimating his calorie consumption is the last thing I'm thinking about. My brain is fully occupied imagining how chiseled his abs must be and what they'd feel like if I trailed my fingertips over them. He leans closer, and while I typically don't like anyone in my personal space, especially when I'm cooking, that rule seems to be falling by the wayside right now.

*What happened to remaining professional, Kastellanos?*  
Maybe if I use my last name I'll heed my own reminder.

*Oh, yeah. Professional.*

I raise my hand to his chest to keep some distance between us. Underneath his thin cotton t-shirt his heartbeat is strong against my palm. Just as I begin to draw back, his hand covers mine, halting my retreat. A kaleidoscope of butterflies comes alive in the depths of my stomach as I look at the spot where the two of us are joined. With his thick fingers wrapped around my hand, it's impossible not to notice the contrasting qualities between them; large versus small, masculine versus feminine.

"Look at me," he directs. My eyes leap up to his, as if they have a mind of their own, widening at the waiting intensity in his stare. "If you weren't my friend's sister, I'd already be kissing you. But I respect Darius too much to go against his

wishes, so I'm going to be on my best behavior." He gently removes my hand from his chest, then relinquishes his hold.

"My brother told you to stay away from me?" I ask. He hesitates as if he doesn't want to give me a definitive answer, so I continue. "You already admitted as much. I'm merely waiting for confirmation. And just so you're aware, he made it clear he didn't want me anywhere near you either."

He shrugs. "I can't blame him for that. He's doing what every brother should do for their sister."

I roll my eyes. "Please don't defend him to me. I'm a grown woman who certainly doesn't need a protector any more than I need my brother meddling in my life. It's not like I'm going to fall for you anyway. "

It hasn't escaped my notice that only a minute ago, I was reminding myself of the importance of remaining professional and not crossing any lines. But now that Ryder's saying the same thing, with my brother as the impetus for his decision, I'm suddenly annoyed.

Whirling away from him, I scurry to the refrigerator and remove the orzo salad I put together earlier. I drizzle homemade Greek dressing on top before placing the bowl on his side of the island. Zipping back over to the oven, I check on the pastitsio. The top is lightly browned in spots just like my mom taught me. Using potholders, I maneuver the steaming pan onto the stovetop.

"What would you like to drink?" I ask.

He heads toward the fridge. "I'll take care of it."

I give a quick nod. Collecting some silverware from the drawer, I lay them on the granite next to his salad. "Here, start on your salad while the pastitsio cools off."

He sits and gulps water from the bottle he just opened. I watch the muscles in his throat as he swallows. Suddenly, drinking water has become a turn-on. I guess throat muscles are doing it for me now. When he's done, I shake my head, disgusted with myself for being so easily tempted. I'm

reaching for a plate in the cabinet when I hear, “Thank you. This salad is delicious.”

“You’re welcome,” I toss over my shoulder, plucking a spatula from my assortment of utensils I brought with me. Cutting into the pan of pastitsio is as enjoyable as always. I don’t know what it is about it that’s always so satisfying, but it never fails. I plate a large square and deliver it to Ryder. Maybe it’s seeing all the tubes of pasta in neat rows that appeals to me. Whatever it is, nothing can compare to the expression on Ryder’s face as he tastes the first bite. It’s practically orgasmic. *Wait. Scratch that.* Using words with a sexual bent will only make me think things I shouldn’t. His expression is euphoric and he hums as he chews.

“Goddamn, you’re a culinary genius. This is the best food I’ve ever eaten. Although, that could change by the end of the weekend.”

I smile. “Thank you. That’s nice of you to say.” I’m hoping he’ll say the same when he tastes what I have in store for him tomorrow. I play a game with myself where I try to outdo the last meal I made. It keeps me motivated and striving to do better, and since I’m only competing with myself, it’s a healthy form of competition.

“What spices am I tasting? I expected it to taste like lasagna, but it’s different.”

“Cinnamon and clove. The cheese used differs too. I use feta like my mom taught me and my grandmother taught her, but you can use kasseri or kefalotyri too.”

“I like this pasta better than lasagna noodles. What is it, ziti?”

“No, it’s bucatini. I order it online because it’s difficult to find. It’s kind of like a thick spaghetti with a hole running through it. You could substitute it by using ziti or penne, which I’ve done before in a pinch.” Leaving him to eat in peace, I wander around the kitchen, putting away the things that I can. The rest gets loaded into the dishwasher.

Ryder dishes himself another large square and returns to his seat.

“Is it okay for me to wrap the rest of the pastitsio up?” I ask.

“Yeah, I don’t think I can eat any more than this.” He waves his fork over his plate.

“You have a lot leftover. I can freeze some if you want, so you don’t have to eat it all in the next few days.”

“Don’t bother going through the trouble. I don’t see any reason why I wouldn’t want to. It’s amazing.”

“You won’t get sick of it?” I ask, covering the pan with a piece of aluminum foil.

He shakes his head. “Are you kidding? I get to eat home-cooked food instead of takeout. There’s no downside to that.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m surprised you don’t eat better than you do. You’re a professional athlete, yet you don’t really pay attention to your diet. At least it doesn’t seem like you do.”

“You’re right, I don’t. At least not like I should. I make sure I eat enough protein, but a lot of that I take in through protein shakes and bars.”

“Don’t get me wrong, you’re in fantastic shape and, obviously, your skating isn’t suffering any.” He’s already one of the top forwards in the league. *But what if he could be even better?*

“Hit me with it,” he says.

My forehead creases with confusion. “Huh?”

“You look like you want to say something to me, so go for it.”

“It’s not my place. You’re a grown man who knows what’s best for himself.”

“I asked you to share whatever you’re thinking. I’d like to know.”

Moving from the stove to the island, I place my palms on the rounded edge of the granite. “Food is like gas for your body. You want to put the best fuel in your body to keep it running efficiently. You wouldn’t use low-grade gas on a vehicle that specifies using premium, right?” He shakes his head. “Without the higher octane, it won’t run as well. So think of your body in the same way. You’re a professional athlete, playing against the most elite in your sport. Shouldn’t you want to pursue every natural advantage you can get? Shouldn’t you be diet conscious and ingest the foods that will fuel your muscles and give you more energy?”

He sets his fork down on the side of the plate. “It may sound dumb, but I’ve never given it that much thought. I eat a lot and work out harder than most. I’ve always made sure I take in enough calories to maintain my weight, but beyond that, I haven’t given it much thought. I guess I’ve always been skeptical about how much of a difference it would make in my actual game.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try it out.”

“It’s definitely something for me to think about.” He takes a drink from the water bottle, then sets it down.

“You should. If nothing else, you’ll find yourself feeling more energetic,” I say.

“Did you go to school for nutrition in addition to marketing?” he asks.

“Over the past couple of years I’ve become a certified nutrition coach. I figured if I was going to cook for other people, I should learn what to feed them. If they’re dieting, I need to accommodate them by preparing healthy choices.”

“Does pastitsio fall under a healthy meal?” he asks, nailing the pronunciation.

“It can be. It’s all about balance. You got your vegetables in, the ground beef is your protein, and the pasta is your carbohydrates. This could be a pregame meal for you if you wanted it to be. I wouldn’t recommend eating this every night, though. You could have chicken, rice, and salad some nights.”



“How exciting,” he says, but it’s clear he means the opposite.

“Hey, chicken and rice can be delicious and healthy at the same time. Do I need to cook some tomorrow to prove I’m right?”

“No, please don’t. I’d rather have something I can’t make myself.” He sounds almost panicked.

I laugh. “Don’t worry, there’s no chicken and rice on the menu. I’ve already planned everything out, and I’m sure you’ll be happy with my choices.”

“I have no doubt I will be. So far there’s nothing disappointing about you... or your food.” He adds the latter as if it’s an afterthought, making my heart leap in my chest.

“That’s nice to know. I’m glad you’re pleased.” I point to his plate. “Are you done?”

“I am, but I’ll take care of it.” He’s moving toward the sink before I can reply.

I place the pan of pastitsio in the refrigerator and wipe down the counters. All that’s left to do is start the dishwasher, which he happens to be standing beside. I find a detergent pod in the cabinet under the sink and drop it into the bottom before I close the door. I start the wash cycle and turn to Ryder.

“What time would you like me to arrive in the morning?”

“How does nine sound?”

“Great.”

“Hey, bring your swimsuit so you can take a dip during your off time. I just had a pool put in a few months ago.”

I’m taken aback by his suggestion. I didn’t know he had a pool. “Okay.” I tap each front pocket on my pants to make sure I have my keys and my phone. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

His lips curve into a smile that makes my knees weak. “I’m already looking forward to it.”

# CHAPTER 8



# RYDER

LIKE AN EAGER SCHOOLBOY, I'm outside as Calista pulls up the next morning. I'm watering the flower beds along the front of my house, trying to appear like I haven't been waiting on her. I turn off the faucet and wrap the hose up before I meet her at the back hatch of her minivan.

My lips stretch into a wide smile I couldn't hold back if I tried. I'm happy to see her, and it has nothing to do with the breakfast she's about to prepare for me. That's a bonus, for sure, though. "Good morning."

"Good morning, yourself," she says, echoing my smile. As she shifts things around, I edge closer. Her perfume is subtle and sweet like a freshly picked bouquet of wildflowers with a hint of... *bacon?*

"Did you bring me bacon?" My eyes light up.

She snickers, lifting a rectangular-shaped insulated bag by the handles on top. "I made you a breakfast casserole, and yes, bacon is one of the ingredients."

"It's ready to be eaten?" I can't keep the excitement from my tone.

"Yep. I figured you'd be hungry by now, so I made it at my place." She taps a finger against the bag. "It's in here."

I hold out my hands and wiggle my fingers. "Come to daddy."

With a huff of laughter falling from her rosy lips, she passes the bag to me.

“Aah. Behold, the perfect breakfast casserole,” I announce, adding some extra bass to my voice.

She closes the minivan’s hatch. “How do you know it’s good?”

We head up the walkway side by side. “Because you made it,” I state.

“Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence. I appreciate it. But just to play devil’s advocate, what if yesterday was just beginner’s luck?”

“No one can be that lucky when it comes to cooking,” I say, opening the front door. She pulls it closed behind us, laughing when she notices I’m practically jogging to the kitchen.

“Well, I don’t expect you to dislike anything I have planned for you today,” she says.

Setting the bag on the island, I turn to her. “You have plans for me?” I ask, wiggling my eyebrows.

She shakes her canted head as if I’m a frustrating child. “Yes, to feed you well.”

“That works for me.”

“Now, go sit down so I can get your breakfast ready.”

“Okay, but first I’m gonna grab some orange juice. Would you like some?”

She undoes the Velcro around the two handles. “No, thank you.”

“How about coffee?”

She starts to shake her head but it turns into a nod. “That would be great.”

I make the coffee first, serving it to her in my favorite Coyotes mug.

She sends a grateful smile my way. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Leaving her to cut into the masterpiece she made, I pour myself some o.j. and take a seat. My stomach

rumbles letting me know it's not nearly as patient as I am. I sip on the juice until she sets my plate in front of me. She hands me a fork and our fingers brush. I want to capture her hand and yank her closer, but since I can't, I do the second-best thing and take a bite of the casserole. Flavors explode on my tongue and are capped off with the crunch of bacon as I chew the fluffy mixture.

"Damn, this is good," I mumble around the food in my mouth.

Smiling softly back at me from across the island where she's retreated to, she seems too far away. I wish she were closer. *Why can't she be?* "Why don't you grab some for yourself and come join me?"

Her eyes flash wider with surprise. "Oh, no, I'm all set."

"Come on. There's plenty," I say, forking another large bite between my lips.

She shakes her head. "No, really. I had breakfast before I left home."

"I'd say you don't know what you're missing, but since you made it, I can't."

"Actually, more often than not, I prepare simple foods for myself," she explains.

"But you know how to make so many different dishes," I say.

"True, but after cooking all day for others, it's easier to have something that's quick to make."

"That's understandable."

Alternating between sips of orange juice and bites of casserole, it doesn't take me long to finish both. Setting my fork down on my plate, I hum with satisfaction.

"Would you like more?" Calista asks.

"I'd like to down the entire thing, but since it's the offseason, I'm not exercising as much. I don't want to show up on the first day with a dad bod."

One of her eyebrows pops upward on her forehead. “As if you could.”

“It’s easy to fall into bad habits, especially overindulging.”

“Are we still talking about food or your other vices?” she teases.

“It applies no matter what the subject. Too much of anything can have repercussions. Too much eating and you’ll gain weight. And on the flip side, too much exercising can cause injuries.”

“Too much cooking for others and you don’t want to cook for yourself,” she says, laughing.

I smile. “Exactly.” Rising from the stool, I collect my plate, fork, and glass and load them into the dishwasher before walking over to her. “Would you like me to take you on a quick tour of the farm?”

“I’d love that. Which reminds me, I brought some treats with me for the ponies and cows.” She rifles through a canvas bag, smiling as she pulls out a large ziploc bag filled with carrots. “I checked online to make sure they’re a safe option for them.”

*How perfect can she be?*

“They’ll love that. Do you need to do anything before we go?”

“Let me put the casserole away.” Covering the glass dish with a lid, she places it in the fridge. “All set.”

Once we’re outside, I lead her to one of our UTVs and help her in the passenger side.

“Oh, wow,” she says, once she’s seated.

I hurry around to the driver’s side. “This is one of my favorite toys on the farm.”

She places the bag of carrots on her lap. “Do I need a helmet?” she asks, fastening her seat belt.

“We’re going for a leisurely ride, a Sunday ride if you will.” I nudge her arm with mine. “Get it?”

“Yep, because it’s Sunday. Har har,” she says.

“Okay, I admit that wasn’t my best attempt at humor, but they can’t all be winners.” I grab a pair of sunglasses from one of the cubbies below the dashboard. “Look at me for a sec,” I say, slipping them on Calista. The large mirrored lenses dwarf her small face, making her look like the cutest bug I’ve ever seen. “The sun gets pretty intense out here.”

“Thank you,” she says.

I put on the second pair that my dad often borrows. Next, I hand her a pair of noise reduction ear muffs. “You’ll need these.”

“Thanks,” she says, wrapping them over the top of her head while I get mine situated.

At first I keep to the long driveway, letting her get used to the feeling of the ride. In my periphery I see her wave and call out to the minis as we drive by their paddocks. I’ll be sure to stop on the way back so she can visit them and give them the carrots.

Slowing down, I turn left through an open gate that brings us onto a dirt road. Things get a little bumpier as we progress along, but it’s not too noticeable until I cut across a field. There’s something I want to show her, but it’s off the beaten path.

My eyes swing her way, finding her clutching the passenger grab bar as she’s jostled around in her seat, but she’s smiling.

After another minute or two, I park and shut the UTV off. Removing my ear muffs, I hang them on the hook beneath the dash. Calista does the same before she undoes her seat belt.

“What’s the plan now?” she asks.

“I want to show you one of my favorite places.”

She nods. “I’d like that.” She’s already climbed out before I can get to her. Turning her head from one side to the other, she scans the area. “It’s so peaceful here.”

“It is. When I first moved here it took some time for me to become accustomed to the silence. After living in the city, it was a big adjustment.”

“I bet. But it’s not really silent. I love how the sounds of nature are all around us,” she says.

“Come on, I’ll show you why I brought you here.” Moving slowly, I make sure I don’t rush her. She’s navigating uncertain terrain, while I’ve been here more times than I can remember.

We come to the edge of a wooded area and she pushes my sunglasses up to the top of her head. I catch hold of her hand.

“The ground can be uneven from this point on,” I explain, hooking my sunglasses over the neck of my t-shirt.

“Thanks. I don’t need to twist my ankle.”

“At least not until after you’ve cooked me lunch and dinner,” I joke.

She sputters out a laugh. “Tell me how you really feel.”

I give her hand a quick squeeze. “Hey, I never said your cooking is the only thing I like about you.”

“Mhmm,” she hums skeptically as we step over rocks and fallen brush. “If you didn’t need me to feed you later, I might wonder if you’re leading me in here to do away with me,” she says.

“You’re safe for now. I’m definitely having nefarious thoughts about you, but they don’t involve killing you. At least not unless it’s death from too many orgasms.”

She trips, stumbling forward. I pull back on our joined hands and swoop in, keeping her upright.

“I’ve got you,” I say.

“Thanks, although it’s your fault I tripped in the first place.”

“How do you figure?”

She fires an annoyed look at me. “You talked about killing me with orgasms.”



I smirk. “And that made you trip?”

“Apparently, I can’t walk and think about orgasms at the same time,” she says, shaking her head, and I bark out a laugh. “Ryder, you need to behave. Be good like your last name suggests.”

“I’ve always thought of it as being impossible to live up to, so why even try?”

“You could take it as a challenge instead,” she says.

I grin down at her. “I prefer to think of my name as an antonym.”

“You’re incorrigible,” she tells me, but her expression makes me think she doesn’t see that as a detriment.

“I’m a lot of things,” I acknowledge. *Most of them are not positive.* Giving her hand a gentle tug, I silently signal for us to move on. “Once we break through to the other side of all these trees, we’ll be there.”

“I’m holding my breath,” she says.

“Are you teasing me?” I ask.

“No, I’m serious. I’m curious about what’s so awesome we’re trekking along in the woods.” She swipes her arm across her forehead, wiping the moisture away. “Especially when I’m not dressed for a nature walk.”

*Shit. She’s right.* Her black pants and purple shirt must feel stifling.

“I’m sorry, Calista. In my excitement to share something with you, I never even considered the clothing you’re wearing. I guess your chef duds aren’t ideal for being outside,” I concede. I’m dressed in a t-shirt and shorts and I’m still hot as hell.

“Yeah, especially when it’s July.” She fans her face with her hand.

“I’m a selfish asshole,” I say.

“You didn’t set out to make me overheat, right?” she asks.

“No, of course not.”

She offers me a reassuring smile. “Then don’t worry about it. I’ll live. I just may not smell great on the ride back.”

I laugh. “I doubt that.” I lean toward her. “You smell great right now.”

“Thank you. But I think you’re too polite to say if I didn’t.”

“Don’t be so sure. I have a bad habit of saying things I shouldn’t,” I tell her.

“Sometimes I find that to be a refreshing quality. Blatant honesty is underrated.”

“Are you sure, because my earlier orgasm comment wasn’t appreciated,” I say.

“I’d say I appreciated it too much. It literally made me trip over my own feet.”

We break through the last of the trees, stepping out into the direct sunlight. Calista slides the sunglasses down from the top of her head to cover her squinting eyes while I put my pair back on. Once she catches sight of what lies in front of us, she sucks in a quick breath. “Oh my God. How beautiful.” She whispers the words as if we’re entering a sacred space. And in some ways we are. It’s sacred to me anyway.

Her reaction makes me smile. “This view still takes me by surprise every time,” I say. My gaze leaves her enraptured face to look at the brook just below where we stand.

“Can we go closer?” she asks.

“Yep, that’s the plan.” I lead us to the water’s edge, where bunches of wildflowers sprout upward from the damp ground. The purple blooms appear to shimmer under the bright sunlight. Moss covered rocks dot the inside of the bed in a zig-zagging pattern that presents a challenge I’ve so far managed to resist.

“I really want to jump from rock to rock, but I won’t,” Calista says.

“I can’t believe you said that. Every time I’m here, I’m tempted to jump on them like I’m in a live version of the game *Frogger*.”

“Yes.” She nods emphatically.

“The only thing that’s stopped me is that layer of bright green moss covering each one. It’s slippery as fuck and I’d probably break my ass.”

“Well, I’d love to give it a go, but I have a very demanding client to make lunch for soon.”

“What are you making him?” I ask, grinning.

“That depends on how long it takes us to get back to the house.”

# CHAPTER 9



# CALISTA

“SHOULD I just toss a bunch of carrots into the paddock or feed them individually?” I ask.

“It’s up to you. It’s faster to feed them all at the same time, but if you want actual contact with them, one on one is the way to go.”

These little cows are so adorable. I want to hug them and never let them go. But we still have the ponies to visit and I need time to prepare lunch.

“I’ll throw half the bag in and let them go at them,” I say, tearing open the end of the plastic. I grab a handful. “You take some too and it’ll go faster,” I tell him, handing over the bag.

“Sure.” He dumps a bunch into his cupped palm and passes the remainder back to me.

While I focus on spreading the carrots inside the paddock close to where we’re standing, Ryder chucks them one at a time toward the middle. Moose is the first to reach them and does his best to collect each niblet before the others can get to them.

Ryder chuckles. “See? He continues to earn his name.”

I nod. “I think I get it now.” Bending over, I peer between the wooden slats as the cow closest to me devours his carrot. When he raises his head, his large brown orbs stare at me as if to thank me for the treat. “You’re welcome, baby.”

“Shall we make our way to the ponies?” Ryder asks.

“Sounds good.”

We jump back in the UTV and make the quick drive to the other paddock. The ponies come running over when they see us approaching.

“They’re social little things,” I say.

“Yeah, they love attention. You should see them when my sister’s kids come to visit. They go crazy trying to get to them.”

I smile. “I bet that’s adorable.”

“It is. And the kids are just as excited.”

I take a handful of carrots and hand the remainder to him. “Let’s do this.” I shoot each orange niblet one at a time toward each one of the ponies, trying to make sure they each get one. Ryder throws his portion across the paddock with the agility of a baseball pitcher. Some of the ponies remain vacuuming the closest carrots up while half of them run toward the other side. Splitting them up seems to have worked well.

“Enjoy your snack, cuties,” I call out as we step away from the fence.

We return to the UTV and start toward the house. Neither of us bother putting on the ear muffs since it’s such a short distance.

Once we’ve parked and the motor’s shut down, I glance at Ryder and find his eyes on me.

“Thank you. That was fun.”

His lips curve up. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you enjoyed it so much.” I make a motion to open my door and he interrupts. “Please, let me do it.” Removing his sunglasses, he places them in the dashboard cubby, then removes the key from the ignition.

While he’s getting out the driver’s side, I pluck the sunglasses from face and put them with Ryder’s. He opens my door and I take his extended hand as I climb out.

“Thank you.”

His answer is a gentle squeeze that presses our palms together. I expect him to relinquish hold of me, but he doesn't. And it's not as if the driveway is an uneven surface like we were on earlier. Then he had a legitimate reason to hold my hand. This feels more intimate, like the end of a date. As if this walk should lead to a kiss at the door.

*But it can't.*

And even imagining it as a possibility is the equivalent of a self-inflicted form of torture.

When we reach the porch, he releases my hand and turns toward me. My heart skips a beat with anticipation. All the shoulds and shouldn'ts disappear, leaving behind a woman who desperately wants a kiss from the gorgeous man standing in front of her.

His eyes meet mine and, for a split second, I see that same desire echoed back at me. But then the heat in his warm brown irises cools before he grips the knob and opens the door.

"Go ahead," he says, allowing me to enter first.

I give a curt nod. "Thank you."

I'm annoyed I allowed myself to slip so easily into temptation while he maintained his grasp on clear headedness. If he had closed the distance between us, I wouldn't have pulled away. And if our lips had met, a chain reaction of life-altering events for the both of us would surely have ensued.

I'm not looking to blow up our lives because of a... crush. But calling it something that simple isn't really a fair representation of my feelings for Ryder. He's different than I imagined—better than I imagined in every possible way. Which makes it damn near impossible to resist him. I guess I'll have to do a better job of maintaining distance between us in every sense of the word. No more sharing personal information between us. No more nature walks. And absolutely no more hand holding.

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It appears as if Ryder has plans of his own for avoiding me. After he ate the fish tacos I whipped up for lunch, he left the house and I haven't seen him since. I'm not sure why his distance irks me like a pesky shirt tag rubbing the back of my neck. I should be happy he's doing his part in preventing us from making a colossal mistake.

I've spent my life trying to be responsible, and doing the right thing has always come easy for me. Temptation in any form has never proved challenging for me. I've never been an alcohol drinker—at least not beyond a social drink or two. I've never tried drugs aside from an occasional hit of weed in college. And I've never been attracted to the bad-boy heartbreaker type. I like safe, dependable men, with data crunching jobs. I date the guys who won't overshadow my world with their larger than life presence. I prefer predictable men. Not rascally hockey players who are friends with my brother. *Maybe if I remind myself enough times it will stick.*

I finish searing both sides of the steak in the cast iron skillet, then pop it in the oven where the potatoes are already baking. I add some dressing to the Caesar salad I made earlier, mix the contents around the bowl, and finish it off with a sprinkle of parmesan cheese on top.

Ryder strolls into the kitchen looking sexier than a man has a right to. I make sure to keep my gaze averted as he heads right over to sit on a barstool.

“Everything smells amazing,” he says.

“Thanks. I think you're going to be happy with what I've prepared. And with all the leftovers from this weekend, you can easily eat for a few more days.” I add some salad to a bowl and pass it to him. I've already set his place with silverware and a napkin in addition to a bottle of water.

“Having home-cooked meals for a few more days will be amazing.” He picks up his fork and digs in.

I move over to the oven, removing the potatoes and steak. Once they're on the stove top, I add a healthy amount of both to a plate.



“Why is your salad so good?” Ryder asks. “I usually don’t like it this much.”

“It’s probably because you didn’t have to make it yourself. I always like my mom’s cooking better than mine,” I say, moving toward him. When I set his dinner down in front of him, he groans.

“I can already taste this.” He picks up the steak knife and cuts into the ribeye. “You cooked it perfectly,” he says when he sees the pink center.

I smile at him. “Isn’t this what I’m here for? Were you expecting shoddy meals?”

He takes a bite of the steak, chewing slowly. His eyes roll back and he lets out another deep groan. It’s sexy as fuck. Spinning around, I scurry back to shut off the oven and take care of anything that will keep me on this side of the room.

“Bacon and cheese potatoes,” he says with awe.

“Yep, they’re twice baked,” I explain, wiping down the counter.

“That must mean twice as fucking good, because these are my new favorite,” he says.

Smiling, I scrub at an imaginary spot on the counter to keep me busy. I’m happy he’s enjoying his meal so much. It makes me feel proud, and it’s also a wonderful boost to my self-confidence.

“Calista, did you hear me?” he asks, and I nod. “Turn around,” he orders.

His growly tone takes me by surprise, and I whirl toward him with my eyes widened. “I heard you,” I say.

“I know, but I want to make sure you really fucking hear me, so I’m going to say it again. Everything about this meal is perfection. You cook like an angel... and you look like one too,” he adds in a softer tone. He knows as well as I do he shouldn’t be saying things like that. Maybe he’s struggling to keep the lines in place as much as I am.

“Thank you, Ryder. I’m thrilled you’re enjoying it so much. That’s my ultimate goal with every meal I prepare for others.”

“You’re going to be a huge success,” he tells me. His compliment fills my chest with so much happiness, I could float on thin air.

“Your confidence in me means a lot. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I really enjoyed this weekend, and if you ever need someone to cater a party, give me a call.”

“I’m not a big party thrower, but that might have to change. Any excuse to taste your food again would be worth the hassle of having people over.”

While he finishes eating, I wash the pans and put them away. Earlier this afternoon I packed up everything I had brought and didn’t need to use while preparing dinner, so the few remaining items are easily loaded into my bags.

Ryder carries his plate to the sink and holds up his hand before I take more than a couple of steps toward him. “I’ll take care of washing this. It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you. I’ll start loading this stuff into my minivan,” I say, grabbing a couple of bags.

He shakes his head. “I’ll carry them out for you.”

“There’s a lot of them.” I cast the explanation over my shoulder on my way out of the kitchen. I haven’t even made it to my vehicle yet when he’s beside me, carrying all the remaining bags. And just like two days ago, the power of his bulging biceps isn’t lost on me. But after getting to know who Ryder is beneath the striking exterior, everything about him is more attractive. He’s an all-around impressive man, one I’d love to get to know better. But since that’s not going to happen, I’ll have to settle for saying goodbye.

After everything is loaded into the back of my minivan, I close the hatch and glance at Ryder. “This weekend was a lot of fun. Thank you for bidding on my donation,” I say, doing my best to keep things professional. “It’s been great meeting you.”

“I know we’re both trying not to cross a line, and that as much as I want to kiss you, I can’t. But I’m sure we can do better than some curt goodbye.” He draws me into an embrace, holding me close. One of my arms wraps around his waist and the other slides between our upper bodies. I press my hand over his heart, feeling the rapid beat under my palm. He’s as affected by this moment as I am. And why does knowing this make me feel like crying?

One of his hands covers mine, holding it in place as our embrace continues on. Neither of us wants to be the one to draw back, but I force myself to be the necessary voice of reason by stepping backward. “I better get going. I’ve got a lot to do to be ready for work tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I’ve got some stuff to take care of too,” he says, shoving his hands in the front pockets of his shorts.

“Thanks again, Ryder. You have a beautiful home, and what you’ve created here for all your animals is wonderful.”

“Thank you for feeding me so well. My stomach may never be satisfied again,” he says, rubbing his hand over his chiseled abs.

I laugh and say, “Sorry, not sorry,” as I walk to the driver’s side. I aim a final glance in his direction, shuttering my emotions away so he can’t see how torn up I am about leaving. At the start of the weekend, I never imagined there’d be a possibility for me to feel so deeply for him after such a short time. And now, I don’t know how I’m going to forget about him.

*But I need to.*

# CHAPTER 10



# CALISTA

I'VE BARELY ARRIVED home when my neighbor, Lucy texts me.

Drinks on the porch in fifteen?

Yeah, why not? I could use a drink or two after this weekend.

Sounds good but make it thirty.

Are you making me something delicious?

I smile. We've been neighbors long enough for her to realize I never show up for drinks at her place without bringing food. Hey, if she's supplying the margaritas, it's the least I can do.

Rustling through my fridge, I pull out the ingredients for crab dip. I preheat the oven before I measure and mix everything together. I spread the mixture into a glass dish and place it in the oven.

While it cooks, I arrange mini rye bagel chips, tortilla chips, buttery crackers, and freshly sliced focaccia bread on a tray. Setting it aside, I remove the pins from the knot on top of my head as I wander toward my bedroom. My heavy locks tumble down the middle of my back, eliciting a sigh of relief from me. Dropping the hair pins on my dresser, I massage my scalp with my fingertips. One of the downsides of being a chef is wearing my hair up all the time. My only other option would be to wear a chef's hat, but for me, that's not practical.

Especially when I do the cooking in my own kitchen. This weekend at Ryder's was an anomaly for me.

Stripping off my pants and shirt, I drop them into the laundry hamper in the corner of my bedroom. I slip on a red t-shirt that says "No whisk, No reward" and tug on a pair of beater shorts that saw better days back in college.

Glancing at my reflection, I slowly run my brush through my hair and take in my sad eyes. The woman looking back isn't me. I won't allow myself to dwell on what ifs. I can't be moping around over a man I met yesterday. Even if it feels like I've known him much longer.

Returning to the kitchen, I remove the dip from the oven and set the oval glass dish in the middle of the tray. I shove my keys and phone into my pocket and slip flip flops on my feet before picking up the food. Holding on to both ends of the rectangular tray, I make my way next door to Lucy's. Her house is bigger than mine and has a fantastic front porch to sit on.

"Hey, lover," she calls out as I mosey up the front walkway. "I thought you'd never get here."

In my periphery I notice our creepy neighbor, Les, lurking in his driveway, so I make sure to sound convincing when I answer Lucy. "How's my sexy little kitten been?" I barely get the words out without laughing, but I avoid ruining our ruse by biting the inside of my lower lip hard enough to leave a metallic taste in my mouth.

I march up the porch stairs and set the tray on the wicker coffee table before lowering down next to Lucy on the couch. She grabs my face between her hands. "Pucker up, lover," she says, pulling my face toward hers. She stops when there's an inch between our mouths, and we act like we're playing tonsil hockey for Les's benefit. With the view of the back of my head, he's none the wiser. It doesn't hurt that we're damn convincing.

"You're the best non-kisser I've ever encountered," she jokes.

“You’re the same for me,” I say. “Is he still lurking?”

Lucy sits back and even goes so far as to wipe under her bottom lip with a knuckle.

“Nice one,” I say.

“Thanks.” She cranes her neck, searching for Les. “The fox has left the henhouse.”

I snort. “I’m surprised he didn’t hang around.”

“He’s probably wanking it as we speak,” she says.

“Oh gross. Don’t tell me that, or I might have to break up with you.”

“You can’t. Then he’ll ask me out again. You’re my only hope.”

“You need a big, burly boyfriend to scare the bejesus out of him.”

“Yeah, I need one of those for a lot more than scaring our creepy neighbor. Where do you suppose I can find one?” she asks, pouring the tequila-loaded beverage into two glasses.

“I can’t help you find a man, but if it’s any consolation, I brought the crab dip you love so much.”

“Who needs a man when I have you?” she jokes.

I shrug. “If you’re okay with no sex, I’m sure we can make it work.”

“In my opinion, your crab dip is better than sex. At least any sex I’ve ever had,” she states. She plucks a cracker from the tray, dragging it through the crab dip before popping it into her mouth.

I laugh. “I wish I could disagree, but sadly, I can’t.” My mind conjures up an image of Ryder. I bet sex with him would beat my crab dip.

“Hey, how was your job this weekend?” Lucy asks, as if she and the universe are conspiring to make me think of him even more.

“It went well. He loved everything I made.”

“Who was the client?” she asks.

“Ryder Goode.”

“Your brother’s teammate?”

“Yep.”

Her eyes open wider. “Is he as hot as he looks on TV?”

“Hotter.”

“No!”

I nod. “Yes!”

“You lucky bitch. I need a new job.”

“Oh, please. You have the coolest job on the planet,” I say.

She feigns modesty. “Okay, you’re right. I do,” she says, snickering.

“How many women can say they have a television show dedicated to proving Bigfoot exists?” I ask.

She points at herself. “I can.”

“Exactly. That’s so fucking cool.” I take a large gulp of the perfectly mixed margarita.

“So back to this weekend. Did he flirt with you? Did you flirt with him?”

“He was different than I expected.”

Her head tips thoughtfully “How so?”

“He’s kinder, gentler, polite. The list could go on and on. Every preconceived notion I had about him was obliterated.”

“You like him.” She’s not asking me, she’s stating it as a fact.

“I do. But I shouldn’t.”

“Why not? Does he have a girlfriend or a wife?”

“No, he doesn’t. It’s just that Darius told both of us separately to keep our distance.”



A gall-filled puff of air flies from her. “You’re going to let your brother dictate who you can have feelings for?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know.” I throw my hands up in the air.

She takes a sip of her drink. “Let’s talk this through.” Her suggestion instantly calms me.

“Well, they’re not only friends, they’re also teammates. Getting involved with Ryder could affect their working relationship, which could negatively impact their careers. I can’t be selfish just because I like the guy. It’s not like he’s the only single man in the world. Besides, he’s the antithesis of my type.”

“I see that as a positive,” Lucy says.

I roll my eyes. “Thanks a lot.”

“What? You have to admit your taste hasn’t panned out for you so far.”

I can’t argue with that. She’s one hundred percent right.

I nod. “I know it hasn’t.”

“Isn’t the definition of insanity doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results?” she asks.

“Sounds about right.”

“Why not try something new? Or should I say *someone* new?” She slaps my knee.

I laugh. “I wish I could.”

“Why can’t you? You’re an adult. Who’s going to stop you?”

“Me, myself, and I. My conscience is a pain in the ass.”

“Tell it to shut the fuck up.”

“Even if I went for it, I’m not sure Ryder would be on board. He seemed set on not crossing any lines. He told me if Darius wasn’t my brother he’d have been kissing me already.”

“Oh damn.” She fans her face. “That’s hot.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” I picture how he looked in that moment and it makes my insides turn to goo.

“Maybe you’ll get another chance to see him,” she says.

“I’ll see him at the wedding. He’s one of the groomsmen.”

“That means he’ll be at rehearsal dinner too.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “That gives you two opportunities to make something happen. If you chicken out the first night, there’s always after the wedding. And didn’t you tell me you’re all staying at some hotel that weekend?”

“Yeah. The wedding takes place on the grounds too.”

Lucy’s blue eyes show her mischievous thoughts before she voices them. “At the very least, you need to have sex with this guy, so we know if hockey players are as hot as we think they are.”

“So *we* know?” I laugh.

“Yes. I mean, strictly for research purposes, of course,” she says, looking like the picture of innocence.

“Of course,” I deadpan.

“Seriously, though, the wedding weekend is the perfect time for you to have some fun. It can be a temporary thing and no one else would even know.”

My heart rate revs up at the idea of spending a night with him. What kind of lover would he be? Gentle? Rough? Or somewhere in between? Just how many orgasms could he give me in one night?

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” Lucy interrupts.

“It’s difficult not to. He seems too good to be true, though.”

“There’s only one way to find out if he is or not. I think you know what you need to do. And afterward I want a full report.” She grins.

I slowly tick my head from side to side. “I don’t know if I have it in me.”

“Isn’t that the goal?” she sputters.

I nudge her foot with mine. “I swear you have the oversexed brain of a teenage boy.”

“And the undersexed body of a thirty-five-year-old,” she drolls, making me laugh.

“You’re in good company at least,” I say. “Maybe we need to be each other’s back up plan in case we’re not married in the next ten years.”

“I’m already in love with your cooking, so...” She shrugs.

“And we’re living without sex now,” I add.

“I do make a mean margarita,” she says.

I pat the cushion on the couch. “I’ve always been a little envious of your front porch.”

She holds up her hand, wiggling her fingers. “Five solid reasons for marriage.”

I laugh. “That’s hilarious.” Raising my glass, I take a deep pull and set it back on the table.

“It is, but who’s to say taking a pragmatic approach to find a life partner isn’t the way to go?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, the traditional way hasn’t worked so well for us.”

“I’d settle for a ‘for now’ partner. I just need to find him.”

“You could always try out Les,” I say.

She pretends to gag. “No way. I’d rather have sex with the most arrogant, controlling asshole on the planet than that creepster.”

“I guess it’s not a good sign when your new neighbor moves in and right after you meet, he tells you that if you look that good in clothes, you’re sure to look even better out of them,” I say. Which is exactly what happened when he and Lucy met. I’m relieved he hasn’t made any inappropriate moves toward me because I wouldn’t deal with it as well as

she does. She likes to have fun with it, hence the fake kiss when I first came over.

“Yep, there were some red flags there,” she says.

Aside from him being my brother’s teammate and a player with the ladies, does Ryder have any red flags of his own flying around him? Not that the two I’m thinking about aren’t enough. But he’s tall, charismatic, and bearded, and those three things combined might be enough to obscure any red flags.

*I’m so screwed.*

Luckily, I only have to be in his presence two more times and then I can go back to admiring him from afar.

# CHAPTER 11



# RYDER

“WE’RE GOING TO STARVE,” I tell my dad. We’re one day removed from eating Calista’s leftovers and nothing tastes good anymore. She ruined my undiscerning palate.

He laughs. “We’re not going to starve. We have food to eat.”

“Yeah, it just sucks,” I add.

“You’re not wrong. Son, I never realized how horrible your cooking is.”

“Ha. That’s rich since you’re the one who taught me to cook. Actually, I don’t think you taught me at all. I just learned through osmosis.”

“Your mom was the cook in the family. If she was still here I’d be overweight and well fed.” He smiles at the thought.

“Do you still miss her as much as I do?”

“Of course. Your mom was my partner in everything from the day we met onward. We clicked from the start and it felt like we’d known each other forever. So to lose a relationship so special and to know I’ll never have that again, it’s devastating. But I’ve reached the point where remembering our life together makes me happy.”

“Dad, you could always date. You’re not too old.”

He shakes his head. “No, I don’t want to. I’ve got a great life.”

“Yeah, but you don’t need to be alone.”

“I’m not. I see you every day. Even when I don’t want to,” he jokes, but then his expression shifts, becoming more serious. “Where is this coming from? You’ve never brought up the topic of me dating before.”

“I don’t know. I got to thinking you might be lonely.” Having Calista around for a couple of days must’ve turned me sappy.

“I miss your mom, but that’s not the same as being lonely. No one can fill the void she left. But I don’t want you worrying about me. I’m a lucky man. I’ve got wonderful kids.”

“Especially that son of yours.” I smirk.

“If only he could cook,” he says.

I laugh. “Tell me about it. I wish I could.”

“Do you think your chef would make daily meals we could purchase?” he asks.

*My chef?* I like the sound of those words together.

“I know she has some clients who do.”

“Maybe you should give her a call and get added to her list,” he suggests.

“Yeah, I suppose I could do that.”

But the thing is, I don’t want her to drop off meals once a week. I want her in my kitchen where I can be near her. I want to talk with her while she prepares my meals. I want to watch her and breathe in her perfume because, apparently, I want to torture myself. I’ve never been someone who makes decisions by thinking things through. I’m impulsive and impatient when I want something. But the good news is, I always get what I want. And to start, that’s Calista in my kitchen.

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Stepping onto my front porch, I sit down on the top step. I’ve been planning to buy furniture for this area, and I just haven’t

gotten around to it yet. I should remedy that soon with how much I love sitting outside and looking at the beautiful view. The peaceful environment seems to put everything into perspective for me, and never more so than during hockey season. If I have a bad practice or we lose a game, taking in the vastness of my farm reminds me it's only a temporary situation. This is where I do some of my best thinking, which is my motivation at the moment.

Since my dad and I spoke at lunch, I've felt a compulsion to call Calista, but I've been doing my best to talk myself out of it. Though the reasons for calling her are valid and plentiful, the one or two reasons why I shouldn't are significant enough to make me pause.

There's no reason why she can't work for me. I know I can't date her, but I can hire her and have a business relationship with her.

*Fuck it.*

Pulling her name up on my phone, I make the call. It rings a few times before she answers.

"Hello."

"Calista, it's Ryder."

"Hi." There's a husk to her tone that's not usually present, and I selfishly hope it's because of me.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Hi. I'm well, thanks. What can I do for you?" she asks politely.

"I was hoping we could meet up. I have a business proposal I'd like to discuss with you."

"I'm working and won't be done until later."

"There's no way we can connect?" I ask, knowing there's no way she missed the disappointment in my voice. I hear the sounds of things moving around on her end of the line, followed by a low sigh. "I'm in the middle of cooking at my house and can't leave."



“Can I come over?” I ask, crossing my fingers like I’m once again eight years old.

“Fine. But I’m warning you, I’m going to be busy while you’re here. If you’re okay with that, come on by. I’ll text you my address.”

Grinning, I pump my fist. “Thank you. I’ll head right over.”

“See you soon,” she says, hanging up.

Within seconds, my phone buzzes, alerting me of a text. I’m relieved she sent her address. I didn’t think she’d ghost me, but I couldn’t say with complete confidence that she wouldn’t.

Rising to my feet, I hurry back inside to brush my teeth, spritz on some cologne, and throw on a backward ball cap. Then I race back down the stairs and out to my truck, getting on the road as fast as possible. My heart races from excitement. I can’t wait to see her.

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I pull into the driveway of a small, bright-blue bungalow and park behind Calista’s minivan. Climbing from my truck, I notice the well-manicured lawn and vibrant flowers in terracotta pots lining the left side of her staircase. It feels like her and makes sense that she lives here.

I ring the bell beside the yellow door and wait.

“Come in,” she shouts.

I do as she says, calling out, “Hey, it’s me.”

“Yeah, I figured,” she answers.

I push the door closed behind me, then walk in the direction of her voice. The vision that greets me makes me stop in my tracks. Calista is frosting cupcakes, but the surprising part is that she’s dressed in a fitted t-shirt and shorts—the tiny kind that end just below the curve of her ass cheeks.

Her willowy limbs are long and golden, and for a moment I imagine them wrapped around me as I thrust inside her.

“You shouldn’t leave your door unlocked,” I growl, still rocked by my intimate vision of the two of us.

“Hello to you too, Ryder.”

I smile. “Hello. How’s your week going?”

She grimaces. “It’s been out of control busy. I took on a job I shouldn’t have. I’ll be making cupcakes all night long.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?” I ask.

She peers at me from under an arched eyebrow. “Not unless you know how to make butterflies out of frosting.”

“Sorry, you’re out of luck. I’m not artistic at all. Unless you count keeping my lines straight when I mow the lawn.”

She points the frosting covered knife at me. “That’s harder than it seems, though.”

“Right?”

“You didn’t come all this way to ask me about my week. What’s going on?” she asks, getting right to the point.

“I’d like to hire you to be my full-time personal chef.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. I want you to work for me like you did last weekend, except permanently.”

“Ryder, I can’t do that.”

My eyebrows pinch together. “Why not?”

“I have clients who count on me every week and events I’ve booked.”

“I can be flexible at first until those people can find someone new to replace you.”

“I don’t want to be replaced, though.”

“I’ll pay you well and make it worth your while.”

“It’s not only the money. It’s job security. I’ve been building my business up, and if I work for you, all the progress I’ve made will go away.”

“Yeah, but you’ll be taking a big leap forward salary wise and the amount of work you’ll be doing will be less.”

“And what if you decide you don’t need me anymore or you suddenly want to hire someone else? Then I’m out of a job and I’ve also lost all my other clients.”

“I can get a contract drawn up with whatever you need. If you’d like a certain amount of guaranteed pay in case we part ways, I’m fine with that.”

She picks up another cupcake, swirling frosting around the top. “I need time to think about it.”

“I’ll pay you five thousand per week,” I say.

The cupcake slips from her grasp, landing upside down on the counter. She snatches it up and stares at me with wide eyes and an open mouth. “Are you insane?” she yells at me.

I shake my head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Why would you offer me that amount?”

Is she disappointed at the number I mentioned? If that’s the case, I can do better.

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t meant to be an insult. I don’t know what the going rate for a private chef is. How about we do ten thousand per week? Is that satisfactory?”

She looks at me like this is her first time seeing me. “Ryder, that’s a lot of fucking money.”

“Not to me, it isn’t.”

“Well, to me it is. I can’t let you pay me an outrageous amount just to cook you three meals each day.”

“Believe me, it’s worth it to me and my dad. We’ve been miserable since we ran out of your leftovers. I was nice and shared them with him and then I regretted it because they didn’t last as long as I imagined they would.”

She shakes her head. “There isn’t a chef in this world that I’d pay that much.”

I scratch my chin, raking my fingertips through the short beard lining my jawline. “I happen to think you’re worth it and I’m not rescinding my last offer. That’s the amount I’m paying and I’m not changing it unless you get a raise.”

She sets the cupcake and knife down. “Are you positive this is something you want? I need you to be one hundred and ten percent sure before I answer you.”

*She’s going to say yes. I can feel it.*

As excited as I am on the inside, I remain outwardly composed. I can’t afford to do anything to make her have doubts.

“I’m as sure as I can be. It’s not only your cooking I’m interested in. I want you to help me eat a more balanced diet. That’s the one piece that’s missing from my training and I can’t do it on my own. I don’t have the knowledge nor do I have the desire to learn. But I promise I won’t give you a reason to regret working for me,” I say.

Her chin drops to her chest and stays there as she works through her thoughts. I stay calm and confident, silently willing her to say yes. *Yes. Yes. Yes.*

When her head raises, our eyes connect. “Yes, I’ll take the job. But I have conditions.”

“Lay them on me,” I say.

“I can’t start until next Monday.”

*It’s already Thursday now.*

I nod. “That works.”

“I’m still going to have to cook for my other clients on the weekends. That means I’ll be at your house during the work week only. However, I’ll have your meals ready for the weekends. All you’ll have to do is pop them in the microwave or oven.”

Hmm. I don't like the idea of her not being at my house two days a week, but I have to compromise on some things if I want her to accept the job.

*Five days is better than none.*

"I can deal with that," I say. "Anything else?"

"There may be times when I have events to prepare food for. If I'm at your house every weekday, I may have to do double duty while I'm there."

"As long as I've got food to eat, you can do whatever you want. I don't expect you to be stuck in my kitchen all day long. If you've got errands to run or you want to go for a swim, you can. Use your time however you see fit. I'll just be happy to have something edible to eat."

"Edible? I think I can do better than that." She snickers.

"Oh, I know you can. Why don't I get out of your kitchen, so you can finish up. I'll have my attorney draw up a contract and email it to you. Let me know if anything needs to be tweaked to meet your approval."

"Okay, great."

"I'll be in touch," I say, smiling.

"Thank you, Ryder. I appreciate the opportunity."

I wave my hand, putting an end to her thanks. "You're the one helping me." I lock her doorknob before I leave and practically float above the driveway as I walk to my truck. I found a way to see Calista every day while putting delicious food in my stomach and improving my diet. It's a win all around.

*Unless I do something to fuck it up, that is.*

# CHAPTER 12



# CALISTA

THE RESTAURANT ENTRYWAY is packed full of people waiting for a table as I pass on by. Evie texted to let me know they're seated in the back room to the side of the bar. But even if I hadn't known where to find them, Wendy's vibrant red hair calls to me like a beacon in a storm. I walk toward the table and Evie's face lights up when she sees me.

"Hey, Calista," she says, jumping up to hug me.

After I exchange quick hugs with everyone, I take the open seat next to Rori.

"Ladies, I've taken the liberty of ordering us some appetizers and drinks," Evie announces. "We're having dinner later with the guys, but I thought we needed something to start the night off right."

"Hell yeah," Wendy says.

As if on cue, the serving staff appears, dropping off champagne and finger foods. I've barely eaten today, so the nourishment is welcome, even if the crab dip is nowhere near as good as mine. The champagne bubbles sweetly on my tongue and I'm refilling my glass all too soon.

"What's the plan for when we leave here?" Rori asks.

Evie shrugs. "I'm not sure. Darius told me there would be a limo outside waiting for us at eight o'clock sharp and it will take us to our next destination."

Wendy moves her shoulders side to side, dancing in her chair with a chicken tender clasped between her fingers. "Ooh, maybe it's a strip club and we'll see some hot buns."

“Don’t you see enough hot buns with Murphy?” Evie asks.

“Is there a sufficient limit? His are the only ones I’ll touch, but a girl can look all she wants.”

“There’s nothing wrong with looking,” I agree. “In fact, that’s all I seem to do these days.” A vision of Ryder in his basketball shorts pops into my head.

“What?” Wendy asks, not hiding her surprise. “But you’re beautiful.”

“Thank you. I’m flattered you think so, but as a new business owner, I don’t have the time or energy to date.”

“Oh, girl, you can’t sacrifice sex in the name of your business,” Wendy states, as if it’s some universal law.

“Something’s gotta give, and it can’t be my sleep, which leaves me no free time,” I explain.

“Yeah, but you only need an hour or so to get together with someone,” Wendy says.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Dating is time consuming. By the time I’d have dinner with someone, I’d be ready to go to bed.”

“Bingo.” Wendy points at me. “That’s the idea.”

“I mean to sleep,” I clarify.

“Maybe you need a sex buddy,” Rori suggests.

“Yes!” Wendy’s eyes gleam enthusiastically. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“In a perfect world, that would work, but I don’t know any men I’d want to have sex with.”

“What about a neighbor?” Evie asks.

I think of Les and sputter out a laugh. “Eww, no.”

“You have three brothers and they must have friends,” Wendy points out.

“How well do you think that would go?” I ask.



Evie snorts. “I thought Darius was going to snap when Ryder won your auction donation. You’d think the guy won your virginity or something.”

“Honestly, I’ve had enough of the overprotective brother bullshit. I’m thirty-one. He’s a little late to the game to protect my virtue. He’s just being ridiculous.”

“He is, but it’s kind of adorable,” Evie says, sighing.

“You would think so, but if it were your brother, not so much. I’ve been vagina blocked by them for years.”

“You should screw one of their friends to teach them a lesson,” Wendy suggests.

“No, that’s not a good idea,” Evie jumps in.

“I think you should focus on your business now, and when you’re meant to find someone, you will,” Rori interjects. “Look how Kaiden and I became reacquainted. It was so random that he was there precisely when I needed someone. Especially since we hadn’t seen each other in years.”

“I’m not saying she shouldn’t focus on her business, but she can slide in a little side action here and there. Besides, orgasms are good for you. My skin’s never looked so healthy.” Wendy turns her face from side to side to prove her point.

She might be right, because lately mine has been looking rather dull and haggard, and her skin is clear and glowing.

Wendy taps a red-tipped finger to her lips. “Tonight might be the perfect opportunity for you to meet someone. You’ll have the three of us as your wingwomen to do all the heavy lifting.”

“Let’s see how it goes. We don’t even know what comes next,” I say, putting on the brakes before things escalate too far.

Wendy has a level of confidence I’ll never be able to achieve. She’s unapologetically herself and it’s admirable. But that’s not me. I don’t hit on strangers and I don’t go home with them. Every man I’ve had sex with has been someone I’ve dated or had a relationship with.

“Okay, ladies. It’s almost eight o’clock and time to head to our next destination,” Evie says.

“Wherever that may be,” Rori adds.

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“What the fuck?” Wendy mutters under her breath.

We all stare at the white brick warehouse-like building that has the name ZAP THAT ASS painted in giant green letters across the front.

“Is this one of those BDSM clubs?” Rori asks.

Evie pulls out her phone and starts tapping on the screen. “This is an adult laser tag facility.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Do we have to strip down to play?” Wendy asks, looking intrigued at the thought.

“I think it’s twenty-one plus because they serve alcohol,” Evie explains. “I guess we should head inside and find out what we’re in for.”

We climb from the limousine and I’m hit with a wave of uncertainty that leaves me less than enthused about the remainder of the night. Laser tag wasn’t in the plan and I have no desire to play.

“I hope there’s some comfortable seating inside because I’m not dressed for this shit,” Wendy says.

“Me too,” I agree, stretching my foot out in front of me. “I can’t run in these heels.”

Wendy places her hands on her hips. “Who planned this anyway? They’ve lost their fucking mind.”

“I think it might’ve been Kaiden,” Rori says. “Darius wanted him to find something fun to do for their bachelor party that didn’t involve a strip club.”

“That’s fantastic for them, but why do we have to be a part of this? I’m dressed for a strip club, not a game of laser tag.” Wendy poses, jutting her hip to the side.

“Let’s go find the guys,” Evie says, strutting toward the door with us trailing behind.

Once I step inside, the bright lights and neon colors are like an assault on my eyes. They should provide sunglasses at the door.

An employee greets us. “Good evening, ladies. Are you with the Kastellanos party?”

“We are the party,” Wendy states, winking at him.

He smiles back at her. “If you follow the arrows on the floor they’ll lead you where you need to go.”

“Thank you,” Evie says, hooking her arm through Wendy’s. “Let’s find our guys and figure out what the hell is going on.”

It seems like a good plan to me.

We follow the bright orange arrows painted on the concrete floor and they bring us to the area where the guys are waiting. It’s also the place where all the equipment is handed out.

Darius beams when he sees Evie. “Hey.” He pulls her into his arms, pressing a kiss to her lips.

“What are we doing here?” she asks him.

“What do you mean? We’re about to play laser tag.”

“We’re not dressed for this,” she points out.

“Evie’s chicken,” Orion calls out.

With her lips pursed together, she aims a pointed stare in his direction. “I’m not chicken. I’m wearing a dress and heels.”

“Take them off,” Orion suggests.

“You better mean the heels,” Darius warns him, his brows ominously lowered.

“Dude, chill. She’s going to be my sister. That makes her automatically unattractive to me,” Orion says.

“It’s good to see you have limits,” Christos chimes in, grinning.

I notice Murphy and Wendy have gravitated toward one another as have Kaiden and Rori, leaving me as the lone woman in the bunch. *How fun. And not awkward at all.* Especially since the only remaining men are two of my brothers and Ryder.

*Oh my God. Ryder’s here.*

My insides do a celebratory jig. I don’t know why my brain had a disconnect about him being here tonight. Between his job proposal and me trying to figure out how to make my schedule work, the idea that he’d be here never registered in my mind. But looking at him now, I don’t know how that’s possible. He’s positively unforgettable. Dressed in black dress pants and a black button-down shirt, he’s devastatingly handsome. With his hair slicked back from his face, emphasizing the sharp slashes of his cheekbones, and his beard neatly trimmed, he reminds me of a pirate. Tall, dark, and dangerous to my resolve, he’s like a force of nature. He’s the electromagnetic force making me lose my ability to think clearly whenever he’s within sight. While I know on paper he’s wrong for me, I don’t feel strong enough to resist him. This polished version of Ryder is wickedly tempting. He hasn’t even said hello yet and I’ve already fallen under his spell.

“Can I have everyone’s attention please?” A ZAP THAT ASS employee shouts loud enough to gain our attention. “If you could line up single file, I’ll pass out your gear.”

I merge together with the group and end up standing behind Wendy. I think Ryder is in back of me, but I don’t want to turn and check.

“Hi, Lis.” He leans close enough for me to feel his breath waft over the nape of my neck.

I spin around. “Did you call me Lis?”

He shrugs. “You’re like a different version of the Calista I know.” His heated gaze lazily glides from my head to my feet and back up again, lingering on my cleavage revealed by the deep V of my neckline.

“I’m still me. You’ve just never seen me dressed for anything but cooking,” I say.

His fingers brush my bare skin when he plucks one of my thick curls from my shoulder. He rubs the lock between his fingers before letting it slide free to my drape down over my chest. “You’re beautiful, but then again, you always are.”

I smile. “Thank you. You look quite dashing yourself.”

He flashes his teeth in a brief smile. “Thanks.”

Wendy spins around to face me. “Can you believe we’re playing fucking laser tag? I knew we should’ve gone to the strip club.”

Murphy pokes her side, making her jump. “You don’t need to go to a club, Sparky. I’ll strip for you anytime you want.”

“At least I have something to look forward to,” she says, facing forward once more.

Ryder leans forward until our cheeks almost touch. “Do you wish you went to a strip club?”

With his face so close, I don’t dare move beyond a barely imperceptible shake of my head. “No, that’s not really my thing.”

“Then what is?” he asks.

“Cooking.”

His hands grip my shoulders, pivoting me to face him. “There’s more to you than your job. What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?”

“I like to work out at home.”

“What else?”

“I like taking care of my yard. It gives me a reason to be outdoors and I take pride in how it looks.”

“I can attest that you do a great job,” he says.

“Thank you. I mow my next door neighbor’s lawn too.”

“That’s nice of you.”

“Well, she’s also my friend, so it’s not some big gesture. She despises yard work and I don’t.” I laugh and it feels awkward. In fact, this whole talking about me thing is painful. It’s time for a subject change.

“What do you like to do in your spare time? I know you work out but what else?” I ask.

“Taking care of things on the farm is time consuming and occupies most of my time during the offseason. Since I had the pool put in, I’ve been swimming a lot.”

“Hey, you two, the line’s up here,” Murphy shouts, and I swivel around. He sends a questioning look toward Ryder.

“Oops,” I say, my heels tapping against the concrete as I scuttle forward. I’ve been in Ryder’s company for a matter of minutes and I’m already losing track of everything and everyone else around me. Maybe laser tag is the best option for this evening. It’ll keep distance between us and there’s nothing remotely sexy about it.

# CHAPTER 13



# RYDER

NED HOLDS up his finger to gain our attention. “Just a couple more things. No pushing or shoving one another. And, finally, have a *blast!*”

*Silence.*

“Get it? Have. A. Blast,” he spells it out for us and waits for a reaction.

“Bless his little heart,” Wendy murmurs.

Calista fidgets from one foot to the other as if she’s uncomfortable. “Oh, I get it now. Good one, Ned,” she says, forcing out a laugh.

Ned smiles as if he won the lottery.

Pinching the bottom hem on the back of her vest between my fingers, I give a quick downward tug to get her attention. When she peers over her shoulder, I’m smiling. “You’re so damn cute.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, waving her hand, as if she can swat away my compliment.

“Your heart is like a big, gooey marshmallow,” I tell her.

She turns to me. “I felt bad none of us laughed at his joke. Even if it was horrible. He could be out raising hell with his friends, but instead, he’s working on a Saturday night. It’s nice to see some drive in someone so young.”

“Okay, grandma,” I tease.

“Is that an age reference because I’m older than you?” she asks, crossing her arms over her chest.



“Yeah, you’ve got a whole year on me. Did I ever tell you I have a thing for older women?”

“Ryder.” Murphy calls my name. “We’re about to start.” His eyes flicking to Calista and back to me, he shakes his head as if to warn me away from her. It’s going to take a lot more than a disapproving look to keep me from her. In fact, I’m not sure there’s a valid reason to stop what seems inevitable.

For now, I’ll focus on the game that’s about to begin, but by the end of the night, I’ll know what her lips feel like.

Ned brings us to the part of the building where our epic battle will take place. There are half walls and other geometric shaped objects for us to take cover behind that are brightly painted with graffiti. He picks up the whistle hanging from the cord around his neck. “Is everyone ready?” he shouts above the music playing.

“Yes,” we chorus.

“When I blow this whistle, the clock starts. The game is over when one of you makes it to the end of the course without being tagged. You can’t cheat at this game without us knowing.” He holds up a tablet. “Every shot will register here.”

“It’s like he knows you,” Christos says, tapping the back of his hand against Orion’s arm.

He shrugs. “Cheat, cheat, always beat.”

Calista shakes her head. “I swear they haven’t emotionally matured since they were eight.”

I hook my pinky finger around hers. “Good luck.”

“You too.”

“I’m going to count down from five,” Ned announces, forcing me to reluctantly lose contact with Calista.

Positioning my laser gun in both my hands, I prepare to start.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One.” Ned blasts the shrill whistle, signaling the official start of the game, and the lights

go off.

*That was unexpected.* I guess Ned forgot to mention the part about this being a black light course.

We disperse in different directions like a bunch of scared mice. I quickly lose sight of Calista. *Dammit.* I was hoping to stay close to her for as long as possible. Glow-in-the-dark painted arrows line the floor, pointing me in the right direction. Moving slowly, I crouch down, taking position behind one of the half walls. I catch a flash of white move past me on my right and realize it's Orion's white shirt glowing. If he wasn't standing out enough, the small sensor vests we're wearing have red lights on the chest and back. Between the two, he doesn't stand a chance of making it through this course.

*This is gonna be fun.*

With him in front of me now, I see every move he makes. I take my time, making sure no one is sneaking up on me while I'm sneaking up on him. I've almost reached him when I see the lights on his vest go off, signaling he's been tagged. Calista jumps in front of him like a graceful jungle cat wearing high heels. She throws her head back with a triumphant cackle, her long hair swaying wildly about her head. This silly, young-at-heart side of her is one I've never seen before.

I'm close enough to hear Orion say, "Calista, you're supposed to be on my side."

"Piss off, Orion. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a game to win."

"Like that'll happen," he says.

"Watch and learn, little brother." She whirls around and disappears again.

*What the fuck?*

I move in the direction I think she went until I see someone to my left. Hugging the triangular shaped structure I'm behind, I peer closer. It's Christos, and he's aiming his gun at Calista's back.

*Fuck that shit.*

I hurry forward, shooting him before he can get her. His vest lights up and flashes and Calista spins around. I see the moment when she realizes he was about to eliminate her. Christos turns to see who shot him, and I wave. He holds up his middle finger and stalks back toward the starting point.

Calista keeps her gun at the ready in front of her, as if she thinks I'm going to shoot her.

I move toward her. "You're safe with me."

"I can't be lulled into a false sense of security. I have three brothers and I know all's fair in war."

I'm almost to her when she dives into a ninja roll that brings her to the next wall. I'd think I was seeing things if she didn't do it another time. Raising her gun, she takes aim, then throws her hand in the air.

I hurry over and find Murphy with his jeans hanging loose and Wendy is bent over one of the half walls in front of him with her ass exposed. I break into laughter. He got shot mid-coitus. This gives an all new meaning to coitus-interruptus.

As if that wasn't savage enough, Calista skips around to the front of the half wall and shoots Wendy's chest sensor. "Sorry, not sorry," she says. She blows them a kiss before taking off once more.

Goddamn, she's a sexy badass. I push down on my dick. I never thought I'd be getting hard during a game of laser tag, but here I am. Then again, I've never played this game with Calista before.

I hear a scream up ahead and get moving. Both Kaiden and Rori's chest sensors are flashing.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Calista got us," Kaiden explains.

*Damn. That's my girl.*

"Good luck," Rori says, as I push on.

If my calculations are correct, there are only four of us remaining in the game.

“Nooooo!” Evie shouts.

*Make that three.*

When I come upon Evie, she’s muttering to herself. She’s taking the loss harder than I thought she would.

“Calista?”

She nods. “Yeah, she came at me like a ninja. I didn’t stand a chance.”

“You put up a good fight,” I say, patting her on the arm.

“Thanks. Watch out for her. She’s a wily one.”

I nod. “I will.”

Bolting forward, I maneuver around the obstacles as quickly as I can. Darius and Calista are farther along than I thought. When I finally catch sight of them, Calista is belly crawling on the floor to get closer to Darius. Her short, tight dress is rising up the back of her delectable thighs. She’s almost to him, and when he finally notices, it’s too late. In a split second she has her gun positioned and fires, hitting his sensor.

She jumps to her feet with a whoop of celebration. Throwing her arms in the air, she pogos up and down chanting, “You lose. You lose. I win. I win.”

Clearly, the Kastellanos family’s competitiveness was ingrained in them at a young age.

“You suck, Calista.”

“No, you suck, Darius. I am the victor. You are the loser.” She blows a raspberry at him and he wanders off grumbling something I can’t hear.

“Look at you, you competitive little badass,” I say, catching Calista off guard. She raises her gun toward me. “If I wanted to, I could’ve shot you and had the win,” I say.

“Then why didn’t you?” she asks, lowering it back to her side.

I shrug, making my way closer. “I guess I was having too much fun watching you gloat.”

Her smile is sheepish. “I know it’s wrong, but I couldn’t help myself. It’s not easy being the only girl in a family of four.”

“I can imagine.”

She places her hand on my chest, briefly resting her palm over my heart. This isn’t the first time she’s done this. It seems like a method for her to connect with me without crossing any lines. To share an intimate moment without actually being intimate.

When she starts to pull away, I catch hold of her hand and tug her into me. Our torsos crash together, followed by our lips. I’m not sure who moved first. I only know it’s long overdue and I never want this fiery kiss to end. I never want to lose the feeling of our tongues tangling with our fingers buried in each other’s hair. We tug and yank and grind together, searching for relief from the maelstrom of desire. But there isn’t any to be found.

The urgent sense of need keeps ratcheting up and I know there’s only one way to ease this ache. And now is not the time or place. Just as the tethers of reality are creeping in through the lustful fog, I hear my sensor alarm go off.

Drawing back from her clinging lips, I glance down at the red flashing lights on my chest and then look at Calista.

*She fucking shot me while we were kissing.*

I start with a single, deep laugh that turns into a roar that continues to grow. Calista soon joins in, and the two of us are gripping our stomachs by the time we’re settling down.

“You got me, champ,” I say.

She shrugs, looking contrite. “Sorry. I really wanted to win.”

My lips slowly spread into a smile. “I can tell. But if you ask me, we both won.” I press a soft kiss to her lips. “What do you think about finding everyone so you can gloat properly?”

She grins. “I like that idea.”

I take hold of her hand and we make our way through the rest of the room together. When the arrows on the floor direct us to an exit, I turn the knob and step through first. Seeing Ned and our friends waiting for us, I quickly drop her hand as they start to cheer.

“Way to go, Calista!” Evie shouts.

“Yay for girl power,” Wendy joins in as everyone gathers around to congratulate Calista.

“Dude, you lost to my sister,” Orion tells me.

“So did you,” I fire back.

He nods. “Good point.”

Murphy edges up beside me, giving me a knowing look. “So, you let her win?”

“No, I didn’t.”

He pats my arm. “Come on. You can tell me the truth.”

“I am. She won fair and square. She’s a badass.”

Impressed, he nods. “How about that? Ryder Goode taken down by a woman.”

I give a careless shrug. Little does he know, I’ve been taken down by her in more ways than one.

# CHAPTER 14



# CALISTA

WE ENTER The Golden Chopstick from the back entrance and we're immediately ushered into a private room. We settle around the rectangular table and, somehow, Ryder ends up next to me.

A man in a suit comes over to the table to hand us each a menu. "I'm Ken, the manager here. Your server should be in shortly. In the meantime, if you need anything, please give me a shout."

"Thank you, Ken," Darius says.

Our waiter shows up to take our drink order.

I nudge Rori's arm. "Want to split a scorpion bowl with me?"

She wrinkles her nose. "God no. I'll fall asleep mid-meal. Sorry."

"It's fine. I shouldn't drink anyway," I say.

Ryder presses his arm against mine on the other side of me. I turn my head his way.

"I'll share a scorpion bowl with you," he offers.

An image of the two of us simultaneously drinking from the same glass with straws pops into my head. It's a bad idea. Especially after our kiss.

God, I haven't even had a chance to properly process that portion of my evening yet. I'll save that for later when I'm alone at home and no one can witness the hearts in my eyes.

"Well?" he prods.



My head starts to move side to side but my mouth misbehaves. “Yes,” I say without meaning to. I open my mouth to correct my answer when Ryder places the order with the waiter.

Oh well. It’s only a drink. A very large drink I’ll be sharing with a very large man. With a very large...

“Evie and I want to thank you all for coming out with us tonight,” Darius says, cutting off my dangerous thoughts. “You all are the people we’re closest with, and we can’t wait to share our big day with you.”

“We’re just as happy to be here with you two,” Kaiden answers for us all.

“Now, figure out what you want because I’m starving,” Darius adds.

Opening the menu, I read through items, waiting for something to jump out at me. This restaurant is new to me, but I’ve heard great things about it.

“What are you thinking of ordering?” Ryder asks.

“I’m not sure yet. This place is new to me.”

“I haven’t been here before either, so I’m no help.”

“I might want beef and broccoli, but I can make that myself.”

“I’ve never thought about how being a chef would impact you when you dine out.”

“Most of the time I look at it as a night where I don’t have to cook or eat my own food, but I don’t make many Chinese dishes, so there’s a lot for me to choose from.” I glance at Ryder. “What about you? What are you in the mood for?”

“I want a little of everything,” he says, smiling devilishly at me.

*Why do I suddenly feel like I’m on the menu?*

“We could order different things and share them,” I suggest.

Closing his menu, he places it on the table. “That works. Let’s figure out what we want.” He leans into me, sharing my menu.

I point out various items and, through the process of elimination, we narrow it down to eight things. Ryder makes a list on his phone so we won’t forget anything.

Our waiter returns, delivering our drinks. When he starts to put the large yellow ceramic bowl in front of me, I gesture for him to set it down between us. While he moves over to Darius and Evie to take their order, I grab one of the two straws and Ryder takes the other. With the center shot still flaming, I brush my hair back behind my shoulders before I lean forward to take my first sip. Ryder moves in at the same time, placing our faces in close proximity, which turns my intended sip into a long pull. Even though I’ve had his tongue in my mouth, there’s still something erotic about sharing a drink with him.

When I sit back, the burn of the alcohol hits my throat before the punch of it is felt. “Whoa, that’s strong.” I rub the spot between my eyebrows.

“Go easy there, lightweight,” Ryder teases.

“I am a lightweight, for sure. And this drink is dangerous because it’s still as delicious as I remember it being when I was in college. It’s just as strong too.”

“Don’t worry, I can give you a ride home,” he says.

“You don’t have to. We have the limo.”

“Well, the offer stands regardless,” he says.

The waiter has now made his way around the table to us. “What can I get for you?”

Ryder checks the list on his phone, then slowly recites each item, giving him time to write it all down.

Our waiter collects the menus before leaving the room. I take another sip of our drink, but this time I don’t overdo it.

“Ryder, we never talked about what foods you want me to make for you this coming week.”

He places his hand on my bare leg above my knee, squeezing. “Let’s not worry about work right now. You’re off the clock.”

“But how will I know what to—”

His pointed look silences me. His large, warm hand squeezes my thigh again. “I’ll eat anything you make, so no more thinking or talking about work. Got it?” His head cants as he studies my face.

I nod. “Got it.”

His brown orbs are filled with warmth as he smiles. “Good.” His fingertips slowly trail along my thigh in a series of swirling patterns. It feels like a sexy version of finger painting with my skin as the canvas. I swallow back a moan before it escapes. My eyes locked with his, I hold still as his fingers skim and glide along the skin beneath the hem of my dress.

*What would his fingers feel like on my clit?*

“So, rumor has it Niall O’Rourke is in negotiations with our team,” Kaiden announces, making me jump. He tucks his phone back into his pocket while I push Ryder’s hand from my leg. My eyes dart around the table to see if anyone’s been watching us. But with the table as a barrier, no one can see. Leaning forward, I suck down a generous gulp from the scorpion bowl.

“Who told you that?” Murphy asks.

Kaiden shakes his head. “I can’t reveal my source.”

“Well, I happen to know it’s true,” Darius says.

“How do you know for sure?” Ryder asks, as if he’s completely unaffected by touching me. And maybe he is. He’s no stranger to female attention. I’m sure he can get any woman he wants.

Darius smiles. “I may have heard it from the man himself.”

“I forgot you guys are tight like that. He could be a great asset for our team,” Ryder says.

Kaiden nods. “We could use an enforcer. That position has died out for the most part in the league, but I think it could be a game changer for us.”

“I think this news is exciting as fuck. As much as I’ve been enjoying my break from hockey, I miss playing. But I know it won’t be long before we’re right back in the season again,” Murphy interjects.

“I feel the same,” Ryder tells him.

“I miss it too, but my body doesn’t,” Kaiden says, and they all laugh.

A few different servers enter the room, carrying trays piled with food. They deliver orders to the appropriate places before hurrying back out to the front of the restaurant.

“Grab what you want first,” Ryder tells me. “And don’t be shy about taking extra because I can eat a lot. Correction—I plan to eat a lot.”

I dish chicken fingers, beef fried rice, vegetable lo mein, and crab rangoon onto my plate.

“Keep going,” Ryder tells me. “What about the boneless spare ribs? Or the vegetable spring rolls?”

“I don’t need to eat that much,” I say.

“You’re always catering to other people’s wants and needs. The whole weekend you were at my house, I don’t remember seeing you eat anything. You squeeze your own meals in when you can.”

I shrug. “It is what it is.”

“I get that, but tonight is not one of those times. You’re out with friends and people who care about you. You don’t have any responsibilities to take care of. No food to prepare. Now you can take your time and enjoy the meal that’s been prepared for you. Right?”

I nod. “Right.” He smiles at me, and it sucks the breath from my lungs. And since breathing is a necessary bodily function, I go into self preservation mode and focus on adding more food to my plate.

“Good girl,” he husks, resulting in another stolen breath. It appears he’s not only dangerous to my libido. *Can you die from an attraction that’s too powerful? How many missed breaths is the limit?*

If my demise is inevitable, I’d rather it be from Ryder’s suggested method of too many orgasms. Since he mentioned that to me, I haven’t been able to forget or to stop imagining what that would entail. Finally, a death I’d welcome.

All conversations around the table end as we dig into the delicious food. I take my time, savoring every single bite. I pay attention to the various hints of flavor and how they’re used, and I think about what dishes I could make. It’s similar to a painter admiring another artist’s work and gaining inspiration from what they see.

I feel Ryder’s heavy gaze on me and turn my head. He winks at me before popping an entire spring roll into his mouth. He seems pleased to see me eating so much. *Maybe he has some food kink and watching me eat is turning him on. He could be hard right now.*

My absurd thoughts make me snicker. Or maybe it’s all the alcohol I’ve consumed that’s starting to make everything amusing.

“What’s so funny?” Ryder asks.

“Just something I thought.” My gaze lowers to his lap to check for a hard-on, but his napkin is covering him.

“See something you like?” he asks, propelling my eyes to his face.

“We should change the subject,” I suggest.

“On the contrary. I think this one will be fascinating.”

“It’s really not. And now that I’m thinking about it, it’s not even funny.”

“I insist,” he presses, smirking.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I take another sip from the bowl because *why not?* “You seemed happy I was eating so much and I wondered if you had a food kink.”

“A food kink?” he repeats.

“Yep. I thought maybe you get aroused when women eat.”

He makes a choking sound. “That’s why you were checking out my dick?”

With my lips wrapped around the straw, I nod. Mmm, the more of this drink I consume, the better it tastes. When I sit back in my chair, I feel nice and relaxed.

He nudges my shoulder with his until I turn my head toward him. “Just so you know, food is not my kink.”

“What is?” I blurt out, instantly regretting it. I don’t think I want to know.

He leans closer, whispering one word. “You.”

# CHAPTER 15



# RYDER

THE WARM NIGHT air is muggy as we stand in The Golden Chopstick's parking lot watching Darius and Evie drive away in his truck.

"Is everyone set with rides?" I ask. I'm sober and happy to give anyone a lift.

"Calista isn't," Wendy says.

Murphy steps forward. "We can—"

"I'll get her home safely," I say, cutting in before he can finish.

"I don't want you to go out of your way," Calista says.

"It's not a problem at all," I reply, dispelling her worries.

I watch as the girls hug each other and say their goodbyes. Murphy moves over to stand next to me.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, dude?" he asks.

"What?" I play dumb.

"Spending time with Calista. The two of you have been glued to each other all night. I'm surprised Darius didn't notice." He keeps his voice low so the others won't hear.

"I think he has more important things on his mind, like marrying the woman he loves," I say.

"Yes, he does. But if, or should I say *when*, he notices what's going on between you two, the shit will hit the fan. And it won't be pretty."

"Let it go, Murphy."



“This is bigger than just you, man. The team—”

“I’m sick of hearing about how my personal life could affect the team. I give my everything to our fucking team. And no one can say differently.” I grit the words out between clenched teeth.

“I know you do,” he agrees.

“I care about her, Murphy.”

“Yeah, you care about a lot of them,” he jokes, laughing.

I grab his arm to get his attention. “I mean it. I really care about her—deeply care about her.”

“Wow. I had no idea,” he says.

“Yeah, I know you didn’t.”

“I’m happy for you, bro. But it sucks that she’s Darius’s sister. Couldn’t you care deeply about someone who’s not related to one of our teammates?”

“In a perfect world, yeah. In this one, no. I didn’t intend to fall for her or anyone else. But she’s damn near irresistible.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he says.

“Oh, you mean like you did with Wendy?” I ask, pointing out his hypocrisy.

“Fair enough. I want you to be happy. I just don’t want it to affect our upcoming season.”

“I don’t want that either. But I’m telling you now, I’m not willing to give her up for the sake of keeping peace on the team.”

Murphy exhales long and slow. “Why do I think this is going to be a shitshow?”

“Because it probably is.” I shrug. “But so be it. Besides, Darius can’t hold a grudge forever.”

“I’m sure we’ll find out,” he adds.

“Let’s go, honey.” Wendy waves to Murphy.

“We’ll talk soon,” I tell him before we exchange a quick back-slapping hug.

“I’ll pray for you,” he says, smirking.

I smirk. “Can’t hurt.”

“Is everything okay?” Calista asks when everyone has dispersed toward their vehicles and we’re alone.

“Yes, why?” I catch her hand, threading our fingers together, as we walk through the parking lot.

She rolls her lips inward. “You and Murphy seemed to be having a serious discussion.”

“So you were watching me, then?” I tease.

“Guilty as charged. But it’s not like you’re not used to women watching you.”

“I’m only interested in one woman,” I say when we reach the passenger side of my truck.

“Does she know that?”

“She should.”

“Have you told her? If not, you can’t expect her to just *know*.”

“I’ve given her plenty of signs.”

“Maybe your signs aren’t as clear as you think they are. Messaging is subjective. Some people need to be hit over the head with something and others—”

I capture her lips, shutting down the conversation in the best possible way—with my tongue in her mouth. Judging by the way she thrusts hers to meet mine, she’s on board with my method. Pulling my hand from hers, I place my palm on her lower back, urging her closer. That same hand begins a downward slide that ends with me clutching an ass cheek.

*Christ, I want her. More than I’ve ever wanted anyone before.*

But a restaurant parking lot is not the place to be doing this. We don’t need someone filming us and sharing it on

social media. Not only would Darius kill me, but so would the team's PR staff.

Dragging my lips from hers, I press our foreheads together. "How's that for a sign? Was that clear enough for you?"

She rubs her hand over my heart, giggling. "Very direct. Your messaging is on point."

Removing her hand from my chest, I press a kiss in the center of her palm. "Let's get you home." I help her climb up into my truck and at the same time appreciate the nice view of her shapely calves.

I slide behind the wheel and get us started on the ride to her home. Calista lets out a big yawn.

"Excuse me. I don't know where that came from."

"It might have something to do with how you drank half of that bowl by yourself," I mention, smiling.

"You didn't hold up your end of the deal. I didn't want it to go to waste. Which reminds me, I need to slip some money in Evie's purse the next time I see her."

"Why?" I ask.

"Those drinks are expensive and I ate a lot of food."

"Do you know how much money your brother makes?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't matter. It's the principle. Just because he's paid well for his profession doesn't mean anyone should take advantage of his generosity."

"If anything, I made you get more than you wanted."

"You're a big guy, though. You need to eat more food," she justifies.

"You're adorable for defending my appetite, but you don't need to worry about the cost for tonight. I instructed the manager to put the bill on my credit card."

"When did you do that?"

"Before you arrived."

Her eyes open wide and joy spreads across her face. “Ryder, that’s so sweet. You never stop surprising me.”

Her words fill me with a warmth that’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I know what it feels like for my mom and dad to be proud of me. I’m lucky to have had that throughout my life. What I’m not used to is surprising people who aren’t related to me. At least not in a good way.

Calista makes me want to be a better man, the best version of myself I can be. And I want to keep surprising her with kind and unexpected gestures that please her. I’m starting to realize exactly how much I’ve fallen for her.

The idea of falling in itself is intimidating, but it’s not until you think of the “how” that it turns scary. Falls aren’t planned. They typically happen rapidly and without control. And from what I’m learning firsthand, it seems that falling in love is no different.

My beautiful passenger is asleep when I park in her driveway and turn off my truck.

I touch her arm. “Calista, honey, you’re home.” She doesn’t react at all. Climbing out, I pocket my keys and head around to open her door. “Calista. It’s time to wake up.” Cupping the side of her face, I caress her cheek with my thumb.

“Hmm.” She hums in her sleep.

I smile. “Wake up, beautiful.”

Her eyes open to slits. “Too tired. Sleep here.” She rolls her head in the other direction, away from me, releasing a tiny snore.

I cover my mouth, smothering my laughter. How the hell am I going to get her into her house?

I spot her tiny purse in her lap and surmise her keys must be somewhere inside. I have a strict rule I follow that forbids me from going through a woman’s purse. However, with this being an unusual situation, it calls for an unorthodox solution.

*A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.*

Undoing the snap, I snatch her keys up by the ring, then fasten it closed once again. Slinging her purse over my shoulder, I slip one arm behind her and the other underneath her knees, lifting her into my arms. Maneuvering carefully, I ease her from my truck and push the door closed with my hip. Carrying her isn't much of a challenge but finding the correct key on the ring sure is. The third time's a charm and I'm able to get her inside without waking her up. I don't know which room is her bedroom, but with only one story, it shouldn't be hard to find. I know the kitchen and living area are to the right, which means the bedrooms are off the hallway on the left side of the house. The first room is a guest room/office, the second is a bathroom, and the last is her bedroom.

I gently set her down on top of her comforter and place her purse on the nightstand. I click on the lamp and glance around the simple space. Her walls are painted a light green and her curtains and comforter are white.

She shifts her legs, calling my attention to the fact that she still has heels on. That won't work. I set about undoing the tiny buckle positioned over each of her ankles. With the size of my fingers, this is no easy feat. I feel like I'm suddenly the definition of *all thumbs*.

Finally, I'm able to remove her shoes and place them in her closet. I return to the bed and lean over her, bracing my weight with a hand on the mattress.

"Calista... Calista." The second time I call her name is louder. Her eyelids flutter open and close again. "Calista," I say forcefully. Her eyes snap open, remaining that way. "Hey, beautiful. You're in your bed. I carried you inside, but I didn't want to leave until I made sure you're okay."

Her lips curve into a sleepy smile. "You carried me inside?"

"I did, and I'm going to head home now."

"Nooo." She throws her arms around my neck. "You can't leave yet."

I laugh. "I can't?"

“Uhn-uh.”

“Why not?”

“I need a kiss.”

“I think I can manage to deliver on that request.” Lowering my mouth to hers, I nibble on her plump bottom lip, then drag my tongue along the length. Her mouth parts beneath mine with a sigh of relief, as if my kiss is exactly what she needs. It makes me feel like I’m a goddamn king in her eyes.

Her arms slide around my back, drawing me toward her. Slipping off my shoes, I climb on the bed and settle between her legs.

“Yes,” she moans when our bodies come together.

“Fuck, you feel good, and I’ve barely had a chance to touch you.”

“Well, what are you waiting for, Mr. I’ll Kill You With Orgasms?”

“I didn’t say it quite like that.”

“Well, I think it’s only fair that since you made such a bold statement, I should get a sample of your skills.”

“You’ve had a lot to drink,” I remind her.

She peers up at me beseechingly with wide green eyes. “I was tired, not drunk, and now I’m completely awake. *All over.*”

Groaning, I swallow past the sudden lump in my throat.

“Ryder.” She calls my name softly. “Kiss me.” I move in to grant her wish and she places her finger over my lips. “That’s not what I meant.” She chews on her lower lip, watching me with anticipation.

“Tell me what you want, Lis. I want to hear the words.”

“I want you to make me come with your mouth on my pussy,” she states, her eyes never wavering from mine.

Shifting to my knees, I raise her dark blue dress until her tiny black panties are exposed. I hook my fingers into each

side of the lace, tugging them from her legs in one long, sweeping motion and toss them aside.

Backing down the mattress, I push her thighs open and lower to my stomach between them. “I’ve wanted to know what you taste like from the moment I saw you,” I say, gliding my finger in a line from her clit to her entrance and back up again. I make the next swipe with my tongue, dipping inside to sample her arousal. “Mmm, so fucking sweet.”

“Oh God.” She moans, bucking her hips toward my mouth.

I blow on her smooth lips, teasing her.

“Please... Ryder.”

“Say my name again, baby,” I order, rubbing my hair-covered chin over her clit.

“Ryder,” she husks, gripping the comforter in her hands.

Closing my lips over her swollen flesh, I softly sweep my tongue back and forth until she’s grinding against my mouth and tugging on my hair. I thrust two fingers inside her, hooking them to pulse against her G-spot, and use the tip of my tongue to rapidly flick at her clit.

“Yes... yes... yes,” she cries, rocking against my hand and tongue as her legs begin to quiver. She arches her back and I clamp down on her hips, holding them still while I draw out every bit of her orgasm. When she’s done, I lick up every drop of her release, which only leaves me hungry for more.

She strokes her fingers through my beard. “That was incredible.”

“It was. You taste even better than I imagined.”

“Do you need to go now?” she asks.

“You’re kicking me out already?” I tease.

“No, of course not. But I know you were planning on leaving before I...” She trails off.

“Got demanding,” I finish.

She nods. “Yeah, that.”

“You can make demands of me anytime. I loved it.”

“Good. I’m sure this won’t be the only time,” she says.

“No, definitely not.” I tap the tip of her nose with my finger.

“I really do have to go. My dad went fishing with his friends this weekend, so I need to be up bright and early tomorrow to take care of all the minis.”

“I love that you call them that,” she says, smiling.

“It’s convenient.”

“I’ll see you on Monday morning at nine,” she says, but it sounds like there’s a question there.

“Nine is perfect. I’m already looking forward to it. You’re welcome to come over tomorrow too,” I say.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got a lot of work to take care of.”

“Okay then. I guess this is bye for now,” I say, pressing a brief kiss on her mouth. When I start to pull back, she grabs each side of my shirt, holding me in place.

“I think we can do better than that.”



# CHAPTER 16



# CALISTA

RYDER MEETS me at the back of my minivan.

“Good morning,” he says, wrapping me up in his muscular arms.

“Good morning.” I sigh contentedly. I spent most of yesterday working myself up into a frenzy over what happened Saturday night. *What does it mean for us? Will it make things awkward with us?* And with one hug, he wipes away much of my concern.

His arms reluctantly slip from me. “I figured you had a bunch of supplies to carry in and would need my help.”

“I sure do. I can use a pack mule, if you’re offering.”

He stretches his arms to each side. “Load me up.”

“Okay, you asked for it.” I snicker, hanging multiple bags from his arms. Grabbing the remainder, I close the hatch and follow him to the kitchen. We place all the bags on the island, and this time he helps me unload them.

When we’re finished putting everything away, he reaches in his pocket and pulls out a small plastic card. “This is for you. Every purchase you make for this job, whether it’s food or cooking utensils you need to have here, I want you to use this card. I’ll pay the monthly balance.” He hands it to me.

*Calista Kastellanos.* My name is on the credit card. “Thank you. You didn’t have to do this.”

“It’s the easiest way for me to make sure you’re not paying for things you shouldn’t.” He stares knowingly at me.

“I’ll save all the receipts so you can see what’s been purchased.” I already made a special folder for them.

“I trust you not to screw me. At least not financially.” He winks.

I poke his chest. “Whoa, pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

He catches my hand, pressing my palm to his heart. “I’m sure there’s something building between us that’s too powerful to deny, and there’s only one way it can go.”

Oh, I don’t know. I can think of another way that’s not so pretty. One that would leave me a heartbroken and pining mess over a man I have no business being with in the first place.

He raises my hand from his chest and presses a kiss to the back of it before letting go. “I have a couple of surprises for you,” he says, looking childlike in his excitement. He hurries over to the table and returns with a large gift bag in his hand. He sets it down on the island. “Open it.”

“You didn’t need to get me a gift,” I say, removing layers of tissue paper from the top.

He shrugs. “I wanted to.”

I pull out a neatly folded square of material. “What is this?” Unfolding it, I shake it out to its full size and laugh. It’s an apron, and across the chest it says “Goode Chef.” “I love it. Thank you.”

“You’re not done yet,” he tells me.

My eyebrows raise in surprise. “There’s more?”

“Yep. Get at it.”

I reach way down to the bottom of the bag and pull out more material. This time, I’m able to immediately recognize what it is. “You bought me a bathing suit?” I hold the modest black one piece up in front of me.

“I thought it would be nice for you to have one here so you can use the pool anytime you’d like. The last time I mentioned taking a dip, you never got the chance.”

Stepping forward, I wrap my arms around his waist. “You’re so thoughtful. Thank you. I love it.” He pulls me tight to him and then loosens his hold, looking down at me. “I really wanted to buy you a bikini, but I resisted the urge.”

“Pfft. Skinny dipping is where it’s at, Goode,” I say, shaking my head.

“Now you’ve done it,” he says, rocking his erection into me.

“Would this be considered sexual harassment since I work for you?” I joke.

“I think any court would decide in my favor. How am I supposed to behave when you mentioned skinny dipping?”

I place my gifts back in the bag and shove the tissue paper down on top. “This is the point where I tell you to get out of my kitchen or at least go sit down and behave. I have breakfast to make. You’re going to mess up my schedule.”

“How much time do you need? I have some chores to do.”

“Give me a half hour and then follow the smell of bacon back here.” I smile.

“Bacon, huh? You must really like me.”

“Or I didn’t want to listen to you whine about how badly you want some.”

“Whine?” He moves closer. “I don’t whine.” He tugs me into his arms and swallows up any words I was about to say. The kiss is slow and sultry, like he’s making love to my mouth, and I’m no longer concerned with schedules... or cooking... or anything besides Ryder.

---

Today is day three at Ryder’s and not only am I enjoying my new job, but things are going well with the man himself. He’s been very flirtatious with me, finding reasons to touch and kiss me whenever he can, and I’m not upset about that at all.

I'm currently making dinner for Ryder's family. He sprung the news on me at breakfast, so a quick trip to the grocery store was necessary. I got to swipe my new credit card for the purchase and it was oddly pleasing. I guess shopping with other people's money is much more fun than with my own.

I've got everything ready to cook. The meat has been marinating for an hour in the souvlaki sauce. I've already prepared the salad and I left the feta cheese on the side because Ryder's five-year-old niece and three-year-old nephew may not like the taste.

I hear the sound of the front door close as I pop the next sheet of cookies in the oven. I'm in the process of moving some from the cooling rack to a plate when an older gentleman appears.

"You must be Calista," he says, offering a welcoming smile.

My lips curve in response. "I am. And I'm guessing you're Ryder's older brother," I joke. It's clear by the resemblance this is Ryder's dad.

"Oh, I like you. Please call me Walter."

"Okay, Walter it is. Would you like a cookie?" I nod toward the plate.

"Don't mind if I do." He grabs the one closest to the edge, devouring it in two bites. "May I please have another?"

"Sure, but don't tell your son. I'm not going to let him have any until after dinner."

He chuckles. "Not a chance. This will be our secret."

Ryder walks in a few minutes later to find his dad sitting at the island drinking a cup of coffee and the two of us chatting like we're best friends.

"I see you've met my dad."

I nod. "I have."

"I was just about to ask Calista to marry me when you walked in," he says, his eyes shining with amusement.

I laugh, glancing at Ryder. “I see where you get your charm from.”

“And my good looks.” He notices the cookies sitting out on the plate and reaches for one. I slap his hand away.

“Hey,” he says, looking outraged.

I wag my finger at him. “No cookies until later.”

“But there are so many,” he says. “Why can’t I have one?”

“I’m saving them for the kids.”

“They don’t need that many. My sister will murder us all if they get hopped up on sweets.”

“I plan to send some home with her.”

“And with me too, right?” Walter asks, smiling.

“Of course,” I confirm.

“Do you need help with anything?” Ryder asks.

“Son, leave it to the professional. The only thing you and I know how to do in the kitchen is screw up,” Walter tells him.

“I’m not that bad,” Ryder defends.

Walter props his chin on his hand. “Did you tell Calista how devastated we were when we ran out of her leftovers?”

Ryder nods. “Yeah, briefly.”

“After eating your cooking, nothing tasted good anymore. You spoiled us.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it so much. And just so you know, I always cook extra. Don’t let your son hoard the meals.”

“Don’t tell him that. He’ll be over here all the time,” Ryder says, but I can tell he doesn’t mind.

“Now that I’ve met Calista, I plan to be over here more anyway. These old eyes could use something beautiful to gaze upon.”

“Oh, Walter. You’re too kind.” I say.

“And you’re too busy to be over here all the time,” Ryder tells him, smirking.

“Hello,” a female voice calls out.

“Alice and her brood are here,” Ryder tells me.

My stomach fills with nervous energy. I’m about to meet the rest of his family.

“Hey y’all,” Alice says, waving. She’s gorgeous like her brother. Black hair falls straight to her shoulders in a shiny curtain. Her dark probing eyes look me over, and I hope I don’t fall short in her esteem.

Ryder and his dad exchange hugs with Alice and the kids, then shake her husband Brandon’s hand.

“Alice and Brandon, this is Calista,” Ryder introduces me.

She smiles as she walks toward me. I’m drawn into a hug before I know what’s happening. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I say.

Brandon shakes my hand. “Good to meet you.”

“Thanks. And you,” I say.”

“Brother, I didn’t know you had a girlfriend,” Alice says, smiling at me.

“I’m not his girlfriend,” I interject before he can reply.

“You’re not?” she asks, her face showing her disappointment.

“She’s my chef,” Ryder explains.

I don’t know why his answer stings so much. I am his chef. And why didn’t I keep my big mouth shut instead of jumping in to answer for him? Had I waited, I would’ve seen what his answer would have been, instead of being based off mine or to save face.

“Yes! No more eating your crappy food or takeout when we come over,” Alice says.

“Mommy, isn’t crappy a bad word?” a petite female version of Brandon asks.

“Yes, Nora. I shouldn’t have said that,” Alice says, rolling her eyes at the adults in the room. “Being a parent is hard, y’all.”

I laugh. “I can imagine.”

Ryder scoops up the little boy clinging to his leg and puts him on his shoulders. “This cute little dude is Leo.”

“Hi, Leo,” I say, waving to him.

“Hi.” He smiles, looking so much like his uncle, my ovaries practically burst.

“And this little angel is Hadley,” Brandon says, angling the sleeping baby in his arms so I can see her cherubic face.

“You have a beautiful family,” I say.

“Thank you,” Alice says. “This is it. There are no more coming. The next one is up to Ryder. I’ve done my family duty.”

Ryder lifts Leo from his shoulders and sets him down. “It’s not happening anytime soon, but maybe at some point. These three are enough for now.”

Why am I excited he’s not against having kids? It’s not like he’s going to ask me to bear them.

“What do you think about taking a swim before dinner?” Alice asks Nora and Leo.

“Yes!” they shout.

“Okay, honey. Looks like we’re getting wet,” she tells Brandon.

“We knew they’d never come over here without going swimming,” he says. “Come on, family. Let’s head outside.” Brandon leads his family toward the back of the house.

“Ryder, I’ve got appetizers if you want me to bring them out to the deck,” I say, removing the trays from the fridge.

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll take care of it,” Ryder says.

Walter slips from the stool and comes around the island. “I’ll take those.” He takes them from me and walks from the



room.

“I guess that’s settled then,” I say, glancing at Ryder.

He sidles closer, brushing a lock of hair back from my face. “I’m sorry you’ve had to do so much extra work today. I didn’t know they were coming over until last night. Alice doesn’t really ask, she just assumes any time is a good time for a visit.”

“It’s not a problem at all. Go visit with your family and leave me to cook.” I smile.

“Are you sure? I’d rather stay here with you.”

I place my hands on my hips. “Do I need to kick you out?”

He throws his hands up. “All right, I’m going.” He leans over, smacking a quick kiss on my lips before he walks away. He pauses, still in sight. “You know, you’re hot when you’re forceful.”

I snort. “Sounds like you need to cool off in the pool.”

# CHAPTER 17



# RYDER

I DRAG my shirt over my head as I walk out the back door, tossing it onto a chair. I toe off my sneakers and start running. There's no slowing down as I make a flying leap into the deep end of the pool. I make an epic splash on impact, and Nora and Leo squeal with delight.

“Uncle Ryder, you made a tidal wave,” Nora says.

“I sure did.” I swim toward the shallow end where they're standing on the lowest step with their arm floaties. My dad is sitting on the edge of the pool with his feet in the water and the baby in his arms.

“What's going on with you and Calista?” Alice asks.

“Jesus, babe. Do you need to be so direct?” Brandon asks.

She shrugs. “Hey, direct is all I know. So, what's the deal?”

“She's my chef.”

Her head tips as she studies me. “That's not all she is, though, right?”

“No, there's more going on. But she's Darius's sister, so that complicates things.”

“And that's keeping you from pursuing something more?”

I push my wet hair back from my face. “No, I wouldn't say that. But it's making me take things slower than I'd like. I'm crazy about her.”

Her eyes flash wide open. “Holy sh— crap. You love her.”

“Mommy said crap again,” Nora points out.

“Why don’t we do some laps,” Brandon suggests, directing the kids to the other side of the shallow end while Alice and I move to the deeper water.

“What are you going to do?” Alice asks.

“I don’t know. We have the rehearsal dinner and the wedding at the end of this week. I’m not going to talk to Darius about the situation before then. And I can’t spring it on him this weekend. I’ll have to wait until he’s back from his honeymoon to sit down with him.”

“I’m going to give you some advice whether you want it or not,” Alice says.

“What a surprise,” I droll.

She laughs. “Hey, at least I’m predictable.”

“That’s true. Do you need a drumroll?” I ask.

“Naw, it’s not necessary. I’m thinking you need to take some time and analyze your feelings for Calista. Figure out if she’s someone you can see yourself with long term or if she’s a temporary dalliance.”

“I’ve already done that,” I say.

Alice stares at me with an appraising eye. “And?”

“Nothing about my feelings for her is temporary.”

“Oh my freaking God. I can’t believe my little brother’s finally fallen for someone. No more puck bunnies for you. Maybe you should get tested to make sure you’re not giving her more than your heart,” she suggests, laughing.

“Aren’t you hilarious?”

“I think I am.” She looks pleased with herself.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’ve already been tested and everything’s A-Okay on that front.”

“Wow, I’m so impressed. How extremely adult of you.”

“Thank you. I have my moments,” I say, treading water.

“If I had any questions as to the validity or the depth of your feelings for Calista, your responsible actions have convinced me more than your words ever could. You love her.”

“I don’t know if it’s love yet. It’s only been a couple of weeks. But it’s something. It’s something special.”

“Listen here, my naive little brother, where is the instruction manual about falling in love?” she asks.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You said it was too soon to be in love, so I’m wondering where you got your information from. Is there some love rule book I don’t know about? Maybe I should read it. I mean, what if Brandon and I aren’t really in love? We’ve only been together for seven years.” She rolls her eyes, openly mocking me.

I make sure the kids aren’t looking our way before I flip her the bird. “What’s wrong with me wanting to be sure before I label what I feel for Calista? I have zero experience when it comes to relationships. The closest I’ve come is a friends with benefits situation in college.”

“Why are you so emotionally stunted anyway?” she asks.

“I’m not stunted at all,” I defend, bracing my arms on the edge of the pool.

She pats me on the back. “Is it because Mom died? Are you afraid to admit you love her because you might lose her?” she asks.

I search her face for a hint of amusement. A flicker of her being disingenuous. But all I find is genuine concern.

“Alice, I promise I never have, nor am I, purposely closing myself off from love. Not because of Mom or for any other reason. I’ve just never met anyone who’s made me feel the way Calista does. I don’t know. Maybe it’s a matter of the timing finally being right.”

“Good. I know I give you a hard time, but you know it’s my love language, right?” she asks.

“I know you love me, sis. How could you not? I’m awesome.” I grin.

She splashes water in my face, making me sputter, then laughs at me.

“I guess I asked for that,” I say, shaking the water from my face. Bracing my hands on the edge of the pool, I propel myself from the water. “I’m going to check on Calista and see if she needs any help.” I grab a towel from one of the chaises and give my arms and legs a cursory swipe, then wrap the terry cloth around my waist.

Alice starts humming “Let’s Get it On” as I walk inside.

I pad into the kitchen on silent bare feet. “Hey, beautiful.”

She spins around with a hand on her chest. “You surprised me.”

I continue moving closer “What are you making?”

“Chicken and beef kabobs.”

She’s using a special pan to grill them on the stovetop.

“We could’ve cooked these on the patio. I would’ve fired up the grill for you.”

She releases a scoffing sound. “I don’t need you to fire up anything for me. I’m a professional, remember?”

“Sorry. I was trying to be chivalrous, not insulting. I know you’re more than capable on your own. I just feel like I never get to help you with anything, while you’re always doing things for me.”

“Did you forget you pay me to do these things?”

I place my hands on her lower back, holding her loosely in my arms. “No, I didn’t. But you go out of your way to please me, and I really appreciate it.”

She curls her hands over my shoulders, her fingertips kneading my muscles. “I like feeding you.”

I smile. “I can tell.”

Her gaze lowering to my chest, she slides one hand down over my heart. Can she feel it beating for her and only her?

A glimpse of unease darts across her face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, cupping her cheek.

Her green, worry-filled eyes affix to mine. “This situation... us... it’s really... complicated.”

“I agree our situation is a bit unorthodox, but I don’t think our feelings are complicated. At least mine aren’t. I’m crazy about you.”

All the signs of worry dissipate from her face as she smiles. “I guess it’s convenient that I’m also crazy about you.”

I smile back at her, wondering if it’s possible for my heart to burst from being too full of happiness. “Maybe we should stop worrying about all the outside influences in our lives and focus on the two of us. I like you. You like me. It doesn’t matter who your brother is or who my teammate is. I want to be with you. I want you to be my girlfriend.”

“What about me working for you?”

“What about it? It’s not an issue for me. If you weren’t my chef, I’d see a lot less of you,” I say.

She wrinkles her nose. “I know, but I don’t feel right taking money from you now that feelings are involved.”

“How about you stick it out through the summer and then you can reevaluate.”

She nods. “Okay. I can do that. What do we do about Darius?”

“I thought we weren’t going to worry about him.”

“If I’m going to be your girlfriend, he’s going to find out about us.”

“Are you going to be my girlfriend? You never answered me,” I say.

“You never asked me. For your information, telling someone you want something isn’t the same as asking.”

“Touché.” She’s right. I got ahead of myself. “Calista Kastellanos, will you do me the honor of being my girlfriend?”

“Yes, I will.”

I press my lips to hers, sealing it with a kiss. I pull back, smiling down at her. “You won’t regret it.”

“You better not make me.”

“Note to self: don’t piss off the woman cooking your food,” I say, and she laughs.

She pushes out of my arms. “Oh shit. I forgot about the kabobs. You’re too distracting.” She turns the skewers. “You’re lucky they’re not overcooked.”

“I’m sure they’d be delicious regardless. Will you do me a huge favor?” I ask.

“What?”

“Will you eat dinner with my family and me?”

“If you want me to.” She surprises me by agreeing so quickly.

“I do. I want them to get to know you. We don’t have to hide our feelings around them.”

“Which reminds me, we never figured out how to handle telling my brother.” she says.

“I’ll take him out for dinner after the honeymoon. We’ll be in a public place, so he can’t murder me.”

“Maybe I should be there too,” she suggests.

“I think it’s better if I go alone. Then he can say everything he needs to without worrying about what your reaction will be.”

She pats my chest. “Okay. I trust your judgment.” Her rosy lips stretch, arching upward at the corners. “This is really going to happen, right?”

I brush the tip of my nose over hers. “Yes. We’re really going to happen.”



# CHAPTER 18



# CALISTA

RYDER AND WALTER help me carry everything outside to the back patio while Alice and Brandon get the kids dried off. We set dinner up buffet style on a long side table. Walter is the first to serve himself.

“Age before beauty,” he says, passing by me with a full plate.

“Hey, get your dinner,” Ryder tells me.

“I can wait until everyone else has theirs. I might ask if they want me to hold the baby while they eat.”

“The baby’s asleep in the playpen right now.” He points to a shaded spot under an umbrella. “You and I are going to eat together for once. Get your cute ass over there and fill your plate.”

I move over to the table, holding my hands up in a helpless gesture. “Okay. Okay. I just like to be helpful when I can,” I explain, taking a paper plate from the stack. I add a scoop of salad, sprinkle feta on top, and put a skewer of chicken next to it.

“You need more than that,” Ryder tells me.

“I weigh half of what you do, this is plenty. You and your food kink.”

He laughs deeply. “You’re hilarious. As I told you before, it’s a *you* kink.” I watch him fill his plate to overflowing. We join Walter at the large round table.

“Better eat fast before the kids come over here,” he says, popping a piece of chicken in his mouth.

“Why? What happens then?”

“Chaos. Lots and lots of chaos.”

I laugh. “I’m the oldest of four and the only girl, so I’m familiar with that term. My brothers are still chaotic. At least two of them are. The other one plays hockey with Ryder, so he’s got his life together.”

“Darius, right?” Walter asks.

“Yes. Have you met him?”

“I have. He’s a great guy. A good hockey player too.”

“He’s worked hard at it for most of his life.”

“That’s what it takes to reach that level of success. Ryder’s had a drive like no other when it comes to hockey,” he says, his fatherly pride evident in his tone and expression.

“That drive applies to getting you too,” Ryder says, winking at me.

“I guess it paid off for you.”

“Of course it did.” He grins knowingly.

“Calista, thank you for this delicious meal,” Walter says.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“I’m going to apologize ahead of time for ruining your dinner,” Alice says, helping Leo onto one of the chairs. She sets a plate with small pieces of chicken and salad in front of him.

He cries out, “Want pizza.”

“No pizza tonight, Leo. Eat up.”

“Want pizza!” he yells louder.

“Leo.” Ryder calls his name and the crying stops. “Eat your dinner now. Calista made you chicken and salad.”

“Okay.” He picks up a piece of chicken and shoves it in his mouth.

“And that right there is the magic of my brother. I kind of hate him for it,” Alice says, giving Ryder the side-eye.

Brandon carries Nora's plate over to the table while she climbs up on the chair. "Here you go."

"Thank you, Daddy," she says.

Alice appears with two more plates of food, handing one to her husband. "Better eat while we can," she says, smiling as if she knows their life is crazy but wouldn't have it any other way.

I'm convinced there must be some kind of magic involved when you're a parent. There's something that makes parents forget how horribly their little ones are behaving most of the time.

"Calista, where do you live?" Alice asks.

"Charleston."

"Were you raised there too?" she asks.

"Yep, my parents still live there. All three of my brothers do also."

"Oh, wow, three brothers. I thought one was bad." Alice smiles at Ryder.

"I'm also the oldest, so you and I have that in common," I tell her.

"Little brothers are annoying, right?" she asks.

"I don't think Leo is annoying, Mommy," Nora says.

Alice's head falls back as she looks up at the sky. "Nora, I was teasing Uncle Ryder."

"But, Mommy, you said teasing isn't nice," she adds.

"Eat your dinner," Brandon tells her.

Ryder nudges my leg in warning. "Seems like parenting is just a whole bunch of 'do as I say, not as I do.'"

With the frostiness of the look Alice shoots his way, I'm surprised he's not frozen in place. "People who don't have kids are always the ones offering advice," she throws back.

"Don't start, you two. Calista doesn't need to deal with your shenanigans," Walter says.

“No worries, Walter. I feel right at home. This is like a typical dinner with my family. My brothers and I inevitably end up ribbing one another until our dad yells at us to stop.”

Walter nods. “Sounds about right.”

“Unca Ry, I ate,” Leo says.

Ryder gives him a thumbs up. “You did a great job.”

Leo smiles.

“What do you say?” Alice asks.

“Thank you.”

Ryder smiles. “You’re welcome, buddy. After everyone else is finished eating, guess what Calista made for dessert?”

Leo shrugs. “What?”

“Cookies. And you can have one in a little bit.”

“Yeah cookie.” Leo nods excitedly.

Watching him interact with Leo is setting my stomach aflutter. Somehow it makes him more attractive, when I didn’t even realize that was a possibility. This must be what falling in love does to people.

*Love?*

*Could I be falling in love with him?*

I want to spend as much time with him as possible and being around him makes my day better. There isn’t anything about him I don’t like. Maybe it’s time to take our relationship to the next step. And I think I know the perfect way to do that.

---

Ryder helps me clean up the counters and load the dishes and utensils in the dishwasher. I toss a detergent pod in the dishwasher, close the door, and start the cycle.

“I’m going to run outside and make sure we got everything off the patio,” he says.

“Sounds good.” I wait until he’s out of sight to strip my clothes off. Once I’m naked, I put on the apron he gave me and snicker when I see the placement of Goode Chef. I tie the strings behind my back and run my hand over the material, smoothing the creases from where it was folded.

Raising my arms, I notice all the side boob action I’ve got going on. This thing wasn’t meant to be worn naked. Maybe this is a bad idea. I’m contemplating putting my clothes back on when I hear Ryder coming and I freeze in place like a scared doe.

“There wasn’t anything out—” He cuts off mid word.

“You like?” I ask, throwing my arms out to my sides. It’s too late to do anything but own my decision.

“I *love*.” He stalks toward me like I’m his prey. “Turn around,” he orders.

I pivot in place, revealing my exposed ass and entire backside.

“Fucking hell, you’re perfect.” He places his hands on the granite surface, caging me between him and the island. “Are you trying to seduce me, Lis? Do you want to see if you can make me lose control?”

“Yes,” I reply honestly.

Shifting closer, he presses into me, letting me feel exactly how much he wants me. He gathers my hair, pushing it to one side to clear a path for his lips. I angle my head, giving him free rein as he presses kisses down the side of my neck. One of his hands slips inside the apron, gliding across the front of my hip bone and down to rub over my clit.

“Yes,” I gasp.

“You’re so fucking wet.” He delves his middle finger between my lips, sliding inside me. My hips rock as I try to ride his hand. He pulls his finger from me, moving back up to draw slow, wet circles around my clit until my teeth gnash together with desperation.

“I’m so close,” I whimper.

“I’ll get you there, baby, Don’t you worry,” he tells me, picking up the pace, his fingers strumming my clit with expertise.

Clutching his arm, I roll my hips as my orgasm builds and builds until I feel like I’m balanced on a jagged edge of pleasure. And then I fall, unraveling beneath his talented fingers.

Ryder shoves his bathing suit down his powerful thighs, kicking them to the side. He tugs his t-shirt over his head and drops it on the floor beside my feet. He groans, and I picture him standing behind me, stroking his cock.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard.”

I watch my red-tipped toes curl in anticipation against the floor. “God yes. I want you to.”

He yanks on my hips, pulling my ass toward him, and I eagerly arch my back. I’m so ready to have him inside me, stretching my walls like never before. I feel the head of his cock swipe back and forth between my lips and I moan. I want it so badly. I need it now.

He nudges against my entrance, and this time he enters me with one powerful thrust that leaves me gasping with surprise.

“Oh fuck” he groans, his hands clenching my hips. He slowly moves in and out of me. “Look at how your greedy pussy takes my cock. She’s so pink and fucking perfect. All mine.”

My hands clutch the granite so hard my knuckles turn white. Nothing matters beyond the drag of his cock over my G-spot. He’s hitting the perfect angle with every thrust like some geometry nerd sex guru. I’ve never experienced sex this amazing before, and I had no idea what I’ve been missing out on.

Ryder’s pace quickens as he repeatedly slams into me. Wanting to please him, I push my ass back into his thrusts.

“Fuck yes, baby.” His fingers painfully dig into my hips as he hits his peak. His movements are erratic as he jerks through the final strokes. And when he thrusts inside me for a final

time, buried to the hilt, I feel him trembling behind me. He presses a kiss on the back of my shoulder and slips from me. “You’re amazing.”

“That was fun,” I say.

He slowly turns me around. “I meant to take you to bed, but you look so fucking hot in this apron, I couldn’t control myself.”

“I’m not complaining,” I say.

“I know you’re not, I am. I have no self-control when it comes to you.”

“I loved everything about what we just did.”

He bends down, lifting me into his arms. “Wait til you see what round two brings.”

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Waking up in Ryder’s arms is a sensation I never thought I’d experience, and now that I have, I don’t want to go without again. As much as I want to spend the entire day like this, I need to shower and get cooking.

I try to slip from his hold without disturbing him, but it doesn’t work. His arms tighten around me.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I need a shower and I have work to do.”

“I’ll skip breakfast if it means you’ll stay in bed with me.” He nuzzles his face against my hair.

“You need to eat and I need to shower. If I don’t stay on my schedule it’ll mess with my whole day.”

He sighs. “Just a minute longer. Do you know this is the first time I’ve slept with someone?” he asks, and I laugh. “You know what I mean. I’m not claiming to be a virgin, but I’m a virgin co-sleeper.”

“Aww, I popped your sleeping cherry. I love that.”



“I’ve never had a girlfriend before either,” he confesses.

“Really? Not even in college?”

I knew he hasn’t had a relationship since he’s been with the Coyotes, but I assumed he had at some point.

“Nope. It’s not that I was against the idea, it just never happened.”

“Hot damn, I’ve popped two of your cherries. I feel kind of bad that I’ve done those things and don’t have anything for you to be the first on.”

His hand slides down my back, gripping my ass. “What about this?”

I giggle nervously. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

“I’m not saying this morning, but someday this baby will be mine.” His finger dips between my cheeks, gliding back and forth in a teasing manner. I know it would be far easier than I think for him to get me to do just about anything.

The alarm on my phone goes off, sounding like a shrill bell being rung. I roll out of his arms and tap the screen.

“Jesus. That’s your alarm tone?”

I laugh. “Yep. It gets the job done.”

“And gives you permanent hearing loss at the same time.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I prefer to wake you up the right way.”

“What’s the right way entail?”

He whips the covers off, revealing his morning wood. Last night I didn’t get a good look at what he’s got but seeing it in daylight is impressive.

“You like what you see?” He grins.

“I do. I love what I see. But you’re not going to distract me from what I have to do. I need a shower and I don’t have anything to wear besides yesterday’s clothes.”

“You have a bathing suit and an apron,” he reminds me.

“True, but not what I had in mind.”

“I’ll tell you what. If I can find something for you to wear, will you come back to bed and help me with my mountainous problem?”

“Sure.”

If he suggests one of his t-shirts and a pair of his shorts, it’s not happening.

He grins. “Look in the second drawer from the top of my dresser.”

I strut naked across the room. Fine. I’ll humor him. I grip the handle and pull. I’m so impressed with how smoothly the drawer slides out, I almost forget to look at the clothes inside, and when I do my mouth literally falls open.

I spin around to face Ryder. “You bought me clothes?”

His smile is proud. “I wanted you to have something to wear if you slept over.”

I pick up a chef shirt and pants, holding them up one at a time. “How did you know what size to get?”

“A lucky guess.”

“This is amazing, Ryder. I get to have clean clothes for today.” Being a chef, my uniform often has a mess of stains on it by the end of the day. As was the case yesterday.

“There’s underwear in there too,” he says.

I place the uniform back in the drawer, retracing my steps to the bed, and pounce on Ryder. I wrap myself around him, holding tightly. “Thank you. You’re the most thoughtful boyfriend in the world.”

“I’m glad you’re happy.” He shifts beneath me and I feel his pressing need against my stomach.

“I didn’t buy you any clothes, but I’m pretty sure I can think of something to give you.” I wiggle backward, settling on my knees between his legs. Ryder places an arm under his head, raising himself up to watch with his heated gaze locked on me. He holds his breath as I reach for him, letting out a

long groan when I stroke him from base to tip and back down again. He's hard and hot in my hand. His skin is smooth and soft over the underlying steel beneath. I like stroking him and I like knowing his eyes are on me. Leaning forward, I swipe my tongue over the drop of pre-cum beading on the tip.

"Yes," he moans.

Wrapping my lips around him, I swirl my tongue around the head, then take him as far into my mouth as I can. My fingers wrap around the rest of him, moving up and down along with my mouth. I start slowly at first, teasing him until he begs for more. It's only then that I pick up the pace.

His hands grip my head as he begins raising his hips. He's reached his limit and I know his release is coming. My cheeks are pulled in tightly as I suck. The wet sound of his cock thrusting into my mouth is so fucking hot. I want to wring every bit of pleasure out of him I can.

"Lis." He calls my name, gripping my hair as his orgasm hits. He jerks beneath me, his cum pulsing down my throat. Letting out a guttural groan, his arms fall to the bed over his head. He lies still as his chest rapidly rises and falls. He's a stunning picture of male masculinity. And he's all mine.

# CHAPTER 19



# RYDER

I CHECK into the bed and breakfast where the wedding party and family members are staying for the next two nights. I'm escorted to one of the small brick guest houses on the grounds. This property has been owned and operated by the same family since before the Revolutionary War. That's one of the reasons why Evie and Darius chose it for the location of their wedding. While this cottage seems to be newer in construction, it still has features consistent with the property's history. Exposed beams run across the ceiling, and the entire fireplace wall is made of bricks. The mantel is made from a rough-hewn beam with candles lining the length.

There's a main room with a television and a few seating options as well as a small table and chairs for dining.

The bedroom has a four-poster bed that looks as comfortable as a cloud. I drop my suitcase on the mattress and hang up the garment bag my tux is in.

I find a small refrigerator that's stocked with water and beer. The labels on the bottles say Darius and Evie's names with a heart wrapped around them. I grab a beer and use the bottle opener stuck to the side of the fridge. I take a sip and sigh. The cold beverage is refreshing. July in South Carolina is hotter than hell and a bitch to deal with. Good thing this cottage has air conditioning.

I'm about to sit down and turn on the TV when there's a knock on the door. I know it's not Calista because I called her when I arrived and she was still at her house packing her things. She's getting a ride here from her parents. That way we can return home together on Sunday morning.

Opening the door, I find Murphy standing there. Stepping back, I let him pass by.

“Hey, man,” Murphy says.

“Hey. Want a beer?” I ask, dropping onto the couch.

“Yeah.”

“Help yourself.”

“Thanks.” He pops open the cap and raises the bottle to take a closer look at the label. “Jesus. Is this what I’m in for with Wendy?”

“Maybe. Weddings can make people do strange things.”

“Yeah, I guess if she wanted heartsy fartsy labels I’d want her to have them.” He sits in one of the armchairs.

I tip my bottle in his direction. “Exactly.”

“What’s going on with you and Calista? Any new developments?”

“I asked her to be my girlfriend and she accepted.” I can’t keep the grin from spreading over my face.

*Who is this guy I’m turning into?*

It’s like I hardly recognize myself, but it’s a positive change I’m happy about.

“That’s awesome. Congratulations.” He shakes his head. “I feel like a proud dad. My boy’s growing up.”

“It was bound to happen sooner or later,” I say.

“Have you told Darius yet?”

“No. And I’m going to wait until after their honeymoon.”

“Maybe he’ll be in a really good mood then,” Murphy says.

“If he is, it won’t be for long. As soon as I tell him about Calista and me, he’s going to try to kick my ass.”

“Maybe let him get one good shot in to make him feel better.”

“Yeah, I can do that. But after the freebie, I’m hitting back.”

“Will you be able to play it cool with Calista this weekend?”

“For sure. She’s going to stay with Evie tonight.”

“Yeah, Wendy too.”

I kick my feet up on the coffee table and flip the TV on. I settle on *Impractical Jokers*, my go-to when I want pure entertainment and laughs.

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“This is where the wedding will take place. Darius and Evie will be married under the trellis in front of the pond,” Jasmine, the wedding planner, points up ahead. “So you’ll walk down the aisle, which, in this instance, is this brick path. You’ll be arm in arm with your partner and when you get to the end, the bride’s party will go to the left and the groom’s to the right where you’ll line up single file. You.” She smiles, pointing at me. “Help me to demonstrate.”

I can’t really say no, so I meet her at the end of the aisle where she curls her hand around my bicep. We follow the bricks to the trellis where we part ways. I line up as if I’m not the only groomsman standing there.

“Very nice,” she says, looking me over.

“Thanks.”

We start back down the aisle. My eyes seek out Calista in our friend group, and when I find her, she doesn’t look happy. Her eyes are narrowed in on Jasmine’s hand gripping my arm. *Great.*

When we reach the end of the path, I remove Jasmine’s grabby hand and position myself near Calista.

“Once the wedding is over and the bride and groom have exited, you’ll simply meet your partner in the middle of the

aisle and follow the pathway all the way back to where you began. Does everyone understand?" Jasmine asks.

"Yes," we chorus.

"Okay, that means it's time to eat."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about!" Murphy yells.

Jasmine leads us inside to a small private dining room that's used for small receptions and events like this. With a handful of round tables set with shiny white dishes and crystal, it's the perfect size to accommodate both Darius's and Evie's families.

I find my name tag at the same table as my teammates and Calista. Murphy deftly swaps out two of the tags without anyone noticing so Calista can sit next to me.

I bump his fist. "Thanks, man."

"Don't mention it."

Servers immediately begin pouring wine into glasses and buckets of beer are set in the middle of the table. I'm guessing the beer was Darius's idea and one I appreciate. I pluck out a bottle for me and one for Murphy.

"Here you go." I hand it over.

"Thanks."

Calista slips onto the seat next to mine. I smile. "Hi, beautiful."

She gives me a cool look. "Hi."

What's this about? She can't possibly be jealous of Jasmine, right? Would I be irked if the situation were reversed and some handsome guy was pawing at Calista? Fuck yes. I'd be a jealous jackass.

I place my hand on her thigh beneath the table and squeeze. "I missed you."

"You sure about that?"

"One hundred percent, baby."



She looks at me, and I see the moment she lets go of the jealousy. “I missed you too. It feels like I haven’t seen you in ages when it’s only been since lunch. I made your dad some meals for this weekend so he won’t go hungry,” she says.

“You do know he’s a grown-ass man and can cook for himself for a couple of days, right?”

“You mean like you are?” she tosses out. “If I recall correctly, you said the two of you might starve if I didn’t become your chef.”

“Yeah, but I missed you and wanted not only your food but your company.”

“Aww, that’s sweet and kind of manipulative, but I’ll let it go because I missed you too. Even though I said I wouldn’t fall for you, I couldn’t stop it from happening.”

“Thank you for being so thoughtful and taking care of my dad. He’s going to try to steal you from me if I’m not careful.”

She smiles mischievously. “He is handsome and charming.”

My hand sweeps under her dress to possessively clamp around her inner thigh. I lean over to whisper in her ear. “Do I need to remind you who this pussy belongs to?”

“Not right now,” she says, giggling.

I slide my hand higher, teasing the edge of her panties. “Are you sure about that?” I challenge, dipping a finger underneath the lace.

“D-don’t,” she whispers, and I pull my hand back. “We’re not alone,” she reminds me.

I glance around the table, making sure no one’s watching. I lose sight of everything else when she’s near me.

I give a quick nod. “You’re right. There’ll be plenty of time later to remind you.”

The servers come around with trays full of food. There are multiple bowls of pasta, salad, chicken, and bread for each table. They’re placed in the middle of the table.

“We’re dining family style,” Evie tells us. “Everyone help yourselves to whatever you want.”

I pick up Calista’s plate and fill it with a little bit of everything.

She smiles at me and all I want to do is kiss her. “Thank you.”

I press my leg to hers. “You’re welcome.” I load my plate up and immediately dig in. “This is good but not as good as your cooking,” I tell her.

“You’re officially biased now,” she says.

Soft jazz music plays in the background while everyone eats. The servers move around, removing empty pasta bowls, placing new ones down. My teammates and I keep eating long past everyone else being finished.

“Wait until you all see the cake Calista made,” Evie says.

“It’s beautiful,” Wendy adds.

“You’re all so nice. Evie, I’m glad you’re happy with it.”

“Happy doesn’t come close to how I feel. It’s too pretty to cut into, never mind eat,” Evie says.

“If no one ate any, all my effort would be for nothing. It makes me happy when it’s enjoyed,” Calista explains.

“I love cake. I can’t wait to eat a big ole piece,” Murphy says. “And knowing you spent a lot of time making it only makes me want to eat it more. It must be really fucking good.”

Calista laughs. “If you like it that much I’ll make you your own cake sometime.”

Murphy glances at me. “How do you feel about that?”

“It’s cake, not a date. But I still might kick your ass.”

Murphy laughs.

Two servers roll out the cart with the cake on it. Bright blue frosting forms large flowers all across the top with green vines trailing down the sides.

“Wow, Lis, that’s amazing,” I say.

She smiles at me. “Thank you.”

“I don’t know how you found the time to make that,” I say.

“Why do you think I went home right after dinner last night?”

Once the cake is cut, the servers begin setting out pieces on each table. Calista touches my leg but she looks at Wendy as she says, “I’m going to the ladies room. Want to come?”

“Sure,” Wendy agrees, and they both rise.

Murphy and I watch our girlfriends until they disappear.

“So far so good,” he murmurs.

“Yeah. It’s a battle to behave where she’s concerned,” I say, speaking softly.

“I bet. Wendy and I were in the opposite situation, pretending we were together. That was more fun.”

“No doubt. Once we don’t have to hide anything anymore, the four of us will have to go out,” I say.

“Yeah, before the season starts again. Do you ever wish we had a longer break between seasons?” he asks.

“That’s never been an issue before, but I’m realizing it’s going to be going forward. It makes sense when you think about it. If hockey is your passion and only concern, then you’d be looking forward to getting back in the thick of the season. But when you fall in love with someone, they become just as important, if not more important, than hockey.”

“That makes me feel better. I was worried I was losing my drive,” he says.

“I guess at some point that’s going to happen to all of us. I’d like to think I have a good amount of time left to play, but you never know until you’re in that moment.”

“You and I need to retire at the same time. I can’t imagine playing without you, dude,” he says.

I rise to my feet. “I gotta use the head.”

Murphy grins, standing. “Me too.”

We walk from the room together and he laughs. “Your need to piss doesn’t have anything to do with a certain teammate’s sister, does it?”

“I plead the fifth,” I say, smiling crookedly. We stroll down the hallway, stopping to take in the old photos and paintings hanging on the wall.

“Fancy meeting you two fellas here,” Wendy calls out, and Murphy’s head snaps in her direction so fast, I’m surprised he didn’t give himself whiplash.

Calista smiles at me as she approaches. She curls into my arm, placing her hand over my heart as she looks up at me. “You’re so handsome.”

Her upturned lips are too tempting to resist, so I lower down to capture them. Our tongues barely connect before I pull back, playing it safe.

“You son of a bitch.” I hear Darius’s voice and instantly know I’m the son of a bitch he’s talking about. I glance at Murphy and he immediately ushers Calista away from me. Wendy grabs her hand, leading her in the other direction.

I hold my arms out at each side. “I’m right here.”

“I told you to stay the fuck away from my sister, but you just couldn’t help yourself could you?”

“I didn’t want to stay away from her, Darius. I *won’t* stay away from her.” I’m purposely taunting him to get him to hit me first so I’ll have an excuse to punch his sanctimonious face. He can start this fight and I’ll finish it. My eyes flick down the hallway to check on Calista before returning to Darius just in time to catch the last blur of his punch before it hits me right above my eye. Even though I tried to tuck my chin, I’m still fucking rocked by it. I throw a couple of punches that end up being glancing blows as Darius shifts away from me. But the third punch seals the deal and has him covering his eye and groaning from the pain.

“Motherfucker,” he growls, gearing up to retaliate. Murphy steps in to try to calm him down, but when he places his hand on Darius’s shoulder, he catches an elbow to the eye socket.

“Goddammit,” Murphy shouts, bending over.

Darius realizes what he’s done. “I’m sorry, man. I didn’t know it was you.”

“You both need to calm the fuck down,” Murphy shouts. He points at Darius. “You need to listen to what he has to say. And you”—he points at me—“stop provoking him.”

“What could he possibly say that would make this better?” Darius asks Murphy.

“Why don’t you try asking me that?” I say. “If you didn’t have your mind already made up, you’d ask me about my feelings for your sister. And I’d tell you I’m not playing around with her. I’m crazy about her. I love her and I’m not going to hurt her.”

“You love her?” Darius repeats my words venomously.

“Yes. I fucking love her.”

“You wouldn’t know love if it bit off your dick.”

“That wouldn’t really be love now, would it?” Murphy interjects, but the levity isn’t appreciated.

“Fuck you. What do you know about me?”

“I know you fuck anything with tits and a pussy.”

“That’s not true,” I fire back. If he doesn’t shut his mouth I’m going to blacken his other eye.

“Yes, it is. You don’t even realize that’s how you are.”

“What the hell is going on here?” a deep voice barks.

Our heads swing in Coach Carlson’s direction.

“Hi, Coach,” Murphy says.

“Someone better tell me what’s going on, or you’ll be training with me next week,” he threatens.

None of us want to skate with Coach next week, that’s for sure.

“We’re having a disagreement,” I say.

He crosses his arms over his chest. “By the looks of your faces, I’d say it’s more than a disagreement.”

“Maybe,” Darius grumbles.

“I suggest you all cool off before this escalates. My daughter is marrying your fool ass tomorrow and I don’t want anything ruining it.”

A gasp breaks out behind me. Turning, I see Evie standing there with her hand over her mouth. “What the hell is going on here?” she yells in a panicked voice. “What happened to you all?”

“A small disagreement,” Murphy says.

“Small? This is what happens with a small disagreement?” she questions.

“Okay, it’s not so small, but we’re working on it,” Murphy tries to reassure her.

“Evie, what did you think you were getting when you agreed to marry a hockey player? I told you it was a mistake to be with him,” her dad says. When her eyes bug out of her head as if she’s about to go off on him, he rushes to say, “I’m just kidding, honey. But you should know by now, you can take the player out of hockey but you can’t take hockey out of the player.”

“I know that, Dad.” She rolls her eyes. “What if I beat it out of him?”

“Is she joking or serious?” Murphy asks.

Darius shrugs. “I’m not sure.”

Evie tucks her hair behind her ear. “At least you all match.” She studies the three of us. “We need ice. Lots and lots of ice.”

“That’s already been taken care of,” Wendy shouts to us as she and Calista walk up the hallway. She hands over an ice pack to each of us. I squeeze it until it pops, then shake it up. I press it to my eye and wince, but almost immediately it starts to lessen the pain.

“How did you know we’d need these?” Murphy asks Wendy.

“Come on. Everyone knows hockey players like to settle things one way and one way only—with their fists.”

Calista reaches up, cupping my cheek in her hand. “Ugh. That looks nasty.”

“Get away from him,” Darius yells at her.

“Don’t raise your fucking voice at her,” I shout at him.

“What are you going to do about it, tough guy?” Darius asks.

“Knock it off!” Coach shouts, louder than any of us. “Darius, take a walk and cool down.”

“Yes, sir,” he says, turning away.

When Evie moves to go after him, Coach shakes his head.

“Ryder, I’m going to go talk to my brother,” Calista tells me.

“No, stay with me.”

“Ryder, he’s not going to hurt me. I need to talk to him before tomorrow.”

I nod. “Okay. But if he’s disrespectful to you, I’m seriously going to kick his ass.”

She smiles. “Aww. My hero.”

“You better believe it, Lis.”

“And just to be clear, I can kick my own brother’s ass.”

# CHAPTER 20





# CALISTA

I TAKE off in the direction I saw my brother go, but I can only walk so fast with these high heels on. I catch sight of him as he exits out a side door and I take small, rapid steps, hurrying after him.

“Darius,” I call out, and he peers over his shoulder. When he sees it’s me, he stops to wait. “Hey, can we talk?”

“I need to walk some of this anger off,” he says.

“We can walk and talk at the same time.” I briefly tug on his arm to get him moving once more.

He rakes his hand through his dark hair. “I don’t think there’s much to say right now.”

“I think there’s plenty that needs to be said. You and two of your friends have black eyes.”

“One friend and one ex-friend,” he clarifies.

I laugh.

“What’s so funny?” he asks.

“You sound like a sulky child who didn’t get his way.”

“I sound like a brother who’s trying to protect his sister from the big, bad wolf.”

“What if I don’t need or want protection? What if I’m happy for the first time in a long time?”

“It’s a false sense of happiness. Ryder will rip the rug out from under you when you least expect it. He doesn’t know how to have a relationship.”

“Darius, do you think I’m dumb?”

“No, of course not.”

“Am I a responsible adult?” I ask.

“You’re one of the most responsible people I know.”

“We’ve established that I’m not dumb and I’m responsible, so what makes you think I’m not smart enough to choose a boyfriend on my own?”

“It’s only because it’s Ryder. You’re getting charmed by his stupidly handsome face.”

“Darius, he’s not like you think. At least not with me.”

“Here we go.” He rolls his healthy eye. “He’s different with me. I’ve changed him,” he says in a high-pitched voice.

“I didn’t change Ryder. He showed me who he is and I fell for him. And he fell for me. He asked me to be his girlfriend and I accepted.”

“He just wants to get in your pants, Calista.”

“If that was the case he’d be gone by now.”

He stops to change direction and I follow. “I’m going to kill that fucker.”

I grab his arm. “Darius, stop. Stop!” I yell. “God, you’re so fucking hardheaded. When are you going to listen to me?”

“When you start making sound decisions again,” he says.

“Fuck you, Darius. How would you have felt if I had said you shouldn’t date Evie because she’s a single mom?”

“I would’ve been mad at you and I wouldn’t have listened.”

“Exactly. And I didn’t tell you that, did I?”

“No.”

“I may have had some reservations about her having a child with another man, but I never said a peep about it because I trusted that you know what’s best for yourself. So why won’t you extend that same courtesy to me? You can have

reservations about Ryder and our relationship, but you should trust that I know what's best for me."

"I'm just worried about you, sis."

"I get that and I love you for it, but if you keep pushing this issue with Ryder and me, what do you think is going to be the result? Do you think I'm going to spend time with someone who doesn't support my relationship with him? Why would I want to subject myself to that kind of negativity?"

"Are you saying you'd choose him over me?" He looks stunned.

"I'm saying don't make me pick between you, Darius. Ryder's going to win my affection every single time. And if you had taken the time to talk with him, you'd know how much he cares about me. Why don't you swallow your pride and see what he has to say? It would go a long way toward gaining my forgiveness for giving my boyfriend a black eye."

He points at his face. "I got one too."

"But you started it."

We walk in silence until we reach the door we exited out of. He pauses with his hand on the handle. "I'm sorry I overreacted."

"Show me you're sorry," I say.

He nods, pulling the door open. "I will."

It doesn't take us long to find Ryder. He and Murphy are leaning against the wall, talking. He straightens up when he sees Darius approaching. He's probably expecting him to take another swing at him.

Darius clears his throat. "Calista has made me realize I reacted a little hastily."

"A little? More like a lot, dude," Murphy says.

"Ryder, you told me you care about my sister, and I'm going to take you at your word. But if you break her heart, I'm going to break your legs," Darius says.

“Yes, I care deeply for her, and I’m okay with your threat. I’d rather die than hurt Calista. Also, you’re going to need to get used to me being in your family because we’re going to be related someday and it will be sooner than you think.”

Darius stares at me with his one good eye. “Promise me you’ll wait one year before you get married.”

“What? No,” I disagree.

Ryder nods. “Yes, I’ll agree to your arbitrary time limit.”

Darius holds out his hand. “Welcome to the family.”

Ryder shakes his hand, and I notice my brother winces.

*Men. Everything’s a competition.*

Ryder gently prods his eye, checking out the swelling. “Jesus, I forgot how painful having a black eye is.”

“Me too,” Darius agrees.

“Me three,” Murphy chimes in.

“Maybe next time my brother has a question he’ll ask first and swing later.”

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“I still can’t believe the three of them have black eyes,” I say, snickering.

“If it were your wedding, you might not find it as funny,” Evie says, but then she laughs too.

“What do you expect when you marry a hockey player?” Wendy asks.

“You better think about that too,” Evie points out. “You’re heading in that same direction.”

Rory smiles. “I’m just glad my man is so well behaved.”

“Yeah, but only because he missed it all,” I say.

“Oh, for sure. He would’ve jumped in the middle of them all and ended up with a black eye too.”

“Should we take bets if they’ll make it to the church on time?” Wendy asks.

“I took care of that. I asked my dad to make sure they’re not late. I figure if he can control them on the ice, he can handle that small task.”

“They’re all scared of Coach Carling,” Rori says.

“He’s my dad and I’m scared of him too,” Evie jokes. She opens her mouth to say something more but a knock on the hotel room door has her pausing. “Come in,” she shouts. The door slowly opens, revealing Evie’s mom and daughter Tillie.

We all shout out greetings, and Wendy’s is especially exuberant for Tillie.

“Tillie Bean!”

“Auntie, I’m getting too old for you to call me that.”

Wendy shakes her head. “You’re never too old for nicknames.”

Evie holds her arms out. “Hey, sweetie. Come give Mommy a hug.” Tillie skips over, throwing herself onto Evie’s lap.

“Are you ready, honey?” Evie’s mom asks.

Evie nods. “I am. I can’t wait to have this wedding over with and have a stiff drink... of water,” she adds for Tillie’s benefit.

“I can’t wait to have a stiff... drink,” Wendy says, winking.

Evie eases Tillie to her feet, then stands. “Shall we do this, ladies?”

“Hell yeah!” Wendy shouts.

“Has anyone seen the guys since last night? I’m trying to mentally prepare myself for how bad their black eyes will be.”

“I saw Murphy, but I didn’t pay attention to his eye. Unless you mean his one-eyed trouser—” She cuts off when she notices Tillie’s listening.

“Don’t worry about what they look like. Think of it as a great story you’ll tell your grandchildren someday,” I suggest.

Evie smiles. “Right after I tell them I met their grandfather when I painted rainbow leopard spots on his dog.”

“That’s the best meet cute ever,” Rori says.

“At the time it wasn’t very cute, but here we are,” Evie says.

“Come on, honey. We need to head out, or you’ll be the one who’s late,” Evie’s mom tells her.

“Before we walk out there, I want to thank you all for being a part of this day. I wouldn’t want to do this without you. I love you all.”

We share a group hug and walk down the stairs toward the back door, with all of our hands joined like a chain. Once we’re outside we drop our hands and mill about behind the curtain that’s been set up to prevent the groom from seeing his bride until she’s walking down the aisle.

Evie’s dad is there, along with all the groomsmen and Three, the ring bearer.

Ryder catches my attention, puckering his lips in a kiss. I blow a kiss back at him and try not to grimace when I notice his bruised and swollen eye.

Evie’s dad takes hold of her hands. “Honey, you look beautiful. Darius is going to forget his vows once he sees you.”

Evie beams at the compliment. “Aww, thanks, Dad.”

Jasmine arrives to line us all up in the correct order. She instructs Orion to escort Evie’s mother to her seat after she gives a quick hug and kiss to her daughter.

I feel awkward as I walk down the aisle, so I keep my eyes on Ryder and let his appreciative smile soothe my nerves. Tillie and Three are the final two to make the trek before Evie and her dad. Tillie sprinkles rose petals along the brick path while she holds her ring bearing friend’s arm. The two of them are adorable, and I wonder if someday they’ll be doing this

themselves. Maybe even marrying each other. You just never know.

When everyone's in position, the Wedding March begins to play. Evie and her dad slowly make their way down the aisle. She looks beautiful with her blond hair swept up on top of her head and held in place with flowered clips. Her strapless wedding dress shows off her delicate collarbones, and the mixed bouquet in her hands adds a pop of color, making her the most beautiful bride I've ever seen.

I look at my brother and find an expression of awe on his face. Tears come to my eyes, and they haven't even exchanged vows yet. I'm so happy for Darius. He deserves Evie, and I know the two of them—make that the three of them because I can't forget Tillie—will have a wonderful life together.

Ryder watches me from the other side of the arched trellis where the minister has begun speaking. I smile as I find myself wondering what our own wedding could be like. I like the outdoor venue, but July is too hot for me. I know they chose this month because it's during the offseason for hockey. If July is the option, then it needs to take place inside where there's air conditioning.

I don't know what kind of dress I'd want. I've never been the kind of girl who dreamed up every aspect of my wedding like it would be the highlight of my life, and just because I have a boyfriend, that's not going to change. At least not yet.

When I finally refocus on my surroundings, Darius and Evie are saying their vows. Now I'm really getting emotional.

The minister pronounces them man and wife, and they share their first kiss as a married couple. The guests go wild, cheering loudly as they walk back up the aisle holding hands.

Ryder gives me his arm when it's our turn to walk out. "You look beautiful, Lis. I couldn't take my eyes off you the whole time."

"Thank you. You make a tuxedo sexier than it should be," I say.

"Even with this black eye?" he asks, pointing at his face.

“Yep. It only adds to your rakish air.” It’s really not fair how attractive he is without having to try.

We enter the reception building and head over to the bar on the far side of the room.

“Ryder Goode, how the hell are ya?” We turn to see who’s speaking with an Irish accent.

Ryder grins. “Niall O’Rourke, in the flesh.”

This is the guy they were talking about at dinner the night of the bachelor and bachelorette party. Like most hockey players, he’s large and extremely easy on the eyes.

His eyes swing my way. “And who would this lovely lass be?”

Ryder wraps his arm around me, staking his claim like a caveman. “This is my girlfriend, Calista. Calista, this is Niall. He’s the newest player on the Coyotes.”

He shakes my hand. “It’s nice to meet ya. I bet ya have your hands full with this one.” He hooks his thumb at Ryder.

“It’s nice to meet you also,” I say, smiling.

Ryder shakes his head. “I’m a changed man, dude. I’m wrapped around her finger and she doesn’t even realize.”

“I do now,” I tease, and they laugh.

“I’m going to go find Darius and congratulate him. I’ll be seeing you on the ice soon.”

“I’m looking forward to having you on our team. You’ll be a great addition.”

“Thanks, man.” They shake hands one more time and he walks away.

“He seems nice,” I say.

“He’s a good guy and a bad-ass player on and off the ice.”

“Oh Lord, just what the hockey world needs, another heartbreaker.”

Ryder smirks. “It’s worked out well for you, hasn’t it?”



I nod. “So far so good, but we’re only a few days in, at least since we became official.”

“Are you doubting my feelings for you, Lis?” His eyes hint at the serious nature of his question. I think I may have hurt his feelings.

“No, I’m not. I was merely stating how new our relationship is, but that doesn’t mean I’m questioning your feelings.”

“Good. I wish there were a way for me to open my heart and show you what I feel for you. But since there isn’t, my word will have to suffice.”

“You show me how you feel through your actions, and that’s the most powerful way to prove you love someone. Words can be meaningless, but actions are committed with intent.”

“You also show me. I knew you liked me before you admitted you did,” he says, puffing his chest out.

I pat his cheek. “I don’t think it’s a secret that I didn’t want to fall for you.”

# CHAPTER 21



# RYDER

CALISTA hugs her mom and dad before they leave the reception. “I have something to tell you both,” she says, her eyes swinging briefly to me. “Ryder and I are in a relationship.”

“I care about your daughter very much,” I add.

I’ve known Mr. and Mrs. Kastellanos since I started playing for the Coyotes. They’ve always been friendly to me. But now that Calista has sprung the news about us, I’m hoping that won’t change.

“How adorable.” Her mom pats Calista’s cheek and looks at her husband. “She thinks we don’t already know.”

“Did Darius blab to you?” Calista asks.

She shakes her head. “As if I needed anyone to tell me when my daughter’s sweet on someone. And if I couldn’t tell by looking at you”—she points to Calista—“it’s written all over Ryder’s face every time he looks at you.”

Calista smiles at me. “We didn’t mean for it to happen,” she says.

“I meant for it to happen,” I say, smiling. “At least once I saw your daughter, and tasting her cooking sealed the deal.”

“Darius wasn’t happy about it. I still don’t think he is despite talking with him.”

“That explains the black eyes you’re all sporting,” her dad says, chuckling. “He didn’t want to go into detail on what happened. He just said it was over differing opinions.”

“Pfft. Differing opinions? Is that what you call it when your brother sticks his nose where it doesn’t belong?” Calista asks.

“His heart’s in the right place,” I say. “At least he cares.”

“Don’t fret over your brother and what he thinks, gliko mou. He’s about to go to Greece for his honeymoon. I can guarantee he won’t be worried about what you two are up to.”

Calista wrinkles her nose. “I hope not. That would just be weird.”

Her dad laughs and presses a kiss on the top of her head. “Enjoy the rest of the weekend, sweetheart.”

“I will. Thank you, Dad. I love you both.” She blows kisses to them as they walk away.

“What do you think? Should we take another cruise around the dance floor?” I ask. I wouldn’t mind holding her in my arms some more. I’m proud to be with her and I want the whole world to see.

“If these shoes weren’t so uncomfortable I’d take you up on that offer. But we still have to walk all the way back to your cottage, and that’s a decent trek from here.”

“Let’s get out of here, then,” I suggest, opening the exit door.

Once we’re outside, Calista hesitates. “Darius and Evie already left, so we don’t have to find them. Do you think it’s rude if we skip saying goodbye to our friends?”

“Not at all.” I take her hand, slotting our fingers together, and we start to walk.

Calista drags a deep breath in through her nose. “It smells wonderful here with all these flower beds. You should add some more flowers to your yard. Right in front of your house in the middle of your driveway where that dirt patch is, you need a bed of flowers. I can see it now, lots of reds and golds and frame it all out with rocks.”

I’m picturing it as she describes it all to me.

“I like that idea. Will you help me with the design?”

She smiles. “I’d love to.”

“Will you help me with the planting too?”

“Absolutely. When can we start?” Her excitement is almost tangible.

“This week.”

“Ouch.” Calista comes to an abrupt stop. “These damn shoes. Now I’ve got something stuck in there.” She jiggles her foot until a tiny pebble falls to the ground.

I let go of her hand and turn my back toward her, bending over. “Here. Hop on.”

“Thank you, Jesus,” she says, jumping on me.

Catching hold of her legs, I start walking. “I think you mean, thank you, Ryder.”

“You too. Good horsey,” she says, scratching the top of my head. “Giddyup.”

“When we get back to the cottage I’ll let you ride me all you want,” I say.

She laughs. “You’re such a guy.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Her arms tighten around my neck. “Of course you will.”

When we reach the cottage I set her down and unlock the door. I flip the light switch as we step over the threshold.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch.” Calista limps over to the couch and falls backward onto the cushions, groaning. “My feet are fucking killing me.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell,” I droll.

She ignores my sarcasm. “I’m never wearing heels again.” She yanks them off, stretching her legs out in front of her on the coffee table.

“Better?” I ask.

She sighs with relief. “Much. You know, that was a nice wedding,” she says.

Shedding my jacket, shoes, and bow tie, I lower down beside her. “It was a good time.” I kick off my shoes and sit back, pulling her feet into my lap. Using my thumbs, I rub the arch on her right foot.

“Oh, that feels amazing. Don’t stop.” She lays her head back while I work on all the tender spots from her heel to her toes. I switch to the other foot, giving it the same attention.

“So I don’t think I’d want to chance an outdoor wedding. It’s risky. What if it rains? Your whole day would be ruined,” she says.

“It was hot as balls too. A little air conditioning would’ve been nice,” I add. “How do you feel about a destination wedding?”

“I guess it depends on where it is. I’d be more apt to choose Greece like Darius and Evie than some tropical island.”

“I’ve never been there,” I reply.

“Really?”

“Yep. It’s on my list of places I’d like to visit, though. I haven’t done a lot of traveling outside of the States.”

“Me either,” she says in a wistful tone. “When I was a child, I couldn’t wait to be an adult. I imagined by this point in my life, I’d have traveled the world. I didn’t realize responsibilities would keep me from doing that.”

“Traveling is something for us to look forward to doing together,” I say.

She nods enthusiastically. “I’d love that.”

“Come here. You’re too far away.” Grabbing hold of her, I set her sideways across my lap. She places her head on my shoulder and her hand over my heart like she so often does.

She burrows closer. “Mmm, this is nice.”

“This is perfect,” I say.

I may not know what the future holds, but right now, there's nothing missing from my life. Calista is everything I always wanted in a woman but was afraid to wish for. And now that I have her, I'll never do anything to jeopardize our relationship.

She tucks her face into my neck, her warm breaths wafting over my skin. "Can we stay like this forever?"

"Sure, but we might get a little stiff."

She wiggles her ass around. "Feels like one part of you already is."

"That's a hazard of being near you. You're so damn sexy."

"I'm glad you think so."

"I do. And I plan to prove it to you in a little while. I just want to hold you a bit longer first." I rub my hand along her outer thigh. The silky material of her bridesmaid dress is nowhere near as soft as the skin underneath is. "I'm so glad I bid on that auction."

"Me too."

"Did I tell you that I'd never bid on anything before?"

She sits up straighter to see my face. "No, you never did."

"I don't know what compelled me to at that moment, but whatever it is was, I'm fucking thankful."

"If you hadn't, we wouldn't know each other."

"Not true. We would've met the night of the bachelor and bachelorette party."

"You're right."

"But we wouldn't be here right now, and I wouldn't be able to tell you I've fallen in love with you."

She gapes at me, her doe eyes the size of silver dollars.

"I love you, Lis."

She blinks slowly. Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips. She draws in a long, fortifying breath, puffing her chest up, then she releases it. "I love you too."

My eyebrows leap to my hairline. “You do?”

I wasn't sure she'd say it back to me. I wasn't sure we're at the same place with our feelings even. I hoped we were though.

“I really do.”

Cupping her soft cheeks, I nuzzle the tip of my nose against hers. “I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you,” she whispers back. Each word floats over my lips and seeps in, filling my heart to overflowing.

I press my lips to hers. The warmth of her mouth sends a jolt of need through me. She must feel it too because she throws her arms around my neck and our lips part, allowing our tongues to tangle together. One of my hands moves to the zipper on her dress, lowering it with one long pull.

Calista shrugs off the top of the dress, leaving her in a strapless bra. Reaching behind her, I unsnap the hooks, and the scrap of material falls between us.

Mouth watering, I stare at her tits, bared before me. “Look at you.” I circle one of the taut buds with a fingertip, then pinch it between my thumb and index finger. “So rosy and tight.” Capturing the peak between my lips, I suck on it.

Her hands move to the back of my head, urging me to continue. I shift to the other side, circling the flesh with my tongue. She slings one leg over my thighs, straddling my lap. Clutching both sides of her dress, I yank the material down her hips. She rises to her knees, aiding me in the removal by lifting each one so I can slip it off her completely. I throw the voluminous folds of material away from us and my hands return to her body, mapping out her curves and paying homage to her beauty.

Calista's fingers pluck open each of the buttons down the front of my shirt. Spreading the white material wide open, she shoves it from my shoulders until I can shake my arms free. Our naked torsos come together in a rush of sensations that leave us both panting.

She tugs my belt open. “Get these off.”



I undo the button and zipper and raise my hips from the couch. She stands, drawing my pants and boxers down my legs, and takes my socks with them. Kicking free of the discarded clothing, I wrap her in my arms and carry her into the other room and deposit her on the bed. She wiggles her thong down her legs while I stand there staring down at the vision in front of me. The lamp on the nightstand bathes her skin with a golden glow, stealing my breath from me. She looks otherworldly, like a goddess come to gift me one night of pleasure.

I climb onto the mattress and take her in my arms, rolling to my back. "Ride me, Lis."

She hesitates.

"What's wrong?"

She chews on her bottom lip. "Being on top isn't my favorite position."

"What don't you like about it?"

"I feel so exposed."

"I think you're beautiful, and I want to see every inch of you as you ride my cock. I want to watch your tits bounce and see your back arch when you're in the throes of ecstasy."

"You make it sound so sexy."

"It is sexy, and so are you."

She straddles my hips, sliding her warm pussy back and forth along my length, coating me with her arousal. My hands clutch her ass, squeezing each cheek while I let her have control.

She wraps her hand around me and rises up, positioning my tip at her entrance. The slow glide of her wet pussy engulfing me has my eyes rolling back in my head. When I'm buried to the hilt, she takes a moment, adjusting to my size.

"Oh fuck," she says on an exhaled breath.

I'm dying a slow death here. "Move those hips for me." She slowly rolls her pelvis, grinding into me. "That's my girl."

My hands clasping her hips, I rock upward on every one of her downward motions. With each second that passes, her confidence grows. She rides me harder and faster, tits bouncing as she wrings out every bit of pleasure she can. With her cheeks flushed from exertion and her brow damp, she's fucking phenomenal.

Her orgasm hits right before mine. Her back arches and her head drops back as her fingernails sink into my chest.

Her pussy squeezes my cock, milking every drop of my cum from me. She falls onto my chest and I hold her close, amazed she's mine.

# CHAPTER 22



**CALISTA**

## THREE MONTHS LATER

LIFE WITH RYDER as my boyfriend has been wonderful. I'm still working as his personal chef but all the money he was supposed to be paying me each month, he's been donating to my favorite charity instead. Now I cook for him because I love him and I want to make sure he's eating the best foods to fuel his body. And taking care of him is important to me. He's been working so hard in the gym and practicing more than ever.

Being the girlfriend of a professional hockey player is still something I'm adjusting to. Especially with the season kicking off tonight.

"You know, I've been to plenty of hockey games before, but this one feels so different," I say, pulling on a pair of gloves.

Evie nudges me with her arm. "You're official now."

"What do you mean by 'official'?" I ask.

Wendy leans around Evie so I can see her. "Officially crazy for being in love with a hockey player."

I laugh. "Now that, I believe."

Evie shakes her head. "I meant you're officially part of the Coyotes family. You're even more emotionally invested in the game's outcome now. I'm not saying you didn't care when you watched Darius play but it's different when you're watching the man you love. You're on pins and needles for every game."

I nod, pressing a hand to my upset stomach. "That's for sure."

"If it's any consolation, I get more nervous than Kaiden does," Rori tells me.

"Really?"

I guess I'm in good company.

She nods. “Absolutely. He thinks it’s funny, but I don’t. I get that sick stomach feeling every single game, and somehow, it’s even worse when I’m at home watching.”

“That sucks,” I say.

“Right? First-world problems,” she says, and we laugh.

“It’s true. We’re nervous over a game they’re playing. I get that it’s their career and passion and we want them to succeed, but we shouldn’t get stressed out over this.”

“Being a coach’s daughter, I’ve tried for years to reason out the feelings that hockey stirs up in me. It’s never helped. This sport gets under your skin. It becomes a part of you, and if you’re in love with a hockey player, you don’t stand a chance. Because when they don’t win, it affects everyone around them. You’d think the world was ending. And to them the loss feels like it is. But then the next game comes around and they move on.”

“Sounds like a roller coaster,” I say.

“It is, so get ready for the ride. And if you need help navigating it, I’m here for you,” Evie says.

“Thanks.” I lean my head on her shoulder. “I’m so lucky to have you as a sister-in-law.”

“You just love me for my hockey knowledge,” she jokes.

I smile. “It sure doesn’t hurt.”

The guys step on the ice and I can’t take my eyes off Ryder. He skates around, talking with Murphy and Niall, the team’s enforcer, before he makes his way over to the boards below where we’re sitting.

I stand and spin around, pointing my thumbs at the back of my Coyotes sweatshirt. Darius bought it for me for my thirtieth birthday. He had it customized so it says Goode on the back instead of Kastellanos. Ryder’s never seen it before. When I turn back to face him, I see the surprise on his face, but it’s soon replaced by lust as he looks me over. Blowing him a kiss, I sink back down onto my hard seat and shift side to side, trying to get comfortable.

“If hockey games are going to be my new normal, I need a cushion to sit on.”

“And a heater for your buns,” Wendy jokes. Niall flies past us, catching her attention. “If this team gets any more eye candy playing for it, we’re going to need a bigger arena to fit more fans.”

“He’s an attractive addition, for sure,” Evie says. “What do you think his female fans will call themselves? Niall’s Nuggets?”

“Niall’s Nubs,” Wendy suggests.

I snort. “Eww. That’s the worst word.”

“Hmm.” Wendy taps her bottom lip. “Niall’s Narcissists? Niall’s Nipples?”

Rori leans forward to chime in with, “Niall’s Nerds.

“I’ve got one,” I say. “Niall’s Nuts.”

Wendy shakes her head, clearly not impressed. “Niall’s Nymphs,” she suggests before her eyes open wide. She claps her hands together. “I’ve got it... Niall’s Nymphos.”

“Oh my God,” I say, laughing.

“You might be onto something,” Evie says.

“It’s even better than the Ryder’s Goode Girls,” Wendy says.

“Please don’t remind me about them,” I say. Knowing women all over the world want your boyfriend is daunting to think about.

“What do they matter?” Wendy asks. “You’re the goodest girl of all.”

I laugh. “You’re not wrong.”

Evie grabs my hand, shaking it around. “They’re about to start.” She’s just a little excited.

My stomach feels like it’s doing a continuous series of somersaults throughout the entire game. Ryder repeatedly told me that losing the season opener would be devastating in more

than one way for them. My eyes flick to the clock, watching it tick down one second at a time. This isn't the most exciting game that I've been to, mostly because no one is scoring. Defense is playing well on both sides.

By the time there's only two minutes left in the game, it's still scoreless. One of the players on the opposing team drives hard into Ryder with his shoulder, trying to steal the puck.

"Oh," I gasp, covering my mouth with my hands. It's not easy to see these big guys being so rough with the man I love.

Ryder gets control of the puck and starts to skate away. Niall barrels into the opposition like a freight train, preventing the player from delivering a nasty hit on my man. This allows Ryder to get the puck to Kaiden, who slaps it in for what will be the only goal of the entire game.

My friends and I, along with everyone else in the arena, jump to our feet, cheering.

*They got the win.*

"Thank God they won. I'm not prepared to deal with a grumpy Murphy," Wendy says.

Evie nods. "No grumpy guys tonight."

"Kaiden doesn't get grumpy. He gets quiet," Rori tells us.

"I don't know what Ryder's reaction to a loss will be and I'm not looking forward to finding out," I say. "I hate to cut this short, but I have something I need to take care of at home. I've got to head out now. I'll see you all at the next game with my seat cushion in hand."

I get hugs from them all and then I filter into the long line of people leaving the arena. I should've left the game early to avoid this mess, but I'm glad I didn't with how the game came to an end.

I finally make it to my mini van and get on the road as quickly as possible. Because I'm in a rush, the ride to Ryder's feels like it's taking longer than usual. When I pull up, Walter is waiting for me.



“I’m sorry I’m late,” I say, running to open the back hatch. I grab the large bags and hurry up the porch stairs. “But at least it was an afternoon game and it’s not dark out.”

He points to the wooden porch swing I had him build for Ryder. “What do you think?”

“It looks amazing. Better than I imagined.” I remove the custom made cushions from the bags and set them out on the swing. The navy material looks sharp against the light stained wood. I give the chains suspending the swing from the ceiling a good yank. “Are you sure this is secure?”

“I’m positive,” he says.

I add a couple of decorative pillows I had made to the swing. One has the Coyotes logo on it and the other says “It’s a GOODE day.”

“We should get the rest of the stuff set out before we run out of time,” Walter reminds me.

“Where is it all?” I ask.

“In the garage.”

We head down the stairs and around to the garage. I drop the empty bags in the recycling bin and start carrying up all the furniture and decorative items I bought for the front porch.

We set out a pair of Adirondack chairs that are stained the same color as the swing. I place a small table between them and set a citronella jar candle on top. Walter helps me spread out a rug near the swing and we add some hearty potted plants.

When we’re done, we step back and take a look. “I think it’s great,” I say. “I hope he likes it.”

“What’s not to like? Up until now he’s been sitting on the stone stairs. All of these seats are an improvement over that,” Walter points out.

“You’re right. I’m going to grab some drinks and snacks for him. Thank you for all your help, Walter. I couldn’t have done it without you.” I step in for a quick hug.

“I’m going to my house to eat the delicious chicken pot pie you made me. That’s all the thanks I need.”

“Wish me luck,” I say.

He waves his hand. “You don’t need it.”

I dash inside to fill a small tin bucket with ice and plunge a few beer bottles inside. I grab the plate of tiropitakia I made this morning after he left and the bucket and bring them out to the porch. The plate goes on the side table and the bucket down on the floor next to one of the chairs.

Headlights shine off in the distance. I bounce on my toes like a little kid waiting to open a gift. I hope he likes what I did. The vehicle is close enough to recognize it’s Ryder’s truck. Descending the stairs, I wait at the bottom for him to travel the rest of the distance. He drives around the island of flowers and plants that we made together. It looks even better than I imagined it would.

He climbs from his truck, aiming a weary smile my way. “Hey, Lis. How’s my girl?”

“I’m better now that you’re home. Great game.”

He closes the door and moves around toward me. He shrugs. “It wasn’t the best, but we started the season with a win, and that’s important.” He pulls me into his arms and moans. “My entire body is sore. The start of the season is always rough.”

“I’ve got a surprise for you that might make you feel better,” I say.

His eyes turn molten. “Please be a blow job.” I laugh and shove his shoulder. “It’s not a blow job?”

I shake my head. “No, not right now anyway.”

“I’m going to hold you to it later.”

“Come with me,” I say, taking his hand. I lead him up the stairs and step out of the way so he can see what we did. “Surprise!”

His eyes dart around from one thing to another as he takes it all in. “You did this for me?”

“Yes. With some help from your dad. He made the swing and hung it up for me.”

He rubs his beard. “I’m blown away by this. It’s so unexpected.”

“I know this is your favorite part of the house and how much you love to sit out here. I wanted you to have a place that’s yours, where you come and relax. You can clear your head if you need to, or you can look out at what you’ve built here and feel proud of all you’ve accomplished.”

“What if I want to share this space with you?” he asks, drawing me into his arms.

“Then I’ll be right here by your side.”

“That’s right where I want you, Lis. Always.”

I glance up at him. “And forever?”

He smiles. “And forever.”



# EPILOGUE

CALISTA

## DECEMBER

### TWO MONTHS LATER

“THAT’S ALL OF IT,” I say, brushing cardboard box dust from my hands.

“How are you feeling?” Ryder asks, pulling me into his arms.

I smile at him. “Excited for our future.”

“But a little sad too?” He waits for my reply, but all I manage is a shrug. “It’s okay to feel conflicted about moving. Even if you’re moving in with me. This was the first home you purchased.”

“Yeah, I’m going to miss this little house of mine.”

“Well, take comfort in the fact that you’re not selling it. Niall will be staying here and making sure everything’s in working order.”

I nod. “That’s true.”

“And if you need a place of your own on the farm, I’ll find one for you.”

“I’ll just cuddle with the minis. I’ll alternate between the cows and ponies,” I joke.

“I think we have the space to build you your own barn.” He winks.

“My own barn, huh? Would this barn have a kitchen?”

“It would have whatever you want.”

“I know you love to spoil me, but all I really need is you,” I say.

He leans forward, pressing a soft kiss on my lips. “I’m heading home. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. I shouldn’t be too long.”

“Take some time with your friend. You’re going to miss her just as much as she’ll miss you.”

“I know I will.”

“I’ll see you at home.” He flashes a smile at me. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I blow him a kiss.

He gets in his truck that’s loaded up with boxes filled with my possessions. Once he pulls out of the driveway, I head back inside to take a final look around. The furniture and appliances still remain for Niall to use. It didn’t make sense to take anything when Ryder’s house—make that *our* house—has plenty of both. It might take me a while to feel like it’s my home too, but that’s more about my own financial insecurities. Ryder’s attitude is that he may have paid for the farm, but he insists I’m the reason it feels like a home.

I trail my fingers over the kitchen island. I started my business in this room. I have a lot of great memories here.

I take a quick peek in each room before I shut down the lights and lock up. I head next door to Lucy’s front porch.

She waves. “Hey, lover!”

“Hey, sex kitten. What’s shaking?”

I sit down next to her and we fall together in a hug. Emotion clogs my throat. Lucy has been right next door whenever I’ve needed her. And now she won’t be.

When we part from each other, there are tears in my eyes. I’m afraid to look at Lucy because if I see her crying, I’ll lose control.

She hands me a glass filled with a frosty margarita, and I look out at the view of our quaint neighborhood. I’m really going to miss moments like this. Lucy snuffles and quickly wipes tears from her eyes while I sip from the ice-cold drink.



“I can’t believe you’re gonna leave me right before Christmas.”

Setting my glass on the coffee table, I shift on the wicker couch, facing her. “Come on. Don’t be like that. In your eyes, there would never be a good time for me to move in with Ryder.”

She tosses her head toward her next door neighbor’s house. “I can’t believe you’re leaving me alone with the creepster. Who’s gonna be my pretend lover now?”

“As it turns out, one of Ryder’s teammates is going to temporarily rent my house. He’s been living in a hotel since July.”

She huffs. “That still leaves me minus one pretend lover.”

“True. I can’t help you with that. Can you have one of your other friends drop over from time to time?”

“Everyone’s married and has kids. You were my last hope.”

I dislike letting her down, but I can’t base my choices on what’s best for Lucy. That’s her responsibility and I’m ecstatic about moving in with Ryder. It’s the next step in our happily ever after. There’ll be no more making the drive back and forth between our homes. I’ll be able to spend every night with him, share a bed, and wake up to see his face first thing every morning.

“I can keep up the lover act every time I visit. You can always say I moved and we’re in a long distance relationship.”

She gives me an *are you kidding* look. “That might work if you weren’t in a relationship with a professional hockey player. Your faces are plastered all over social media,” she says.

I shudder. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t tell me that.”

“Why?”

“Because the idea of total strangers commenting on my life or weighing in on my relationship online is unsettling. They

don't know me or anything about my life. They don't know what goes on behind closed doors."

"Look at it like it's just noise you'll have to ignore to be with Ryder."

"I stay off social media, so I don't see most of the toxic stuff that gets posted, and I don't even want to know about it, so don't tell me. Ever."

"What about the compliments you get? Do you want to hear those?"

I shake my head from side to side. "Nope."

"Not even when they say you're beautiful?"

"Nope. My stance is firm."

What other people think about me or my appearance shouldn't matter.

She presses her lips together, nodding. "Wow. I'm impressed."

"How's your show been?" I ask. "Any new Bigfoot sightings?"

She studies my expression. "I can't tell if you're being serious or not"

"What? Girl, I've always thought your job is cool as fuck. It's not something I'd be comfortable doing, but I admire your bravery."

"It's not scary, per se. For the most part it's actually exhilarating. I like the unpredictability of it. We never know what's going to happen."

"Sounds like dating," I say, slapping my knee.

She laughs. "You're not wrong. And guys are hairy animals."

I point at her. "You're so right."

A car pulls into the driveway next door. "Well, well, well, looks like the creeper is home."

"Are we still lovers?" I ask, smiling.

“What’s the point? Everyone knows you’re with Ryder.”

“We can tongue kiss and make it look convincing,” I say, wiggling my eyebrows. “A final hurrah, so to speak.”

She laughs. “God, I’m gonna miss you. Don’t leave me,” she says with an exaggerated sob and throws herself into my arms.

Laughing, I rub her back, and we don’t part until our neighbor has gone inside.

I rise from the couch. “I hate to leave, but I need to get home and cook something for dinner.”

“Make Ryder cook,” she suggests.

“It’s not that he won’t. But I like my food to be edible. And he’s got a lot of boxes to unload from his truck, so he’ll be hungry.”

“I bet in more ways than one, you lucky bitch,” she says.

I hold out my arms. “Give me another hug and promise you’ll come visit me soon.”

She jumps to her feet and squeezes me tightly. “I’m happy for you, Calista.”

“Thank you. I’ll be in touch, don’t worry.” I step back and hurry down the porch stairs before I can cry.

“Toodles, lover.” Lucy waves her fingers, and I laugh.

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When I pull into the long driveway leading to our farm, I feel like I’m coming home for real. This is the first time I’m making this drive without a plan for returning to my house in Charleston. There’s no more visiting the farm. I’m a permanent resident, and I couldn’t be happier about that.

The ponies and cows run around their paddocks as they hear my minivan approaching. I roll down the passenger window and yell to them, “I’m home for good!”

I park behind Ryder's truck, and on my way to the porch, I notice he's already unloaded all the boxes and is currently sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs.

He smiles at me. "Hey, baby."

"You've been busy." I drop into the other chair.

"I was in the zone, so I figured why not get it done. How did it go with Lucy?"

"It was fine. It's not like we're never going to see each other."

"You went from having your best friend as your neighbor to having no neighbors," he says.

"Yeah. I won't miss the traffic and the city noise. It's so wonderfully quiet here."

He stands and stretches his hand out to me. "Come with me. I have something I want to show you."

I let him pull me to my feet. "I've seen it all before," I say, winking.

He laughs. "I like how you're thinking, but I have a surprise for you that you've never seen before. I got you a 'moving in' gift."

"Ryder! You've spoiled me so much already. I don't need gifts from you. All I need is you."

"You have me. And I can't help spoiling you. It's so much fun."

He holds my hand as we walk down the driveway. He directs me to the barn and leads me inside.

"I was kidding earlier about cuddling with minis," I say.

He laughs. "You might change your mind when you see your present."

Now I'm really confused as to what the gift could be.

He leads me to a stall and covers my eyes before I see what's inside. "No peeking yet," he says.

I pout my lips. "That's not fair, you meanie."

“Your gift is something that fell into my lap unexpectedly. It wasn’t planned but the timing is perfect.”

“Okay already. I want to see. Please?” I press my hands together in a prayerful pose.

“What do you think?” he asks, slipping his hands from my eyes. There’s a baby blond mini cow standing in the stall.

I let out a tiny excited squeal. “Oh my God! He’s so cute.”

I walk slowly into the stall. I don’t want to scare the little guy. He stares up at me with his huge brown eyes, batting his long blond lashes at me as he chews a mouthful of hay.

“He’s beautiful. What’s his name?”

“He doesn’t have a name. That’s for you to decide.”

“I get to name him?”

“Baby, he’s yours. You can call him whatever you want.”

“He’s mine?” I ask, my eyes tearing up.

“I told you I had a gift for you. He’s all yours.”

I fall to my knees in front of my mini and scratch behind his ears. “Hey, handsome baby. I’m so happy you’re here.”

He sniffs my hand, then laps at my palm, making me laugh.

“Look at his pink nose,” I say. “So fucking cute.” I place a hand on my chest. “I can’t deal with how gorgeous he is. Can he live in the house with us?”

Ryder laughs. “He can visit, but I don’t think it would be fair to the other guys if he lived with us.”

“Then I’m really going to need a bed in the barn to cuddle with him.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He chuckles as he watches me stroke my hands all over the little guy’s fluffy coat.

“Lis, we should let him eat.”

“I don’t want to leave him,” I say.

“We should get back to the house so we can eat too.”

I know he's right. With all the excitement, I've lost track of time.

I rise to my feet and brush the bits of straw from my jeans. "Give me one minute," I say, pulling my phone from my back pocket. I tap some keys, bring up the search bar, and ask which boy's name means blond. When I read the answer, I smile. Bending over, I whisper in my mini's ear. When I straighten back up, I nod at Ryder. "I'm ready."

He nods toward my new obsession. "What was that all about?"

"I had to tell him his name."

"Which is?"

"Boyd."

Ryder smiles. "Boyd Goode."

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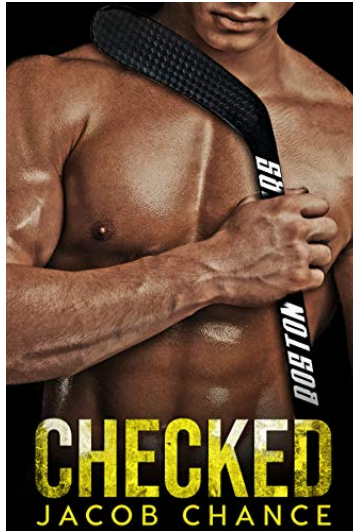
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**Want to More Hockey Books from me?**

**[Check out the sneak peek of Chapter One from CHECKED, book one in my Boston Terriers Hockey Series](#)**



They call him ‘Wilde Man’. Rumor has it he’s an animal on the ice and between the sheets.

Like the rest of the female population, I’ve been crushing on Clancy Wilde, the captain of Boston University’s hockey team, since the first time I saw him. Big, blond, and charming, he ticks all the boxes.

When we find ourselves at a wedding, drunk and flirting, I know I can finally check this tattooed, bad boy, hockey player off my wish list.

One night is all it was meant to be, until I see two pink lines on the pregnancy test.

How did the notch on my belt turn into a ball and chain?

**[Check out the sneak peek of Chapter One from CHECKED, book one in my Boston Terriers Hockey Series](#)**





# CHAPTER ONE

TENLEY

## AUGUST

LEANING BACK AGAINST THE BAR, I sip my wine and glance around the poolside wedding reception. My friend just married the man of her dreams and I can't even land a date with a decent guy. Smiling faces surround me while couples dance closely and contentedly in each other's arms. Romance fills the air and I'm standing here drowning my sorrows, contemplating my love life. Or should I say lack thereof?

I haven't gone on a date in three months. That's quite a dry spell for a twenty-one-year-old woman. The guy who took me out must have had a change of heart. He was completely into me for weeks, and in the span of two hours his behavior did a sudden one-eighty. He went from flirting madly to thrusting me in the friend zone so fast I got whiplash. To this day, I still wonder what happened.

*Was it something I said? Or something I did?*

Fuck me. My thoughts are beginning to sound like a cheesy eighties rock ballad.

Turning around, I set my wine glass down and lean my forearms on the bar while I stare out at the beautiful northern Virginia sunset. Painting the sky with vivid slashes of orange, pink, and gold, it's breathtaking, making it difficult to feel down when there's so much beauty surrounding me. And the gentle whisper of the evening breeze wafting over my bare shoulders feels like a reassuring caress.

*Relax. Loosen up.* That's what I imagine it's saying to me.

I don't want to be a killjoy on this happy occasion. It's not that I'm jealous when people find their happily ever after, like my friend Jane did. She and her new husband are perfect for each other. The two of them belong together and I want her to have nothing but the best. I just wish I had some viable dating options on the horizon, so I could feel better about my own

romantic future. I'd even be satisfied if something would happen to give me hope that I won't be alone forever.

*Send me a sign, universe. I'm ready.*

A tan, masculine forearm lands on the bar next to mine.

*Damn that was quick. Is this my sign?*

My eyes wander along the muscular, veined length, stopping when they reach the neatly rolled up shirtsleeves. Turning my head, my gaze continues the trek up his crisp, white, fitted shirt. Snug around his flexed bicep, I wonder if he has any tattoos under that material?

A broad shoulder caps it off so nicely, I'm afraid to look any higher. Whoever this is standing next to me, there's no way his face can possibly measure up to the rest of him. Why ruin perfection?

Curiosity wins out, though.

*Oh well, here goes nothing.*

His thick neck is tanned a golden brown and his sculpted lips are twisted into a derisive smirk telling me he's aware of my thorough perusal. The higher my eyes climb, the faster my heart gallops.

*Oh shit.*

I know those lips.

I recognize that sexy smirk.

Please be wrong.

Sweeping my gaze up, I connect with roguish hazel orbs. Fuck me. Of all times for me to be right.

Clancy Wilde, my best friend's cousin, is next to me in the flesh... in his very sexy, two percent body fat flesh.

I let out a gasp before I can hold the sound in.

He chuckles deeply, making my stomach toss turbulently, like rough water on the high seas.

"Something wrong, Tenley?" he questions knowingly. Fuck me. Unfortunately, he's aware I've always harbored a

huge crush on him.

Licking my dry lips, I pray my voice still works. “Not a thing.” I aim a tight, close-lipped smile his way and pluck my wine glass from the bar. Tipping it back, I drink down the remainder in one long gulp. One hand raises signaling for the bartender before the other can place the empty glass down.

He sniggers, as if he knows the reason for my discomfort, and my need for more wine. But is it really a secret? He makes me feel off balance and flushed, unlike my usual confident self.

What girl wouldn't be uncomfortable in this situation?

It feels so grade school that he knows I think he's ridiculously hot. But I'm pretty sure every girl in the free world feels that way about him.

“Wine?” he arches a dark blond brow and tips his head toward my glass.

“What about it?”

“I just never imagined you as a wine drinker.”

Turning to face him, I lean my arm on the bar and prop my chin on my palm. “What have you imagined me drinking then?” I can't wait to hear this one.

“Something with a little more kick, a little more fire. It needs to have a hint of sour and plenty of sweet. Something that mimics your personality.”

He thinks I'm fiery and sweet?

“I'm your cousin's best friend. You live in Boston and I'm in Washington D.C. We've probably seen each other a total of ten times over the years. How strange is it that you think of me at all?”

“Ten times? You've been counting, Tenley?”

Fucker.

“You wish,” I sass back. I take another sip of my wine, cooling down the heat that being in his company always brings.

Clancy Wilde is my most-embarrassing secret. A frequent topic in my high school journal, I recorded all the cringe worthy facts about him with my favorite purple pen in looping handwriting and i's dotted with hearts.

Thank God he's never read the entries or knows of their existence. I've no doubt he'd love to see his name at the top of my 'wish list' of guys I'd like to be with. It's a short list, but he's still in the top spot.

"Say I'm going to go along with your theory about my drink, what would you suggest?" Gripping the stem, I hold out my empty glass.

His fingers close around the rim, sliding it across the bar while his eyes study me carefully. Raking his teeth over his bottom lip, the action calls my attention to their full shape. He probably did that on purpose.

Returning my focus upward, I catch his amused expression. Yep. He did. The bastard.

"Devil's Advocate."

"Is that the name of the drink, or are you playing one?"

He smiles. "That's the name of the drink. Although, that's also one of my favorite parts to play."

Okay, I'll go along with your game. "What's in it?"

"Fireball whiskey, spiced rum, apple schnapps, and lemon-lime soda."

I wrinkle my nose. "That sounds horrible."

"I figured you wouldn't try it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He shrugs. "It's just that this drink is probably too much for you to handle."

I rise to my full height and narrow my eyes at him. "I can handle more than you could imagine, buddy."

He grins and looks at me appraisingly. "Can you now? I'd like to see exactly how much you can handle."

Wait a minute.

Is he still talking about this drink? Or is he flirting with me?

My stomach tumbles madly at the thought of him being interested in me.

Turning, I raise my hand signaling the bartender once more. He ambles over, but before I can order, Clancy beats me to it.

“Can I get a Devil’s Advocate for her and a Jameson neat for me?”

“Sure thing,” he replies, before moving toward the clean glasses.

“Have you ever tried this drink?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

“I have, actually. One of my cousins went to bartending school and I helped him out by trying all the drinks he made.”

“I’m sure that was a real hardship for you.” I roll my eyes. What young guy wouldn’t jump at the opportunity for free booze?

“You can’t imagine.” He shakes his head. “But that’s the kind of guy I am. I’ll jump right in there and take the bull by the horns when no one else wants to.” His tone is teasing, but he probably thinks he’s all that.

And he is.

Tall and thick-chested with shoulder length blond hair, he can get any girl he wants and probably has had most of them.

He’s captain of the hockey team at Boston University and, from what I’ve heard, an animal on the ice. And if I had to guess, I’d say between the sheets too.

They don’t call him ‘Wilde Man’ for nothing.

I’ve heard too much about his love ‘em and leave ‘em ways from Sophie. I know she wanted me informed so I would keep my distance.

What she doesn't understand is being aware of his hook ups doesn't turn me off like you'd think it would. It makes me assume he must be really good between the sheets from all that practice.

Clancy is the worst kind of player there is because he's also a nice guy. And it would be all too easy to fall for him without meaning to.

He leaves a trail of broken hearts behind him wherever he goes. Even I'm susceptible to his handsome face and charming personality.

And let's not forget that hard body.

The bartender returns, placing my drink on a napkin in front of me. Eyeing the beverage skeptically, I can't help but wonder what it will taste like.

Golden in color, it looks harmless enough, but Clancy rattled off the liquor content, so I know it's going to pack a punch.

His Jameson gets set on the bar and he immediately raises the glass to his lips for a sip. "Come on. Don't make me drink alone." He tips his chin toward my drink. "Try it. I'm interested in hearing what you think."

Uncrossing my arms, I hesitantly close my fingers around the tumbler. It's cold against my skin.

"Go on. It's not going to bite you. At least not right away." He laughs.

It's his amusement at my expense that goads me into raising the glass to my lips and knocking it back in one continuous gulp. I don't stop until every drop is gone. Raising my head, my empty hand lands on my tingling lips.

I try not to cringe from the sweet aftertaste in my mouth, followed by a fiery burn down my esophagus and into my stomach. It feels like I swallowed a tiny fire breathing dragon.

The ice in the empty glass clinks together as I place the tumbler on the bar. A weary warmth envelops my limbs, instantly relaxing me.



Clancy watches for a reaction. “So? What did you think?”

Hmm. What do I think?

“It was better than I thought it would be. It’s definitely sweet, almost too much so. And it feels a little like I swallowed fire.” Licking my lips, I taste a bit of the lemon-lime mixed with the apple, or maybe I’m just imagining it. Either way, it’s not as unpleasant as I expected.

“The second one will taste even better,” he states.

“Second one? I don’t think my stomach can take another. It might already be flaming.”

“Trust me. I know what I’m talking about.” He winks and gestures to the bartender for two more drinks.

“Okay, but this is the last one. I don’t want to get drunk and feel like crap tomorrow morning. I plan on making the most of this weekend.”

“You mentioned before that you can handle a lot, so I think you’ll be fine.”

He’s so annoying for throwing my own words back at me. I’m going to have this one last drink and after that, if Clancy doesn’t find somewhere else to be, I will.

I’m not going to let him weasel his way past my defenses, or into my panties, like so many girls do.

I’m smarter than they are.

*But do I want to be?*

Our drinks get pushed along the shiny bar top toward us. Clancy tucks two twenty dollar bills down into the tip cup and hands my glass to me. He picks up his own and holds it up in the air.

“I think a toast is in order.”

“Why?”

“Because this is a happy occasion and it’s the first time we’ve had a chance to talk in a long time.” He leans closer.

“I’m not sure what you mean. We’ve never really talked much.”

“Well, maybe we should rectify that.” His voice lowers becoming impossibly deep.

I angle my torso toward him. “Okay. Whatever floats your boat, dude.” My words contradict my body language.

“Don’t sound so happy at the prospect. Look, I’ll even make the toast, all you have to do is say cheers. You can handle that, right?” I shake my hand like I’m holding a pom pom and he grins. “To friendship... close friendship.”

I mutter, “Cheers.” And ignore his innuendo.

There.

My duty is done.

Now to finish this drink and get away from all this suffocating machismo before I collapse under the weight of it. I don’t want to be one of those girls who give in easily. He should have to put in some effort for a change. I drink down this Devil’s Advocate slightly slower than the first one, but when all is said and done, it’s still pretty fast. I want to get away from Clancy ASAP.

No. I *need* to.

He’s looking a little too attractive and he smells amazing. I’ve been breathing shallowly for the past ten minutes trying to convince myself I was imagining it, but I’m not.

Trying to resist him after wanting him for so long is taking more restraint than I have. How do I ignore this opportunity when I may never get the chance to be with him again?

Setting the empty glass down, I lean toward him and sniff. He smells like sex in the woods. Okay, he looks like sex. But he smells like a combination of pine and wood, very manly.

“Did you just smell me?”

“No. My allergies have been bothering me and I was just making sure my nasal passages are clear.”

*What the fuck?*

It's not the greatest answer, but hey, it's on the fly.

"And are they?"

"Yeah, you smell great."

*Dammit.*

He smiles triumphantly and grabs my hand. "Let's dance."

I'm trotting along beside him before I can disagree. "Wait. I don't want to dance with you." I put up a token resistance and try to tug my hand free, but I want to be in his arms. Judging from the sly grin twisting his lips, he knows it too.

"Well, I want to dance with you. Come on. How bad can it be? Just one dance."

Sighing, I give in and go with the flow, letting Clancy draw me into his arms. Agreeing is the path of least resistance. That's what I tell myself anyway.

Those two drinks have what little resolve is left waning and my body feels languid and loose enough to relax against him.

Of course, a slow song would have to be playing. Silently I cheer and curse the universe at the same time.

Molded to the front of Clancy's muscular body is the last place I should be.

But it might be the only place I want to be now that I am.

Which makes me a dumbass because I know he's a top-notch player and I'm not supposed to get played by him.

But is it getting played when you go into the situation with your eyes wide open?

Sophie, his own cousin, has warned me to stay away from him. Therefore, I'm not supposed to be dancing closely with Clancy, and I'm definitely not supposed to be enjoying it.

I probably shouldn't be so excited about the prospect of placing a check mark next to his name in my old diary. My stomach leaps and twirls. I shouldn't be, but I am.

Who knew that dancing could feel so sexual? That every particle that makes up my body could hum with awareness? That every brush of our hips teases me to the point I might splinter?

His large hands wander over my spine, sending chills plucking down each vertebra like fingertips on guitar strings.

His palms are hot against my lower back, caressing me. Making me want them to slide lower and cup my ass.

When his actions mimic my thoughts, my breath stutters. One cheek in each hand, he squeezes, urging me closer to his obvious hard-on.

*Well, this escalated fast.*

“You’re driving me crazy,” he confesses in a hoarse voice with his lips against my ear. “Holding you is the best thing about this wedding.”

“I’m not going to fall for your bullshit,” I inform him, leaning closer.

But who am I kidding?

I fell the moment I saw him standing next to me.

“Noted. But you don’t have to fall for me to fuck me. So, what do you say?” He grinds into me and I let out a low moan, my eyelids sweeping shut. “You know it will be mind-blowing. Fuck. You’re halfway to an orgasm already.”

My eyes snap open with annoyance. Is it possible to want to screw someone and strangle them at the same time?

“So are you. How do I know you won’t... “ I struggle for a polite way to say what I need to. “End early.”

He laughs. “I won’t. And even if I did, it wouldn’t keep me down for long.” He winks. “I recover fast.”

I curl my upper lip at him, but it’s really at myself. I hate being so tempted by his hard, hot body. But I’m pretty sure he could tempt a nun to throw caution to the wind.

Besides, I haven’t had sex in too fucking long.

In fact, I can't even remember how much time it's actually been.

But none of those reasons matter. What it boils down to is that I've never been the girl to doubt myself or to not go after the things I want.

I want Clancy Wilde.

He's been an object of my desire for years now. He's smoking hot and I'm pretty sure sex with him won't make me regretful.

You only live once, and tonight I'm going to grab onto Clancy and enjoy the ride.

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**[For more of Clancy and Tenley read CHECKED in full on AMAZON and FREE with KindleUnlimited](#)**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacob Chance grew up in New England and still lives there today. He's a martial artist, a football fan, a practical joker and junk food lover.

All his books are available on [Amazon](#)



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