



DEFIANT
KINGS

HAVEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BELLA MATTHEWS

HAVEN

DEFIANT KINGS

BOOK FIVE



BELLA MATTHEWS

CONTENTS

Sensitive Content

1. [Ashlyn](#)
2. [Ashlyn](#)
3. [Brandon](#)
4. [Brandon](#)
5. [Brandon](#)
6. [Ashlyn](#)
7. [Ashlyn](#)
8. [Ashlyn](#)
9. [Brandon](#)
10. [Ashlyn](#)
11. [Brandon](#)
12. [Ashlyn](#)
13. [Unknown](#)
14. [Brandon](#)
15. [Brandon](#)
16. [Ashlyn](#)
17. [Unknown](#)
18. [Ashlyn](#)
19. [Brandon](#)
20. [Ashlyn](#)
21. [Ashlyn](#)
22. [Unknown](#)
23. [Brandon](#)
24. [Ashlyn](#)
25. [Ashlyn](#)
26. [Brandon](#)
27. [Ashlyn](#)
28. [Brandon](#)
29. [Ashlyn](#)
30. [Ashlyn](#)
31. [Brandon](#)
32. [Epilogue](#)
33. [Epilogue](#)

[What Comes Next?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Bella Matthews](#)

Copyright © 2023

Bella Matthews

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotation embodied in the critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Resemblance to actual persons, things, living or dead, locales or events is entirely coincidental. The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

This book contains mature themes and is only suitable for 18+ readers.

Editor: Dena Mastrogiovanni, Red Pen Editing

Cover Designer: Shannon Passmore, Shanoff Designs

Photographer: WANDER AGUIAR PHOTOGRAPHY

Interior Formatting: Brianna Cooper

SENSITIVE CONTENT

This book contains sensitive content that could be triggering.
Please see my website for a full list.

WWW.AUTHORBELLAMATTHEWS.COM

Jen. This one is for you.

Thank you so much for talking me off so many cliffs and holding my hand through so many levels of hell this past year. I appreciate every voice memo. Every laugh and every tear.

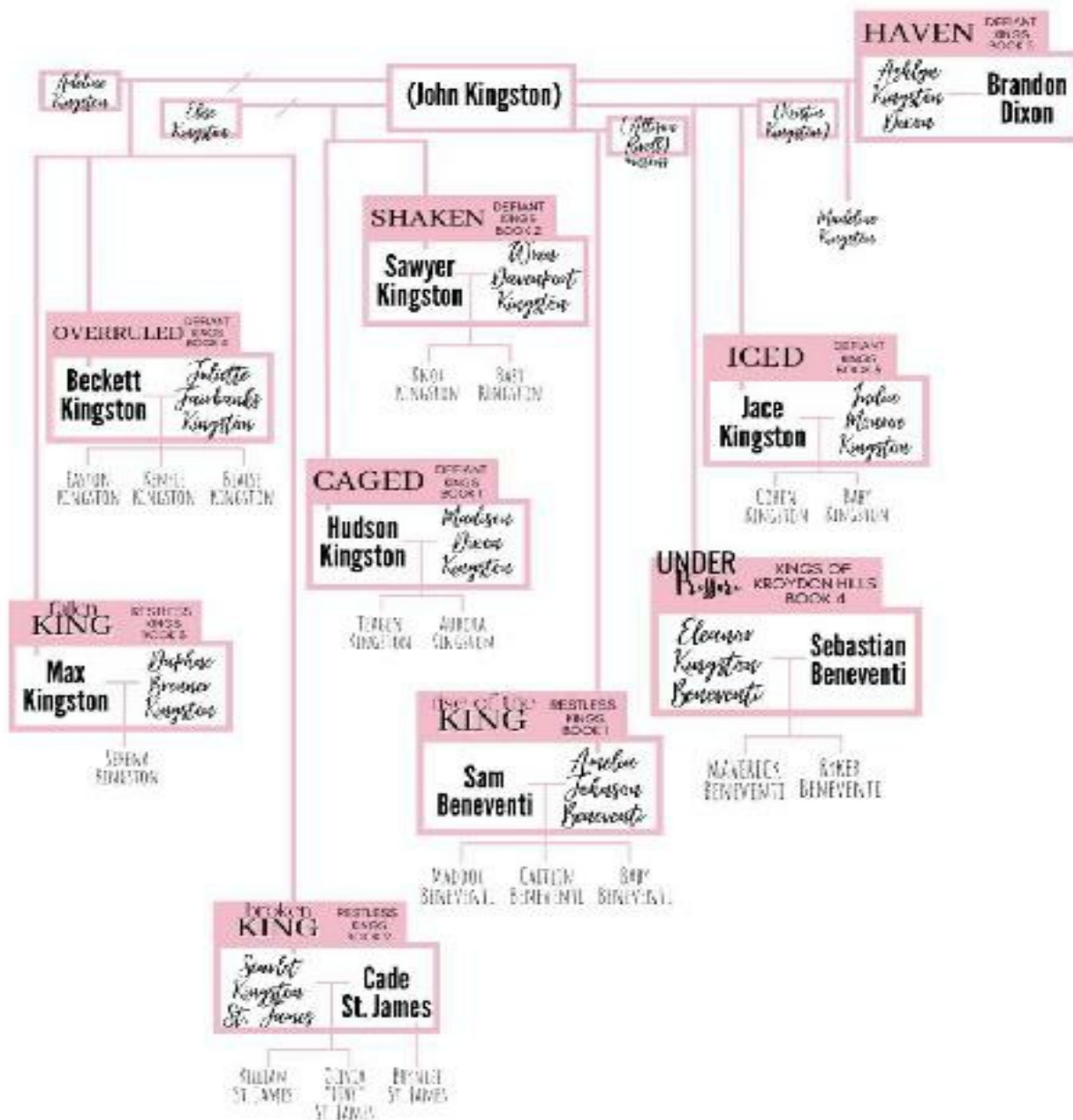
And thank you for always loving these Kingstons.

“And the love in their eyes set the world on fire.”

— JENNIFER WHITE

THE KINGSTON FAMILY

Alfa
MATTHEWS
SERIES NO. 204



ASHLYN



Fifteen years ago

“*T*his is such a bad idea, Nina.” I hesitate and glance over at my teammate before she climbs out of the car.

The shoo-in for the Olympic gold medal in figure skating slams the door shut behind her, then rounds the car and opens my door. “Get out of the car, Ashlyn. We’re already here.” She turns around and looks over the fraternity house behind her. “What *Coach* doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“No, but it might hurt us,” I argue as I get out and tug my sweater down. “If he realizes we’re not in the house—”

Nina’s eyes flare, and she cuts me off, “Stop. We’re already here, and we’re going to have fun. We leave for Paris in two days, and then everything will change. Just have one night of fun with me. Please,” she begs, and I do what I always do. I give in.

“Fine.” I link my arm through hers. “One night. But we’ve got to be smart about it and back in the house before five. I refuse to get caught because of a stupid frat party.”

“First of all, we’re not a frat. We’re a football team. Frats are for douchebags,” a deep voice rumbles from the shadows before a guy steps out and Nina launches herself at him. She wraps her arms around his thick neck and her legs around his waist before kissing him, and my cheeks flame.

I stand there, waiting for her to stop and take a breath, feeling like a third wheel when another guy, this one bigger and broader, and oh my God, hotter than the one Nina’s mauling, clears his throat. The sound is deep and gravelly

and sexy as hell. “You guys gonna come up for air, or you plan on giving the whole street a show, man?”

The big guy moves next to me and blatantly looks me over. “Hey. I’m Brandon.”

“Ashlyn,” I offer softly . . . though, awkwardly is probably more like it. This guy looks like Henry Cavill and The Rock had a baby. Shit. And I sound like a tongue-tied idiot.

“Well, Ashlyn, want to come inside and get a drink? These two don’t look like they’re coming up for air anytime soon.” His lips tip up to one side in a practiced smile, and I think my panties might have just melted away.

Then his words finally register.

“What?” I ask tall, dark, and muscley before marching over to my sister-from-another-mister and yank on her shoulder. “Who the hell is this, and when did you find time to meet someone? And where the hell did you meet him? And why didn’t you tell me?” I demand.

Nina and I have been like sisters ever since my mom basically sold me to Nina’s dad so he could train me for the Olympics ten years ago. We’ve shared a room. Shared our secrets and fears. Hell, we even shared a pair of skates two years ago at nationals when hers broke ten minutes before her free skate.

I know everything about her.

At least I thought I did.

She unlaces herself from the football guy and smiles sheepishly. “Sorry, Ash. This is Eric. Eric, this is Ashlyn.”

Eric gives me a nod. “Hey. I’ve heard all about the *perfect* Ashlyn. Nice to finally meet you.”

I glare at Nina. What the hell has she been telling this guy?

She’s in so much trouble.

“Don’t be mad, Ash. If I told you, you wouldn’t have come,” Nina pleads, and she’s not wrong. “Come on. Let’s go inside.” She reaches for me, but Eric tugs her away.

“Come on, babe. I wanted to show you that thing. Dixon’s got your girl, don’t you, Dix?” Okay. That’s strike two for Eric, but I don’t get a chance to say anything else before he picks Nina up, throws her over his shoulder, smacks her ass, and walks away.

I look up at the dark sky and resist the urge to cry when the big guy next to me places his big palm at the small of my back, right above the waist of

my low-slung jeans. “Come on. Let’s go around back and get you something to drink.”

I hesitate for a hot second as a shiver races down my spine from the feel of his warm skin against mine. “Thanks, but I don’t need a drink or a babysitter.”

“What if I told you you’d be doing me a favor?” And there goes that smile again.

Jesus, get it together, girl.

“I’d say you were lying,” I answer but let him guide me down the worn grass pathway alongside the old brick house, and toward the backyard, where the music is just a little louder than all the voices.

“Well, that’s the first thing you’re going to learn about me, Ashlyn. I never lie.”

A few groups of people call out his name and congratulate him as we walk by. “You seem like a pretty popular guy.”

“Yeah . . . well.” It’s his turn to hesitate, and if I’m not mistaken, he may even turn a little red. “My football team won the national championship a few weeks ago, but most of these guys weren’t back on campus until classes started this week. They’re still pretty excited.” And there’s something about the way he says it—like he’s embarrassed by it—that intrigues me.

“That’s amazing. You guys must be pretty good to make it that far. Congratulations.” We stop by a keg where I’m handed a yellow Solo cup of foamy beer, then led over to a very *indoor* couch sitting outside next to a heat lamp. Brandon drops down and stretches his thick legs in front of him and his arm across the back while he waits for me to sit.

When I eye him skeptically, his smile grows bigger. “You *really* don’t want to be here, do you?”

“Not really. It’s kind of a big week for me. I should honestly be sleeping.” Could I possibly sound more lame?

“Listen, I wasn’t kidding before. You can really help me out. I just wanted to chill tonight, but the guys had other plans, and I couldn’t say no. How about you stick by my side and act like we’re together?”

“Ha. Does that usually work for you?” I tease.

“I’m serious. You’d be doin’ me a favor. No funny business. Just sit here with me and talk. People will think we’re together. That’ll keep the guys away from you and the girls away from me. Win-win.”

His white thermal shirt stretches across an impossibly muscled chest, and

an unbuttoned blue and gray flannel covers that. He looks comfortable and warm, and for some reason, I kinda think I might actually trust him, so I sit.

Probably a dumb move. Definitely one I'll regret. But it's the first time I've ever had a hot guy ask me to spend time with him, so why not?

Yeah . . . this isn't going to end well.



Brandon

“So why should you be in bed at eleven o'clock on a Thursday night?” I ask this beautiful girl as she sits as far away from me as possible and pulls her knees up against her chest. She's skittish like a kitten, but every move she makes is graceful and perfect, like she's practiced the movement thousands of times. It's a strange combo.

“I have a long flight out Saturday, and the next few weeks are going to be kinda crazy.” She looks down at her beer. The one she hasn't so much as sipped yet. Her thick strawberry-blonde hair falls in front of her face, and yeah . . . that hair would look fucking fantastic wrapped around my fist while I fucked her from behind, but that ain't happenin'.

Not tonight.

Not with this girl.

Everything about her screams *good girl*. From the top of her tight little black cardigan sweater with white pearl buttons all the way down to the ballet flats on her feet. This isn't a one-night-stand girl. This is the girl you protect from the rest of the assholes at the party who'd chew her ass up.

“Where ya flying to?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Paris,” she whispers. Yup. She's a good little rich girl too. Fucking figures.

I take a sip of beer and watch her as she fidgets with her pearls. “Family vacation?”

“No.” Her fingers still, and she looks around, like she's looking for Nina or someone to save her. “I have a competition.”

Okay. Now I'm intrigued. “What kind of competition?”

“Umm . . . Did Nina really not tell you guys? It seemed like you knew

her.”

What the hell? “Nah. She didn’t say anything. I think her and Eric have only been hooking up for a few weeks.”

“Good to know.” She shakes her head, then lifts sparkling green eyes to mine. “We’re going to the Olympics. She and I are both on the US Women’s Figure Skating team.”

“Damn. That’s . . . just wow. That’s incredible.” I look at her again, really look this time. She’s a tiny thing, with long fucking legs, and I’m pretty sure her clothes do a decent job of hiding a smoking hot body. One I never would have guessed from the obvious way she avoids attention. I guess the graceful way she moves makes sense now. But if she’s good enough to make the Olympics, why aren’t strength and confidence oozing from her bones. “Nina is too?”

“Yeah. Odds have her winning the gold. Her dad is our coach. I live with them.” Then, as if she wants to stop talking, she takes her first sip of beer, and based on the sour look on her face, I’m pretty fucking sure it’s her first ever taste of the stuff.

I drag my eyes from her face back to the cup and take it from her hand.

“Hey,” she calls out. “What are you doing?”

“You’re going to the Olympics in two fucking days. You don’t really want to be drinking this piss, do ya?”

Ashlyn bites down on her glossy lip and shakes her head. “Why would anyone want to drink that stuff? It tastes gross.” She settles deeper into the couch, and I tug on a lock of her hair as a small smile graces her face. And *goddamn*. That smile.

It’s the kinda smile that gets you through the shit in life.

I haven’t seen too many of them.

Fuck.

I finish off my beer and drop her full cup in mine. “You get used to it eventually.”

She shivers and rubs her arms.

“You cold?” I ask as I take off my flannel and drape it over her shoulders, then leave my arm hanging there too, liking the feel of her against me.

“Thanks,” she answers as she inches closer. “Wanna tell me why you don’t feel like talking at a party celebrating your team?”

“My roommate was our team captain. He died a few months ago. It’s been a fucked up season on top of a few fucked up years. I just want to get

through the next few months, get drafted, and get my life started.”

“What was his name?” she asks. “Your roommate?”

“Jamie,” I whisper and feel that same pressure building in my chest that I always feel when I think about him and his girl, Charlotte. “He’d just gotten engaged. He was driving his girl to the airport, and somebody blew through a red light.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers just as quietly.

Funny thing is I think she actually is.

This girl . . . I think this girl might be something special.



By three a.m., the party pretty much cleared out, and Ashlyn and I have moved inside. We’ve just been talking. I stopped drinking after I finished her beer earlier. Probably should do that more often. Stop after one or two. I’ve definitely done too much drinking since Jamie died. But our place was so fucking quiet without him. I even miss that goddamn bulldog of his and all his drool. After years of sleeping in my sister, Maddie’s room to make sure whatever piece-of-shit foster parents or siblings we were living with at the time didn’t think it was okay to sneak in, in the middle of the night, Jamie and I got paired up as freshmen, and we’d roomed together ever since.

The last couple of months fucking sucked.

I’m not used to being alone.

Tonight is the first time in a long damn time I haven’t felt it.

The gnawing fucking feeling.

The one telling me I’d failed to protect Jamie and I’m failing Maddie every night I’m not in that house with her. The feeling that won’t let me go a day or two without stopping by her foster house to intimidate the shit out of everyone who lives there and remind them, without words, I’ll kill anyone who lays a finger on my sister. It doesn’t matter that this foster house is different. That we don’t hate these foster parents. They haven’t been bad, but you can’t let your guard down. We’ve learned that the hard fucking way. Always alert. Always prepared.

But tonight . . . *Her* . . . She’s different.

Something about Ashlyn is calming.

Soothing almost.

I'm not sure what it is.

But I've never met anyone this easy to talk to.

Ashlyn yawns and leans her head against my shoulder. "I think I need to go find Nina. We need to leave soon."

"I can drive you home." I wouldn't hate a few more minutes with this girl.

"Thanks, but Nina has to come home with me. Her dad will kill us if he finds out we snuck out. We're going to be exhausted practicing today as it is. He'll definitely notice. He always does." She yawns again.

"It's just one party. How pissed can he really be? Haven't you earned it? You're both good enough to be going to the Olympics. He's got to get that you know your own limits. You can't get this far without it."

Something crosses her face.

A look that sets me on edge.

"Ashlyn . . . Is your coach a bad guy?"

She doesn't look at me when she answers, "He's a tough coach." After a second, she pulls away from me and stands. "We've really got to get going."

"Ashlyn . . ." I stand and block her in. "I grew up in foster care. And not in those families you see on TV. My sister and I haven't been that lucky. I know how to deal with bad guys. Is your coach a bad guy?" I ask her again.

I reach out and take her hand when she doesn't answer me. "Ashlyn." Alarm bells are going off so fucking loud they should wake the whole campus.

"You don't understand, Brandon."

Yeah. That's what they say. That's what they *always* say.

"Then make me understand. Because I've watched people get hurt before. Are you safe?"

"I can't. Not yet." She looks at me with watery eyes, then wraps her arms around my waist and leans her head against my chest. "Maybe someday."

I know she's lying when she says it.

There's no someday for us.

Ten minutes later, Nina and Eric come downstairs and walk out the front door, but I tug Ashlyn back and wrap my hand around her neck, anchoring it in her thick hair. "Give me your phone."

"What?"

“Give me your phone. I want to put my number in there. If you need help. If you need anything, I want you to call me. I don’t care what time it is. I don’t care where you are. I want you to call. You got me?”

Her big eyes double in size as she pulls her phone out. “What’s your number, big guy?”

I give her my number and watch as she puts it in her phone, then pull mine out of my pocket when she texts me.

Ashlyn tucks her phone back into her tight jeans, then leans back against the wall behind her when I take another step closer.

It’s as if everything happens in slow motion.

I lean down as she presses up on her toes.

Our breath mixing together.

I leave one hand in her hair and cup her face with the other, my thumb brushing over her cheek as she sucks in a breath.

My mouth ghosts over hers, and I groan when she fists her hands in my shirt.

Her sweet taste explodes on my lips, and electricity arcs and soars between us. “There’s no maybe about it, Ashlyn. Go win the fucking gold, and when you come home, let me take you out to celebrate.”

“Was that a question?” She pulls at my shirt, and I lean against her, letting her feel how much I want her right now.

“Not really. Do you need it to be a question?”

She presses her lips against mine and whispers, “No.” Then she pulls back. “I’ve got to go.”

I drop my forehead to hers. “I know. Text me when you get home.”

“Okay.” She pushes me away and smiles.

“What are you smiling at, beautiful?”

Ashlyn takes a few steps away, then turns her head back to me. “Turns out, I’m pretty happy I came tonight after all.”

And then she’s gone.

Twenty minutes later as I lie in bed, a text pops up on my phone.

ASHLYN

Hey, big guy. We made it home before the coffee maker started, so Coach is still sleeping. We’re safe. Sweet dreams.

BRANDON

Do you have to wear one of those short skirts for practice?

ASHLYN

No. Practice is tights and a sweater. Why?

BRANDON

You made me hard all night. I'm just trying to get a visual for later.

When she doesn't answer right away, I wonder if that went too far for her. But my little good girl surprises me with a selfie of herself in a tight white tank top with her boobs plumped up and spilling over the top.

ASHLYN

Here. Maybe this will help. Like I said, sweet dreams.

BRANDON

Damn. They will be now.

ASHLYN



ASHLYN

Hey big guy. Nina and I just got unpacked. The Olympic village is crazy. All the stories you hear about this place are true.

BRANDON

Oh yeah?

ASHLYN

Yeah. Nina's going out to explore.

BRANDON

You should go with her. You've earned this. Enjoy it.

ASHLYN

I will. As soon as the competition is over. We have two days to acclimate, and then we're on the ice. I just want to crash for the night. I haven't slept well in a few days.

BRANDON

Oh yeah?

ASHLYN

Yeah. Not that I'm pointing fingers or anything.

BRANDON

Point anything you want my way.

ASHLYN

Gotta go. Coach just got here.

I close my phone and look up as Coach walks into the room. “Why are both dressed for dinner? I told you we had plans tonight.”

Coach Ron isn’t a big guy. Certainly not as big as Brandon. But where I already know without a single doubt that Brandon Dixon would never hurt me, Coach Ron Meyerson has proven over and over again that not all pain is physical.

Saying no to him has never been an option.

“Dad . . .” Nina whines. “It’s our first night in the village. Can’t we do dinner a different night?”

“Nina.” With one short word and a certain tone to his voice, she loses all her fight and drops down next to me on the bed.

We link our pinkies like we’ve done forever, with no doubt in our minds what’s coming.



BRANDON

What am I allowed to say today? Good luck? Break a leg? How about kick all the other skater’s asses? Speaking of asses, I YouTubed some of your old skating programs, and your ass looks fucking incredible in your costumes.

ASHLYN

Should I be freaked out you’re watching me online? It sounds kinda creepy. LOL

BRANDON

How about I just tell you you’re incredible. You told me Nina was the one set to take the gold, but you won Nationals and Worlds. Why is she gonna to win the gold?

ASHLYN

She can land a jump I can’t land, and she’s got it in her long program. She’s been nailing it for months. So odds are on her.

BRANDON

Yeah well, don’t forget when you come home, we’re celebrating.

ASHLYN

I can’t wait.



BRANDON

HOLY SHIT. You got a perfect score. I'm so fucking proud of you. You better be celebrating.

ASHLYN

Shush. First – don't jinx me. Second - I've got one more skate to go and Nina is less than a point behind me. The free skate is where she shines.

BRANDON

Hey you got a perfect score. Be proud of yourself. I am.

*B*randon might be the only person proud of me.

Coach spent the hour after the event going over every little thing we both could have done better. It didn't matter to him that the judges saw a perfect routine. There's no such thing as perfection in his eyes. There's always room to improve.

Nina and I get back to our room later that day, and I make a beeline for the bathroom and turn on the shower. When I come out to grab my robe, she's got my phone in her hand.

"What are you doing, Ashlyn? Are you texting with Eric's teammate?"

I snatch it out of her hand, heat flaming my cheeks. "So what if I am?"

She strips out of her warm-ups and slips on a minidress as she shakes her head at me like I'm stupid. *Worse*. Like she feels sorry for me. "Don't be dense, Ashlyn. Guys like that only want sex. And hey, if that's what you want, go for it. But after tomorrow, you won't be mingling with frat boys or football players."

Nina grabs a pair of black heels from the closet, then turns back around. "Fuck that. You don't need to be wasting your time with that now. Come out with me tonight. Let's go have fun. Let's get in some trouble. Come on . . . Let's live a little."

"Nina . . . We're skating again tomorrow night. Your dad will kill us if he finds out we went out tonight. Plus, honestly, I just want to stretch and soak

and sleep.” I tuck my phone in my pocket and glare at her. “And back off. I really like Brandon. He’s different.”

“Oh, sweetie . . . Sure he is.” Then she grabs a strip of condoms from her suitcase, shoves them in her purse, kisses my cheek, and opens the door. “Everything is gonna change tomorrow, Ashlyn. One way or another, we’re gonna burn it all down tomorrow.”

When she shuts the door behind herself, I play her words over in my head.

I’ve never heard Nina say anything like that before.

Everything is gonna change—Yes.

Burn it all down—No.



Brandon

*S*kip my Wednesday afternoon architecture lecture so I can watch Ashlyn skate in real time. I don’t want to wait for the replay tonight. I want to see what my girl does when she does it. Because whether she knows it yet or not, she’s already mine. It didn’t take long to think about her that way either.

Nina skates second to some kind of classical song. She’s good. I can see why everyone thinks she’s got a good shot at the gold, but I still think Ashlyn’s better.

The judges keep talking about this triple-quadruple combination she’s got.

And holy shit.

She pulls off the triple part, but something happens.

Did her skate just get caught?

She falls instead of landing the second jump.

The judges start talking about the technicality of the jump and what just happened. Then they start talking about the fact that she’s not getting up. She’s just sitting on the ice, looking into the crowd. It sounds like they were expecting her to finish her routine. But instead, Nina waits for her song to end, then stands, bows, and skates off the ice, over to where Ashlyn waits

with their coach. The camera zooms on Nina saying something to Ashlyn before she spits in her dad's face and walks away.

Then they zoom in tighter on Ashlyn's face as they wait for her to take the ice.

What the fuck just happened?

How's she gonna skate after that?

But she does. She pushes off and skates to the middle of the ice, then waits for her music to start. It's haunting at first, and I can't place it until a woman starts to sing where I'm used to hearing Axl Rose. She's skating to "Knockin' On Heaven's Door."

She's skating to my favorite song.

And when they tighten up on her face, I can see it.

She feels it too.

The hurt. The pain.

All the things she should never have to feel.

She's fucking beautiful as she effortlessly glides over the ice. Her white costume floats around her legs as she spins and twirls. She takes my breath away.

And when she finishes, she does it with tears in her pretty eyes.

She tucks one leg behind the other and curtseys to each side of the crowd as they roar and give her a standing ovation. The cameras zoom in again once she's seated next to her coach in the scoring area. He doesn't look happy.

And I don't like how they score the skaters and tape their damn reactions. It seems cruel.

Hey, you really sucked out there, but let's watch the judges tell you that too. Thanks.

Not that Ashlyn has to worry about that.

Not tonight.

There are nine judges, and five of them give her a perfect score.

The other four take off for minor things.

She's now the girl to beat for the gold.



try to FaceTime her later because a text doesn't seem like enough.

J A silver fucking medal.
Damn. That's pretty amazing.
Ashlyn doesn't answer.
She's probably busy, so I try again a few hours later.
Still no answer.



BRANDON

Hey. I tried to call to congratulate you. A silver medal.
Seriously. That's incredible. I'm so proud of you.

Hope you're out celebrating.



*D*ays go by and I still haven't heard from Ashlyn, but last night *Sports Center* reported that Nina Meyerson killed herself, so I send Ashlyn one last message.

BRANDON

I heard about Nina. Can you at least tell me you're okay?

ASHLYN

I'm safe.

That was the last time I heard from her until the day I was drafted to the Philadelphia Kings, two months later. By then, good old *Sports Center* had already reported that she was married to the Kings owner, John Kingston.

ASHLYN

You did it, Brandon. You're playing professional football.
Congratulations.

BRANDON

Thanks. Looks like John Kingston owns both of us now. Hope
your happy.

BRANDON



Fifteen years later

“*Y*ou doing okay, big guy?”

I look down at the teenager, who barely comes up to my chest, and cock a brow, wondering when in the hell she started to look more like a young woman and less like a little kid. “Yeah, shortcake. I’m okay,” I bluff. “Why? Don’t I look it?”

Madeline Kingston—or Lindy, as everyone now calls her—started calling me *big guy* the very first time we met. Right around the time my sister, Maddie, married Lindy’s *much older* brother, Hudson. She was still a little kid back then, but she hopped up on a couch next to me—her strawberry-blonde curls bouncing around her face, looking like her mother’s mini-me—and asked me why I was so quiet. It was the start of a strange little friendship.

Her mother and I have lived with an unspoken rule since my sister married Ashlyn’s stepson, who happens to be a year older than Ashlyn. Neither of us has ever spoken of those weeks.

Not before John Kingston died. And not once since then either.

Doesn’t mean I don’t still think about them on occasion.

Especially when her daughter is sitting next to me. The baby girl she gave birth to a few months after the death of John Kingston.

Lindy shrugs. “You look like you always do.”

“Is that a bad thing? I’ve been told I look pretty good by the ladies,” I tease, and she rolls her eyes.

“You look like you’re expecting something bad to happen. You *always*

look like you're expecting something bad to happen, Brandon." She points over to where my nieces are. "They're ponies, not tigers. The girls are fine."

I watch Hudson hold my youngest niece, Aurora, on top of one of the brown and white ponies as it trots around the lake at the back of the yard. Baby girl is happy as can be. Aurora is a squealer. There's no hiding when she's happy, and she's thrilled right now. Her smile could light up the Philadelphia skyline, it's so damn bright. Still . . . "She's little. She could fall off and get hurt."

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and I feel her before she says a word.

"Like you would ever let that happen." Ashlyn Kingston brings a pink-and-gold-dotted paper straw to her lips and sips her sweet tea. The late afternoon sun gives her a warm golden glow, and it's impossible to look away.

Even if I should.

I will.

I just need to get my fix first.

This woman has no fucking clue what she still does to me, all these years later. I've chosen to keep it that way. Instead, I grunt in response.

"Relax." She rests her palm on my shoulder, singeing my skin with her touch. "She's safe."

Safe.

Not a word I'll ever take for granted.

Not in this lifetime.

"Told ya," Lindy jumps up from the chair next to me and moves next to Ashlyn. She's the spitting image of her gorgeous mother. But then that damn devious smile that this kid is always sporting slides across her face. "Mom—Kenzie, Brynlee, and I are going for a walk around the lake. We'll be back in a little bit."

Ashlyn runs her hand over Lindy's hair and shakes her head. "Do you have your cell phone?"

Lindy walks backward and sighs in that way only a teenage girl can, rolling her eyes again. "Yes, Mom. I've got my phone." She takes two more steps backward before turning and heading for the other two giggling girls.

Ashlyn gracefully sits down, taking Lindy's seat and rubs her temples.

Aurora tips on the pony, and before I can get up, Ashlyn stops me with a hand to my chest as Hudson rights his daughter with ease. "He's got her. This

is the easy age. You might need to jump in and help when she's a teenager. But for now, she's safe."

I know she's right, but protecting Maddie and her kids will always be my first instinct. Even if, technically, it's her husband's job now.

Hudson Kingston is the former MMA heavyweight champion of the world. When my sister fell in love with him years ago, I was almost relieved. Keeping Maddie safe had been my main priority in life for so damn long, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to let it go. But at least if she was going to fall for anyone, it was a man who'd worship the ground she walks on and protect her with his life. She could have done a hell of a lot worse.

Now the poor guy has Maddie and two little girls just like her to take care of.

Pretty sure I'd never sleep again if I was him.

He's fucking screwed.

But did it have to be a Kingston?

"Old habits die hard," I mumble and take a pull of my beer, then look over at the gorgeous woman sitting next to me. "It's a great party. Maddie told me you planned the whole thing."

Her smile is soft. "Juliette and I did. I guess that's the good thing about having event planners in the family. We actually enjoy planning it first, then get to watch everyone else enjoy it too." She taps her glass of sweet tea against my beer. "Cheers to the end of summer. Are you excited about the game tomorrow?"

I think about that for a minute.

Football season rolls around faster and faster each year. "Yeah. I guess."

"You guess?" she pushes as she leans back and crosses her long legs. The sexy little one-piece red shorts thing she's wearing pushes up higher on her toned thighs and dips down perfectly between her breasts. "That doesn't sound convincing."

I watch Hudson pull Aurora off the pony, then take my older niece, Teagan, from Maddie and slide her onto the saddle. Aurora doesn't look thrilled when Teagan sticks her tongue out at her younger sister.

"I've been playing football for a long damn time. Maybe too long."

Aurora runs on chubby legs toward me, and I stand and scoop her into my arms. "Hey, baby girl." I blow a raspberry against her neck.

"Do you . . ." Ashlyn starts. "Are you thinking about retiring?" Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Ashlyn run her hands over her shorts, then stand,

her movements measured and perfectly poised, graceful as ever.

“Is that my boss asking or a friend?” My answer is colder than it’s meant to be. But I’ve been with the Kings for a long-ass time as the starting center and captain for the past five years. I’m pretty sure I’m ready to move on. I was thinking about it before training camp, but these past few weeks, things have come more into focus.

“Uncle Brandon?” Aurora smooshes my face between her hands, forcing all my attention back on her. “Will you ride the pony with me?”

“I’ll help you ride it, baby girl. But I’m too big. I’d hurt the pony.” I kiss the top of her head and watch Ashlyn as her cheeks flush.

She still blushes so damn easy.

“I’m not your boss,” she whispers, and the quiet hurt in her voice makes me wonder things I try not to let myself think about.

Shaking it away, I throw Aurora up on my shoulders and wrap my hands around her legs. With one step closer, I know I’m in Ashlyn’s personal space, but I take it further and lean my face in next to her ear. “Yeah, you are. You always have been.”

I pull back and watch her cheeks flame bright red, then walk away.

Ashlyn Kingston is the epitome of Philadelphia royalty.

She was the late John Kingston’s fourth wife.

She’s younger than half his kids, most who are married with their own kids now.

Then the former team owner and cheating bastard died fucking some model while Ashlyn was six months pregnant with Lindy. A whole seven months into their marriage.

Stupid fuck.

She’s off-limits for a shit ton of reasons.

Blaming it on the team is just the easiest one.

Aurora kicks my chest from up on my shoulders. “Let’s go see the ponies, Uncle Brandon.”

“Okay, baby girl.”

I get about ten feet away before my buddy Watkins stops me. “Dude. That one is so fucking far out of your league.”

And there’s the other reason . . .

“Language, Uncle Watty,” Aurora chastises him, and I punch him in the chest with a smile.

“Yeah, language, Watty.”



Ashlyn

“*Y*ou want to go inside and get a real drink?” Juliette, my business partner, best friend, and technically my step-daughter-in-law, eyes me warily as I watch Brandon Dixon walk away. She knows me too well.

“Margaritas?” I ask, knowing there’s a pitcher or two in the kitchen.

“Oh, definitely.” She takes the empty glass out of my hand and leaves it on the table, then links her arm through mine. “You know, when I told you it was time to get back on the horse, I didn’t realize you’d set your sites on that particular stallion. But do you see his ass in those shorts? I mean, seriously?”

I bite down on my bottom lip and sigh. “Yeah . . . I saw.”

We carefully dodge family members as we make our way into Hudson and Maddie’s house. Not an easy thing to do with a family as big as ours. We’re closing in on forty members in our immediate family, counting spouses and kids, not to mention the friends who might as well be part of the family. Fitting everyone around a table has gotten more interesting over the past few years . . . not that it’s stopped us. We’ve just had to get creative.

I wait until we’re in the kitchen and laser in on the green pitcher and empty glasses next to it. A few limes, some salt around the rims, and a quick pour later, and we’re toasting to another successful party. Ever After Event Planning came to fruition a few years ago after Jules and I worked together to plan her wedding to Becket. I’d been kicking around the idea for a while. Desperate for something more to do with my life than sit on the boards of charities. I had gone from a life of training for the Olympics, to winning a silver medal, to being a trophy wife in the span of a sneeze.

Then, *bam* . . .

My husband died.

I was pregnant.

My already incredibly fucked up life was turned on its head . . . Not for the first time. Hell, not for the fiftieth time.

And okay, it took me a few years to get my shit together. Maybe a few too many. But it’s together now. It turns out, I needed a challenge. And Ever After was the perfect challenge. Clicking with Jules and having her join me

was the icing on the cake.

Jules waves her perfectly manicured nails in front of my face. “Earth to Ashlyn . . .”

“Fine. I’ll bite. Who said anything about horses?” I ask and watch her over the top of my margarita glass as I savor my first sip. Early September in Kroydon Hills can go either way. Some years, it’s still disgustingly hot and humid, and others we luck out and get a beautiful day like today. Warm with a cool fall breeze blowing in off the lake. The perfect day for sun and fun with family and friends. But man, does an ice-cold margarita hit the spot.

Jules reaches for the tequila and adds another small shot to her glass, then smiles. “Like you don’t know who I’m talking about.”

“Juliette,” I blush. “I swear you weren’t this crazy when I met you.”

“I blame the family. It’s hard to be a Kingston and not be loud and obnoxious.”

“Hey. I think I’m supposed to be offended by that.” Juliette’s best friend and my youngest stepdaughter, Lenny, grabs an empty glass and fills it to the brim. “I’m not because it’s true, but I think I should be,” she laughs. “And why the hell wasn’t I told there were margaritas in here?” She lifts it to her lips but stops and looks at Jules. “Does it need more tequila?”

Jules says, “Yes,” at the same time I answer, “No.”

They both ignore me, and Jules adds a shot to Lenny’s already full glass.

Lenny sips and smiles. “I hate birthday parties.” She licks her lips and sighs. “I know. *I know*. I’m an awful mom. Don’t ever tell the boys. But what the hell were we thinking? This is complete chaos.”

“Hey,” I answer. “Don’t look at us. We planned the perfect party. It’s not our fault Maverick tried to get the pony to trot into the lake.”

“I swear to God, my sons are terrors.” Lenny gulps half the damn glass, then moves next to Jules. Both women eye me deviously, like those two creepy Siamese cats from *Lady and The Tramp*. “Stop evading, Ashlyn. Who’s the stallion?”

“Why are you asking *me*? Maybe Jules is calling your brother a stallion,” I giggle and lick the rim of my glass. Damn. This is good. “I mean, you were just telling me—”

Lenny slaps her hand over my mouth to shut me up, so I lick her palm.

“Eww.” She pulls it away and wipes it on her shorts.

“I’m not talking about Becks.” Jules’s smile grows ridiculously wide. “However, I am talking about *someone*’s brother.” She places her empty

glass back on the counter, then dumps way too much tequila into the pitcher. She swooshes the pitcher a little, then refills her glass and tops mine off.

Lenny holds out her glass, clearly having a case of FOMO while she makes an ick face at the thought of Becket being a stallion. It only takes a moment before her gray-blue eyes grow wide and her entire body vibrates. *“Holy shit.”*

She looks from me to Jules with her lips pulled so tight, it looks painful. *“Are you finally dating someone?”*

“Jesus, Len.” Jules takes Lenny’s half-empty glass out of her hand. *“You’ve clearly had too much already if I have to spell this out for you.”*

Lenny pouts and eyes her glass longingly. *“Have you dated at all since Dad died, Ash?”*

I take another big gulp and this time enjoy the way my entirely too strong margarita burns my throat. And feel utterly embarrassed by the answer.

One more gulp, and I look up with humiliation thrumming through my veins, and whisper, *“No.”*

“Not at all?” Len pushes and snatches her glass back from Jules.

Fuck this.

I finish my glass and slam it down a little too hard on the granite counter. *“No. Not at all. Happy?”*

“She never dated before your dad either,” Jules adds, and if looks could kill, I’d be going to jail. Pretty sure I could rock an orange jumpsuit. Not so sure I’d do well as someone’s bitch though.

“I told you that in confidence,” I snap.

“Wait . . .” Lenny pulls herself up to sit on her brother’s counter, then leans back so she can see the door to the backyard, making sure we’re alone. Once she’s satisfied it’s just us, her eyes sparkle with a Machiavellian twinkle. *“I’m going to ask you something . . .”* Then she mutters, *“I kinda can’t believe I’m going to ask this.”*

“Then please God, don’t,” I tell her.

Hell, I beg.

“Sorry, Ashlyn. This is like a trainwreck I can’t look away from. I need to know.”

“Eleanor. You just compared my life to a trainwreck.” I brace myself for the blow that’s about to come. Meanwhile, Juliette kicks off her heels and pulls herself up next to Len. Damn it. These two. Fucking Siamese cats. The hairless little fuckers.

“Ashlyn . . .” At least Len has the good sense to lower her damn voice.
“Have you had sex with anyone since my dad?”

And there it is.

Lenny was a few years younger than me when I married her father. We never really became close until I made her best friend my business partner. Somehow, I was lucky enough to be welcomed into their little twosome, and the three of us have been close since. But still . . . Some things don’t need to be discussed.

I choose to take another drink and not answer her, and the two of them gasp in sync.

But it’s Jules who lands the kill shot.

“Wait . . . wait, wait, wait. Have you ever had sex with anyone besides John Kingston?”

My eyes fly up to hers, and I open my mouth to answer, but no words come out. Instead, I pull up a stool next to the two troublemakers and sigh as I shake my head no.

“But Madeline is fifteen,” Lenny gasps, utterly horrified.

Yeah, Len. Me too . . .

“Jesus, how big was his dick?” Juliette mumbles, and Lenny and I both pound our drinks before we’re interrupted quickly by a little voice.

“Did you forget about my Band-Aid, Uncle Brandon? I got blood on your shirt.”

Kill me now.

BRANDON



“**S**orry, baby girl,” I kiss Aurora’s finger, then walk quickly through the kitchen, not making eye contact with any of the ladies.

It shouldn’t matter to me that the woman I’ve lusted after for years just admitted she hasn’t had sex in fifteen years. *FIFTEEN YEARS*. Every instinct I have is screaming at me to go back into that kitchen, but I don’t know why.

I don’t do relationships.

I don’t want strings.

I don’t do attachments.

It’s easier this way.

I may have thought about it once, but that was a long fucking time ago.

Fuck that. It’s not just easier. It’s how I’ve gotten through life. I don’t know any other way. And Ashlyn Kingston isn’t a woman I can take to bed and walk away from the next day. She’s . . . *Fuck*. I don’t even know what the hell she is.

But she’s not mine.

At one point, I might have thought she was. But I was wrong.

By the time I’ve cleaned and bandaged the tiny scrape Aurora got when she fell trying to keep up with her cousins, Ashlyn and Lenny are gone from the kitchen, but Jules is still there. She’s now sitting on a stool instead of the counter with a full margarita glass in front of her, and I’m pretty sure she’s waiting for me.

I set Aurora down on her feet and squat down next to her. “Listen, baby girl. Your legs aren’t as long as the boys’ yet. You’ve got to be careful. Okay?”

She nods her little head, her space-buns bouncing with the movement.

“Okay.”

I hold my hand up, and she high-fives me.

“Love you, Uncle Brandy.”

I groan at the horrible fucking nickname. “Love you too, Aurora.”

And then she takes off on her chubby little legs, and I debate whether to bother turning around or just follow my niece out of the kitchen. My gut is telling me to get the hell out of here while I still can. But I should have known Juliette Kingston is not a woman to be ignored.

“Dixon,” she calls out, forcing my hand.

When I turn, she eyes me carefully. “What are your intentions toward my friend?”

“Intentions?” I sigh. What the fuck? “Listen, Jules—”

“Nope,” she cuts me off. “*You* listen. I’ve watched you silently pine for years. You’re interested. What I can’t figure out is why you haven’t made a move yet, unless there’s something I don’t know.”

She runs a lime wedge around the rim of her glass, waiting. “Got an answer for me?”

“No.” Something pulls low in my gut. This isn’t a conversation I’m gonna have with her.

“Wrong answer.” She stands from the stool and takes a few steps toward me. “Ashlyn is something special. She deserves to be treated like a queen.” Her eyes tighten as she stares at me. “I’m pretty sure you could be that person if you stopped being a pussy and made a goddamn move.”

Pussy?

Motherfucker.

I’ve made the biggest defensive tackles in the league piss their pants, and this little supermodel just called me a pussy . . . I look at her a little closer and notice her glassy eyes. Juliette’s drunk.

“But don’t you worry. My girl might not have dated in the past decade, but now she has Lenny and me to help her with that.” She pats my chest. “I’m positive we can find someone to help her with that little problem you just overheard.”

She hiccups like she definitely drank *too much too fast*, then takes a step back and does something weird with her fingers. “Peace out.”

I watch the former supermodel bump into Hudson as he steps through the French doors. She’s muttering something I can’t hear before she moves around him out of the kitchen, grabs a cake pop off the tray of a passing

server, bops the dude on the nose with the pop, and walks away.

Hudson opens the fridge, grabs a beer, and offers me one.

“No thanks, man. One and done. I’ve got a game tomorrow.”

He tosses me a bottle of water instead, then looks at me funny. “Did I just hear drunk Jules mumbling about you banging Ashlyn?”

I shake my head but don’t say anything. I don’t need this shit to make its way to the Kingston family’s crazy fucking gossip mill.

“I swear when she bumped into me, she was saying something about you, and I quote, *banging the shit out of Ashlyn.*”

“I think she had too many margaritas, brother.” I clap him on the back, ready to make my exit from this crazy train. “Do you guys need help cleaning up after this thing?”

“Nah. We’ve got it covered. We’ll see you tomorrow after the game.” Hudson lifts his hand for a fist bump.

“Do me a favor and tell Maddie I said bye. I don’t want to get caught out there by somebody else excited for the season.”

Hud nods. “I got ya covered.”

I make my escape through the front door, then stop and look at the house next door. Sandwiched between Hudson and Maddie’s home and his brother Sawyer’s home is a slightly smaller house. Boxes full of brightly colored blooms stand out against gray cedar-shake siding and sit along each white-framed window. A windchime of butterflies hangs from the corner of a wraparound porch, next to a white bench swing with a pink throw blanket draped over the edge. It’s warm and inviting and not at all where I’d have expected Ashlyn and Lindy to move when they eventually left Kingston Manor, the sprawling estate where Ashlyn lived with her late husband.

The last man she had sex with.

Better yet, *the only* man she’s had sex with.

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

I’m not sure what it says about me that my dick’s hard as steel, just thinking about that.

Probably that it’s been a little too long since I’ve had sex too. Not fifteen years too long. But definitely a few months too long. I grab my keys from my pocket as I walk over to my truck but pull up short when I hear arguing.

When I turn, I find Lindy walking toward her front door with some little shitstain following behind her. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but she looks pissed, and he looks like a douche. Something tells me she needs help, so I

take a few steps toward them.

Then he grabs her wrist and pulls.

She rips it from his hand, and her momentum has her stumbling backward.

That's all I need to see.

I sprint over and get between them, then reach out to steady her. "You okay, shortcake?"

"Yeah." She nods and looks around me at Shitstain. "Go home, Billy."

That's when I turn, and I'm pretty sure Billy pisses himself.

I'm a big guy. Six foot four, two hundred and eighty-two pounds. And unlike some centers for other teams, I'm solid muscle. Very little body fat. I was called a freak of nature during the combine the year I was drafted to the Kings. And judging by the look on his face, this little fucker knows it.

"Who told you it was okay to grab a woman against her will?" I get in his face but make sure I don't touch him. When he doesn't answer, I take a step closer. "That's what I thought. Listen very closely, *Billy* . . . If you ever lay a finger on Madeline or any other woman who doesn't want to be touched again, I will hunt you down like a rabid dog." Then I lower my voice and get in his face. "You know what they do to rabid dogs, Billy?"

His face turns ghostly white as he swallows, and I vaguely register the door opening behind me.

"Nod if you understand me, Billy," I tell him, then wait for him to do it.

The little prick looks at me and nods so hard it looks like his head might fall off his neck.

Satisfied, I step back. "Now go home and don't come back here. *Ever*."

His eyes dart between me and Lindy, and I step to the side, blocking her from view. "Don't look at her."

"Brandon," Lindy protests as Shitstain turns and jogs toward a car I might have seen in one of those *Fast and Furious* movies.

Fucking pansy-ass little shit.

When I turn toward Lindy, her lower lip trembles like she's going to cry.

Damn. I'm not good with crying women. It doesn't matter if they're fifteen or fifty-five. "Shortcake," I reach out for her, but she shrugs away.

"Now he's going to tell the whole school I'm a baby." She makes some kind of frustrated noise, then runs past her mother into the house, leaving me standing there wondering what the fuck I just did wrong.

When I look up, Ashlyn is standing behind me, and she looks torn.

Like she wants to say something but isn't sure how to talk to me.
Probably uncomfortable after the earlier thing in the kitchen.

I sure as hell am.

I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a guy who puts his head in the sand. So I walk up to her front porch and watch the flush in her cheeks deepen with every step I take.

When she finally lifts her eyes to mine, I stop in front of her. "What happened?" she asks.

"You might want to ask Lindy. She might have a very different version than mine."

Ashlyn crosses her arms over her chest, pushing her boobs up in the process. "Well, let me hear yours first, please."

"I don't know what happened before I came over here, but I was walking to my truck when I heard her arguing with that little shitstain. I turned around when she yelled at him and ran over. I may have scared the fucking piss out of him after I saw him grab her wrist. She yanked it from him and almost fell in the process."

"What?" She looks behind her at the front door, then back to me. "He grabbed her?"

"Yeah. Who is he?"

Ashlyn blows out a frustrated breath. "He took her to prom last year. He's a senior and a little dick. But if I tell her that, it's the kiss of death. She'll dig her heels in and never let go."

"Pretty sure he's not going to be coming around again any time soon." Not that I feel one fucking bit of guilt over that.

"Thanks, Brandon." She motions toward the house behind her. "I need to go check on Lindy."

"Yeah." I take a chance and move a little closer. "Listen, Ashlyn, about earlier."

She covers her face with her hands. "Oh God. Can we not. Please?"

"You've got nothing to be ashamed of." I gently peel her hands away from her face and enjoy the way her green eyes flutter open.

We're both quiet. Lost in the moment.

I cup her delicate shoulders in my hands.

The pull is still there, and it's as real today as it was then.

Kissing her would be easy.

Everything else would be messy.

Decision made.

I drop my hands and take a step back. “Will you let me know if she hates me now?”

Ashlyn smiles and opens the front door. “Good luck tomorrow, Brandon.”

BRANDON



“*F*uck, we’re getting too old for this shit. It’s only mid-October, and I feel like I’ve played an entire season already,” I groan to my quarterback, Declan Sinclair, as we grab our shit from our lockers. Declan joined the Kings the year after I did, and we’ve been dubbed the Dream Team ever since. It doesn’t hurt that the Kings have won five Super Bowls in that time either. Or that we’re the only QB/center combination to have ever started every single game together for fifteen years. Neither of us has ever missed a game. Pretty sure we’re just begging the football gods to smack us the fuck down these days.

“Speak for yourself, Dix. You’re getting old. I’m aging like a fine fucking wine,” Declan laughs as he closes his locker. “Come on, brother. Let’s go grab lunch.”

I shut mine too, following him out of the locker room and into the parking lot. “I don’t know, man. Used to be, we’d have a Sunday night game and I’d feel fine by Tuesday. Hell, when we first started, I was good to go on Monday. Now it’s Wednesday, we’re playing again tomorrow, and my knuckles are still raw from three days ago. You might be a fine wine, but I feel more like the box shit the girls drank in college. It’s gettin’ harder.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole.” We both toss our stuff in the back of Declan’s SUV and head to lunch, like we always do after a walk-through. We might be the Dream Team, but we still don’t take any chances, and we’re never dumb enough to mess with superstitions. “I keep telling you to start working with my guy. He’s the best. Worth every penny. I feel better than half the rookies on the team.”

“Speaking of . . .” I trail off for a minute, wishing I was lost in thought

but it's more like lost in the past. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Sure, man. What's up?"

We pull on to Main Street in Kroydon Hills and park across from Declan's wife's dance studio. Dec turns the car off and waits for me . . . then waits some more. "Come on, Dix. The suspense is killing me," he jokes.

"I have a meeting with Coach and Scarlet Kingston next week."

Declan's face pinches because he knows what I'm saying without me having to say it. Nonverbal communication has always been one of our strengths. After a moment, he composes himself, but there's a new hitch in his voice. "Damn." He blows out a long breath. "You sure?"

"Yeah, man. It's time. I'm the oldest center the league's ever had. Hell, my assistant line coach is almost ten fucking years younger than me. I'm tired, man. I'm fucking tired of hurting every day."

When he doesn't say anything, I get out of the SUV and lean on the door, waiting for him to follow. "This is our year. I can feel it in my bones. We're going back to the big game this year, and I want to go out while we're on top. I've been working with the rookie, and you're going to be fine next year with him. We've got him where he needs to be. This is my last year."

"Fuck," Dec hisses as he walks into The Busy Bee and takes our usual booth at the back of the place. "Dude. We're only halfway through the season."

"Yeah, man. I know, but I've been thinking about it since week one. If I'm honest, I've been thinking about it since the playoffs last year."

Junie, our normal waitress, drops off our drinks and confirms our orders before she walks away, humming something way off-key.

"You already made your mind up?"

I nod. "I'm not going to announce anything until the season's done. But I needed you to know before Coach and Scarlet. I'll keep working with the rookie, but I want you to go harder on him. He's got to get there by February."

Because if it's the last damn thing I do, I'm going out with one more big win to my name.

One more February game to bring it all home.



Ashlyn

“*M*om . . .” Lindy calls from the front yard as I zip up my boot. “Hurry up. I told Evie and Gracie I’d meet them on the sidelines for pregame.”

I grab my purse and my coat and lock the door behind me. “Who’s fault is that? Mine or yours?” I ask as we walk to the car.

“Mom.” My daughter stops and points at my windshield. “It’s another flower. I thought that stopped.”

“*Shit.*” I hiss and yank it out from under my wiper blade, then suck in a breath and pull my thumb back. A perfect little bright red bloom pops up on the pad of my thumb where the thorn pierced my skin. But just like all the other times, there’s no card. No note. Nothing to tell me who it’s from or why.

Guess it’s time to get those cameras installed around the property.

“Who’s it from, Mom?” Lindy sniffs the white rose, then makes a face. “You got blood on the petals.” She takes it out of my hand and twirls it. “Looks kinda cool.”

I shrug and unlock the car. “No note.”

“Your secret admirer sucks. How are you supposed to know they love you if you don’t know who they are?” She skips back toward the house.

“Where are you going, young lady?”

“To throw it out, like the other ones.” She lifts the lid on the trash can and tosses the rose inside before running back to the car. “Maybe you should talk to Sawyer and Hudson, Mom. See if they saw anybody walking around like a lovesick fool.”

“Very funny,” I humor her. “But not tonight. I told Maddie she could ride with us. Hudson is staying home with the girls tonight. Teagan isn’t feeling well, and it’s a late game.”

I pull into Maddie’s driveway next door and press my forefinger and thumb against my temples, feeling the dull throb of a headache starting.

Maddie slides into the front seat in her Dixon jersey, all smiles. “Who’s ready for some football?”

“I am,” Lindy cheers a little too loud.

“You just love staying up late,” Maddie taunts, and my daughter blushes.

“The boys are cute too.”

Sweet Jesus, save me now.



I should have known better.

Lindy has basically grown up in this stadium. It's a rite of passage for the Kingston kids. But she was a little *too* excited about tonight's game. That should have been the giveaway. But I chalked it up to her wanting to spend time with her best friends.

Annabelle Sinclair, Scarlet, Juliette, and I all stand on the sidelines during pregame and watch our daughters talking to the ball boys.

"They're trying to flirt, right?" Scarlet asks.

Jules snorts out a laugh as Annabelle and I giggle.

I look over at the girls again and sigh. "If that's what *that* is, they're doing an awful job."

"Do you think we were this bad at their ages?" Juliette asks as Declan jogs over to the girls, says something we can't hear, and apparently scares off the ball boys.

Good job, Declan.

"You may have been," I argue, "but I'd barely spoken to boys at their ages." Not until one night a few years later. And I've paid for my mistakes with that one boy every year since. Like now, when he jogs over, stops next to Declan and high-fives the girls.

Annabelle hums wistfully. "Ballet may have taken up most of my life, but I still managed to find time to be a boy-crazy teen. Looks like karma is biting me in the ass now, isn't she?"

"Listen . . . The only boy I ever flirted with in high school was Cade, so I don't really have anything to compare it too. And if I take Brynlee home tonight and tell her father she was flirting with some athletic trainer, he's going to ground her little ass until she's thirty," Scarlet adds.

"Then don't tell him," Jules fires back. "It's just a little harmless flirting."

"Wait." I look back at the kids. "How old are they? I thought they were ball boys."

The girls all laugh at something Brandon says, but he looks away from them and locks eyes with me, then winks.

He's teasing me. *Ugh*. I've brought avoidance to a whole new level since Aurora's birthday last month. I still can't believe he overheard what he did.

Jules has been trying to make it up to me since. She's insisted on setting me up on a date for an event the entire family has to attend Saturday night. I was going to say no, but I guess it *is* time to start putting myself out there.

And if I tell myself that enough, maybe I'll actually believe it.

Maybe.

I mean, *honestly*, there's nothing like knowing the man I picture every single time I bring out my freshly charged vibrator now knows more about my lackluster—okay, fine, nonexistent—sex life than I ever wanted him too.

I'm not sure humiliated is a strong enough word to describe how I feel.

I can't seem to shake it.

I spent my twenties as a widow, raising a baby and looking over my shoulder.

I know I don't have any room to be pissed.

I ghosted him.

It's not like he knows why, and that was my choice.

I knew back then what he'd have done. After only a few weeks of talking, I knew without a shadow of a doubt the man standing in front of my daughter on the field would have handled everything for me, even if it cost him everything in the process. And I couldn't let him do that.

But hindsight is twenty-twenty, and Annabelle is right. Karma is a bitch.

Now all I have are memories and *what ifs*.

And damn, those *what ifs* are the worst.

I don't regret my choices because they gave me my daughter.

Maybe some nights in the dark of my room and the quiet of my bed, I wish I could have done something differently. But in the light of day, I know I made the choice I had to make for both of us. The thing is . . . I've lived a lifetime since then, and I'm starting to wonder if second chances exist.



*T*he Kingston box isn't full tonight.

In all fairness, there was a home game Sunday too, and most of us were here for that one. We decided tonight was a girls' night. There's only a few of us spilling out into the stands as the final moments of the fourth quarter count down. We're down by four, so we need a touchdown to win.

Declan has been marching the team down the field, burning the clock so the other team won't have time to get the ball back once we score. The girls have been cheering, and everyone has had a good time, but I'm ready for it to be over.

Dec comes back on to the field after a time-out, calls the play, then throws to Watkins.

It's a beautiful spiral.

The stadium erupts when Watkins runs into the end zone and launches himself up, arms extended, to rip the pass out mid-air, catching the football in what has to be the best pass of the night.

It's beautiful.

But the celebration is short-lived as the other team's cornerback crashes his shoulders into Watkins's knees, making him spin like a pinwheel.

The momentum flips Watkins around, and instead of landing on his feet, he crashes down on his head.

The cornerback gets up, but a collective gasp can be heard throughout the stadium when Watkins doesn't move.

Maddie stands and links her fingers with mine. "I need to get down there."

"Maddie, you can't." I hold her hand next to me. "Not yet."

Scarlet immediately has her phone up to her ear as the medics surround Watkins, and everyone in our box and in the stadium waits with bated breath to see if he moves.

Once Scarlet ends the call, she wraps an arm around Maddie. "I know he's your friend, but you've got to let the medics do their thing. The ambulance is waiting to take him to the hospital, and the staff there is waiting for him."

"Okay." She looks to me with scared eyes. "I'll get an Uber."

"No you won't . . ."

ASHLYN



“No, honey. We haven’t heard anything yet. Make sure you set the alarm and go to bed. You’ve got rink time before school tomorrow. I’ll be home in a little bit, okay?”

Lindy rolls her eyes as if I can’t see her, and I fight the urge to remind her we’re FaceTiming. “I know, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

My beautiful daughter smiles before her face disappears from the screen, and I make my way back inside the busy hospital waiting room. When we got here nearly two hours ago, Maddie rushed to the front desk, begging the nurse for information on Watkins. They looked less than thrilled and pointed us to the waiting room. According to the woman who seemed more interested in her phone than us, everyone and their drunken brother had been calling, trying to get the same information we wanted, and we’d just have to wait our turn. We could have played the Kingston card, but that’s not our style. Maddie and I weren’t born into this family, and I’m fairly certain neither of us is completely comfortable with everything that comes with it.

Judging by the look on Maddie’s face when I sit back down, our turn hasn’t come yet. “Hey . . . you doing okay? Can I get you anything?”

“No. I’m fine.” She holds up the coffee I got for us an hour ago, the one she’s barely touched. “I feel bad that you’re waiting with me. I swear, I’m fine. Go home.”

Maddie Kingston is the type of woman who’ll always try to do it all herself. She hates asking for help. Something I can absolutely relate to.

“I know you’re fine. I also know your husband wants to be here with you, but I told him I’ve got you. So it looks like you’re stuck with me.” I lace her

fingers through mine and squeeze. “He’s going to be all right.”

“You don’t know that,” she whispers. “Watty loves to act tough. He always has. But he’s not invincible. He can break like the rest of us.” She closes her eyes, and a sad smile pulls at her lips. “He practically lived with Brandon and me after I graduated from college.”

She laughs softly and wipes away an errant tear. “Did you know I accidentally kicked him in the balls the night Daphne went into labor? God, that feels like a lifetime ago.”

“No,” I laugh. “Do I want to know why?”

But before Maddie gets a chance to answer, it feels like all the oxygen is sucked out of the room. We both turn toward the sliding doors as Brandon and a few others from the team walk in.

Maddie runs toward her brother and buries her face in his chest, and of course, I look away like the coward I am and focus on the Kings head coach, Joe Sinclair.

He stops in front of me, looking calm and collected, not like he just won a football game, gave a press conference, and rushed to the hospital all in a two-hour time frame. “Have you heard anything?” I ask.

Joe looks around for a quiet corner, and I follow. “I was on a call with Scarlet on the way here. Watty’s neck was compressed when he landed. The good news is he has feeling and movement in all his extremities. But we don’t know the extent of the injuries yet.”

He looks devastated at the idea of one of his players being hurt.

Joe Sinclair is a good man and a good coach, who’s been with the Kings since before I married John. His players are lucky to have him.

Not all athletes get that lucky.

“Thanks, Coach. I appreciate it. Has anyone called his family?”

“Scarlet has, and I think Dixon touched base with them in the locker room. His mom is catching the first flight out. You should go home, Ashlyn. There’s nothing you can do here.”

Maddie and Brandon join us before she gives me a quick hug. “Coach is right, Ashlyn. Brandon can take me home. You should go check on Lindy.”

Okay then. I guess I’ve been dismissed.

I slip an unaffected mask in place, hoping it covers the twinge of hurt and hug her back. “Okay. Text me if you need anything.”

With my purse in hand, I head for the door before a voice stops me.

“Ashlyn, wait up,” Brandon calls out as I push through the door and stop

on the other side. He catches up to me in a few long steps. “Come on. I’ll walk you to your car.”

“I’m fine, Brandon.”

“I know you are. But it’s late, and I’m here. Let me walk you to your damn car.” There’s something in his voice, a strain I don’t recognize and don’t have the energy to argue with. So I walk silently by his side as we cross the bridge to the parking garage and down a few flights of stairs instead of taking the elevator. I’m not a fan of small spaces.

“Thanks for staying with Maddie.” He shoves his hands in the pockets of the suit pants he must have worn to the stadium tonight. “She and Watty have always been close. The two of them used to gang up on me whenever they could.”

“I’d like to see that. Your sister thinks you hung the moon. I can’t imagine her ganging up on you,” I snicker.

“Yeah well, she hates being told what to do more than she likes me. And the two of them together outvoted me . . . *a lot*. I never had a chance.”

When we stop next to my car, Brandon places his big palm flat against the door. “Ashlyn . . .”

I spin around and look at him, feeling that same pang in my chest I do whenever he’s this close. “You’ve been avoiding me,” he grumbles, and the deep tenor of his voice brings me back to the night we met. Funny, the things you forget from a day or a week ago and others you can remember with absolute clarity over a decade later.

I lean back against my car and enjoy the feel of his big body crowding mine.

“I’ve been busy,” I tell him, but I don’t recognize the soft, sexy voice coming out of my mouth. That voice is lying.

His dark eyes flare before he drops his hand and takes a step back. “You’re not going to be busy forever, Ashlyn.”

“Goodnight, Brandon,” I whisper before I get in the car.

“Be safe, Ashlyn.”



Brandon

“*H*ey, man. Am I dead?”

Watty’s voice drags me back from the fucked up dream I was having. I force my eyes open and sit up in the hard-ass chair I’ve been in since sometime around midnight. They’ve got him hooked up to monitors and IVs. A brace is wrapped around his neck, and his stupid joke can’t hide the fear in his eyes. “Hey, you’re awake. Let me go get a nurse.”

“Not yet. How long have I been here, brother?”

I check my phone for the time. “It’s been about six hours. How ya feelin’?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m moving my toes.” Then he slowly waves his hands in front of his face. “And I can move my hands, all five of them, so that’s fucking good, right?”

I lean over the bed and gently smack his hand away from his face. “Dude. You’re on the good drugs. I’m surprised you’re only seeing five hands instead of ten.”

“Did we win?” He brings his hands down to touch the brace wrapped around his neck and winces.

“Yeah, man. We won,” I tell him, hiding the emotion clogging my voice.

There were a few minutes where he wasn’t moving and none of us knew what was happening. You never want to think the worst on the field. Football is a game for warriors. We get beat and bruised. Our bodies take trauma after trauma, week after week. But you always think the big hits aren’t going to happen to you. That you’re going to be fine. Then you see your teammate land on his head, lying on the ground with his neck at an unnatural angle and *fuck*, it puts everything in perspective.

“Did the girls go wild?” he asks.

“Yeah. Your mom did. She’s gonna be here tomorrow. *Well*, later today.”

“Shit. My *mom*’s comin’?”

“Yeah. Scarlet talked to her last night. Coach and some of the guys were here until they set you up in a room. I promised I’d text when you woke up.”

Watty closes his eyes and leans his head back against the pillow. “I’m not

gonna play another down of football, am I, Dix?”

“I don’t know, Watty.” I stand to get the nurse. “But you never dropped the ball.”



They release Watkins a few hours later, and that’s how I find myself standing next to Declan at the back of a press conference that afternoon while my best friend announces his retirement from football. He was lucky. He herniated a disk in his neck and has surgery scheduled next week for a single level cervical fusion.

He was right this morning when he said he’ll never play another down of football, but he walked in here on two feet without any help. Considering where we were last night, I’ll take that as a win.

It really hit things home for me, and I know I made the right decision about retiring after this season. It’s time.

I need to start thinking about my life after ball.

ASHLYN



“*R*emind me why this is a good idea,” I whisper to Juliette and glance back at my date. Dr. Travis Mitchell should check off all the boxes. He’s handsome, well-mannered, employed, and well . . . is it sad there’s only three boxes?

Sexy should be a box.

Capable of giving multiple orgasms . . . now *that* should definitely be a box.

A big one.

I snicker to myself at that thought.

She taps her glass to mine and smiles as if she’s reading my mind. “Because there are some things even the best vibrators just can’t do. You need to start dipping your toes in the water if you ever want to get wet again, Ashlyn.”

I snort and feel my wine burn my nose as it goes down the wrong way. “Jesus Christ, Juliette. Could you at least lower your voice?” I should be used to this. Jules says whatever she wants, whenever she wants.

The two of us stand by the bar while her husband, Becket, and Travis chat with some of the Kings players here tonight. The team and the family are being recognized by the mayor for our contributions to the city, putting us front and center in the ballroom of this beautiful, historic hotel.

“Oh, please. He’s a hot pediatric neurologist. I mean, seriously, the man saves kids for a living, and he’s gorgeous. How can you not be interested in him?”

“I don’t know.” I grab a bacon-wrapped scallop from the tray of a passing waiter and pop it in my mouth, buying myself a minute to come up with an

answer.

Yum. That's good.

Eventually, I admit, "There's no spark."

Scarlet joins Jules and me and orders a martini before she turns around to see what we're looking at. "Wait . . . no spark between you and the hot doc? Is that what I just heard?"

Why does someone always have to hear?

"You heard right. Ashlyn finally let me fix her up, and she's here talking to me instead of letting the hot doc bang the hell out of her in the fancy bathroom." She inches closer to me. "There's a couch in there . . . I'm just saying. It could be classy bathroom sex."

"Okay," Scarlet shakes her head and points her olive pick at Jules. "First of all, there's no such thing as classy bathroom sex."

"You've had sex in a closet," Jules snaps back, and Scarlet grins.

"I have. And let me tell you, the orgasm was incredible, but there was nothing classy about the smell of the mop and bucket I was leaning over."

I politely thank the bartender for my next glass of wine. "Please stop. I'm begging you both." Another waiter passes by.

Ohh . . . crab puffs.

Lenny and her husband, Sebastian, join us, and I cringe. "How are we doing tonight, ladies?" Bash asks.

Jules looks at her best friend. "Have you ever had classy sex in a bathroom?"

"No," Len answers at the same time Bash says, "Yes."

She looks at her husband and shoves his chest. "You had better be talking about that time with me. And if you are, there was nothing classy about it. I was sticky for hours afterward."

"Of course I'm talking about you, Len." He drops a kiss to the top of her head. "And you'll always be a class act to me."

"Oh, whatever," Jules moans. "Just go bang the doc in the bathroom, then report back."

I close my eyes and wish the ground would swallow me whole.

"Juliette," Scarlet snaps and waits for Jules to look at her. "Are you aware that you've set Ashlyn up with a man who's only interested in men?"

Lenny barks out a laugh, then slaps her hand over her mouth.

"No way," Jules answers.

"Until recently, he was engaged to the team's physical therapist, who is

very much a man,” Scarlet tells her. “And a gorgeous one at that.”

“He could be into men and women,” Jules argues, and I start looking for another waiter, so I can stuff my face with more food and attempt to get out of this conversation completely.

“He could,” Scarlet says smoothly. “But he’s not. We’ve been at functions together before, and that man only dates men. Trust me.” She turns to find me about to bite into a spring roll and cocks a brow. “No bathroom sex for you tonight, Mommy Dearest.”

I hold my spring roll up and point it at my band of merry morons. “I was never having bathroom sex. Not tonight. Not tomorrow night. Probably not ever. Now can we move on to embarrassing someone else? *Please?*”

A wicked smile spreads across Lenny’s face. “Sure. How about we talk about the fact that Brandon Dixon just walked through the door with Chloe Ryan on his arm?”

And there he is.

The entire reason I agreed to go on a date tonight, wrapped up in a perfectly tailored tux showcasing his delectable muscles. He might as well have a shiny red ribbon on top of his head, just begging someone to unwrap him. Someone like Chloe.

Someone single with no baggage.

Someone gorgeous and adventurous.

Someone perfect for him.

Fuck this night, and fuck my life, and fuck my shitty, nonexistent sex life.

Fuck. It. All.

I stop the waiter walking by with lemon raspberry petit fours and take two.

I may have officially crossed over into the eating my feelings portion of the evening, but ask me if I care? Nope. The answer is hell no, I don’t. Especially as the band switches to a slower song and Becket and Travis make their way back over to our growing group. Travis holds his hand out to me. “May I have this dance?”

I place my tiny desserts on the high-top table and look at them longingly before I slide my palm in his. We take two steps before I make the mistake of looking over Travis’s shoulder at Brandon and Chloe. He’s leaning into her, whispering something in her ear as she laughs. Lucky girl.

As we step onto the dance floor, Travis wraps me in his arms. His palm splays flat against my bare back between my shoulder blades, and I don’t feel

so much as a tiny flicker of anticipation. No spark at all. Maybe I'm broken.

More broken than I even realize.

I lean my head on his shoulder and silently sigh. "Scarlet told me you recently called off an engagement." Travis stiffens, and I look around the ballroom, things suddenly beginning to click. "Wait, is he here?"

Travis groans and spins us around. The man is an incredible dancer. "See him over there in the gray suit? Blond hair, standing next to the mayor?"

"Oh my. He's handsome." And he really is. "The two of you together probably make a striking pair."

I'm spun again, and his hand slides lower on my back. "I should've told you that before I asked you out, shouldn't I?"

"Letting me know my purpose tonight was to make your ex jealous would have been nice. But I understand. I actually feel better knowing. The question is, are you still in love with him?"

"Yes," Travis answers without hesitation.

"Can I give you a piece of advice?" I ask, maybe a little too pushy. But I'm not sure I've got anything to lose.

He nods and pulls me closer to him.

I feel eyes on me again, only this time I'm not so sure they're Travis's ex's eyes, but I don't dare look back and officially embrace my coward status as I tell someone else to seize the day. "Don't give up if you aren't sure. Living with regret is a bitch."

I'm pretty sure every move this man forces is an attempt to make his ex jealous, but when I look over to where Brandon is sitting, I know I'm doing the same thing. And maybe, just maybe it's working, because Chloe is nowhere to be seen, and his eyes are on me.



Brandon

o, Chloe Ryan?" Maddie asks as she sits down next to me.

“S I force my eyes from Ashlyn and the tool she’s dancing with, who can’t keep his hands off her, and glare at my sister. Yeah . . . I’m not in the mood for a lecture. “What about her?”

“Nothing . . . I’m just surprised.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. We’re just friends. I bumped into her in the lobby, and we came up here together.” I nod over toward the other side of the room, where she’s talking with Lenny and Bash.

“Whatever . . . Chloe’s awesome. Why don’t you ask her out on an actual date?”

“Sunshine . . .” Hudson hands Maddie a glass of water, then sits down next to us. “Leave the man alone.”

She leans her head on her husband’s shoulder and yawns. “I can’t help that I worry about you. I just want you to be happy, big brother.”

“Who says I’m not happy?” My little sister is so deliriously in love that she thinks everyone else needs to be too. “And it’s not your job to worry about me, remember?”

“Brandon . . .”

“Leave him alone, Mads,” Hudson chides.

“Yeah. Leave me alone, Mads.” I push back from the table and put my tux coat back on. “I think I’m about done for the night, guys.”

Maddie stands up, clearly upset, and follows me into the hall as I wait for the elevator. “Brandon, I wasn’t trying to piss you off. I just hate seeing you alone.”

I push the down button again, already getting impatient. “I’m not mad. Just tired. It’s been a long week, and I’ve got a lot on my mind. Okay?”

“Come on . . .” she pushes, and hallelujah, the elevator door dings. I reach in and grip it, holding it open.

There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell I’m going to stand here longer than I have to. Maddie’s scrappy. Give her too long, and she’ll have me agreeing to anything just to be a pain in my ass. “Give it a rest, Mads. I smiled for the cameras and made the rounds. I’m done. I want to go home and get the hell out of this tux. I want to sleep for the next twenty-four hours. Kiss my nieces for me. I’ll see you guys soon.” I drop a kiss on the top of her head and step onto the gilded elevator car.

This hotel is ancient, with classic old architecture and golden accents.

It’s something I’d have loved to design had football not worked out for me.

Maddie plants her hands on her hips, glaring. “One of these days, you’re going to have to be an active participant in your life instead of watching from the sidelines, Brandon. You should try it. Who knows . . . maybe you’d actually like it.”

“Good night, Madison.” The doors begin to slide closed as a soft voice catches my attention.

“Hold the elevator . . .”

My hand jolts out, stopping the doors just before they meet, and pushes them back open as Ashlyn Kingston rushes in. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” I mumble because that’s what this woman reduces me to. *Mumbling.*

I wasn’t lying when I said I wasn’t interested in finding anyone.

But *this woman* . . . well , let’s just say she makes me wish I was.

Every step she takes is as delicate and graceful today as it was a lifetime ago.

She moves to the back of the elevator and closes her eyes, while I just stand there like a fucking idiot, watching her as the elevator moves from the fifty-ninth floor. Her fingers wrap around her purse, white knuckling it as her breathing hitches in her throat.

“Not a fan of elevators?”

Fucking genius observation, asshole.

Her eyes flutter open and meet mine. “Not the biggest fan of small spaces.” She forces a laugh as the car jerks to a stop three floors down, and a younger couple steps on. They can’t be much older than nineteen, from the looks of it. And the way this dude kisses his girl as soon as the doors close makes me feel bad for her.

Is he trying to swallow her entire face?

When they bump into the wall behind them, Ashlyn steps closer to me, barely avoiding becoming a casualty of teenage hormones. Her arm brushes mine as she blows out another silent breath.

“Didn’t feel like taking the stairs?” I whisper, and I’m rewarded with a devious smile.

She pops her shapely leg out of the thigh-high slit in her flowing blue gown, revealing a pair of silver stilettos. “These shoes make my legs look incredible, but they’ve been pinching my toes all night.”

I drag an appreciative eye over her toned, tanned thigh.

Yup, they do look incredible.

Her ass does too, but I'm pretty sure the shoes didn't have a thing to do with either one. "They sure do."

Ashlyn's cheeks pink, and her lips tip up at the compliment as she adjusts the floaty layers of her dress.

The doors open on the fiftieth floor.

The two dumb kids barely pull apart long enough to walk through the doors, and when they close again, the two of us laugh.

"Geez, I guess that's one way to forget you're in an elevator," she laughs, and blood rushes to my cock at the idea of pushing her up against the wall.

Bad idea, man.

"We'll be in the lobby in a minute," I reassure her.

Only, before my next breath, the elevator jolts and drops.

Holy shit.

Screams bounce off the golden walls, but even they can't hide the screeching of the metal cable trying to stop our plummet.

The lights flicker and go out, and we both fall back against the wall.

Ashlyn crashes into me, sobbing, and I wrap my arms around her and brace us both for impact, then do something I never thought I'd do again.

I pray to a God who never answered me before.

I'm not ready to die.

The elevator jerks to a stop, and we both crash to the floor.

Fuck. *Fuck.* Fuuuuuck.

"Oh my God," Ashlyn cries hysterically.

I sit there for a second, with her hysterical in my arms, wondering if this is really happening. This isn't the movies. Elevators don't fall. But when I open my eyes and try to look around the dark space, we're not moving, and nothing inside the space is lit.

Shit. "Are you hurt?"

Her entire body shakes against mine, but she doesn't answer me.

"Ashlyn . . ." I cup her face and run my thumbs over her wet cheeks, then down her bare arms. "I need to know if you're hurt."

"I don't . . ." She sucks in a shaky breath, then another. "I don't think so."

I can barely make out her face in the dark, but I don't need to see her to feel her tears. "We need to get out of here," she sobs.

"I agree." I pull my phone from my pocket but don't have any damn bars.
Fuck.

The flashlight.

There's an app on my phone that I find and turn on to get some light in this fucking tomb. "I don't have any bars on my phone. I can't call out. I'm going to get up and try the emergency phone."

She pulls her phone from her tiny purse in shaky hands, then looks back up at me with fat tears streaming down her cheeks. "Me either. No service."

"Okay. Sit tight, and I'll check the emergency phone."

She grabs hold of my tux jacket and pulls. "No. Don't move. What if we're not stable?"

"We've got to try. We don't know what happened or if anyone even knows it happened yet." I take her hand in mine and squeeze.

"Listen . . . I'm going to slide over to the box over there." I shine the light on the box on the opposite wall. "Hold my hand. We're going to be okay." Man, I hope that's not a lie.

I try not to show the fucking fear in my eyes that's already gripping every inch of me and move so fucking slow, a snail could outpace me as I slide over to the emergency box while still holding Ashlyn's hand. Once I'm on the other side of the elevator, I grab the damn phone and wait for someone to answer.

"Hello," I yell into the phone, and Ashlyn sobs again. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, sir. I'm here," a voice answers.

"The elevator dropped. We were on the fiftieth floor. I don't know where we are now. The lights are out. There are two of us in here, and we don't know what's happening." I attempt to keep my voice steady. "Can you do something to get the doors to open?"

"May I have your name, sir?"

"Brandon . . . Brandon Dixon, and Ashlyn Kingston is with me. We're the only two on the elevator. We were at the party on the fifty-ninth floor." I look back at Ashlyn and squeeze her hand in mine.

"Thank you, Mr. Dixon. The entire building has experienced a blackout, but our generators have turned on. I'm not sure why the elevator hasn't kicked back on as well or what caused the fall. I'm making management aware that the elevator has stopped. Please do not attempt to pry the doors open. Just sit tight. I'll call you back as soon as I have an update for you."

"Wait . . . Don't hang up yet." I swallow, fighting to keep my calm. "Are we safe to sit here? What if the elevator drops again?"

Ashlyn squeaks when I ask that morbid fucking question.

“Yes, sir. You’re completely safe. Just sit tight, and I’ll ring you as soon as I have a better answer for you.”

I bet he will. The guy is probably getting paid jack shit to sit there and answer the phone. How the hell does he know if we’re safe in here?

The phone line goes dead, and I manage not to slam it against the wall in frustration.

What the fuck?

When I turn back to Ashlyn, she’s silently sobbing. This is so fucking bad. I slide slowly across the floor until I’m back next to her. “The power went out in the building. It’s back on now, so it shouldn’t be too long before they can get us out.” I set my phone to stay on and give us a little light in the otherwise dark space.

“That’s not what they said,” she whispers. “I could hear him. I can’t stay here. Lindy is home with the girls. I need to get back to her. She’s already lost one parent. She can’t lose me too.”

“She’s not going to. *You’re* going to be fine. *We’re* going to be fine.” I take a good look at the space around us. There’s a panel in the middle of the ceiling, I could boost her through, but then what?

What if the elevator isn’t stable?

What if it drops when we’re on top of it?

If it was just me, I’d try it. But I can’t take that risk with her in here.

“I think we need to do what they said and sit tight. At least for now.” The words feel bitter in my mouth. Sitting tight and doing nothing hasn’t been the way I’ve played anything since I turned eighteen and could get the hell out of my foster family’s house.

Ashlyn nods and runs her hands up and down her arms like she’s cold, so I peel off my jacket and put it around her. The black tux jacket dwarfs her delicate frame when she tugs it closed without putting her arms through it. “Thank you. I’m sorry I’m such a mess. I really hate small spaces.”

“Trust me, I know what a mess looks like. I’ve seen it. I lived with it. I’m pretty sure you couldn’t be a mess if you tried.”

Green eyes lift up to mine, her tears catching on her smile. “You only see what I let people see.”

ASHLYN



*B*randon looks at me, confused. “Well, it looks like we’ve got time to kill since we might be here a while. Why don’t you tell me what I don’t see?”

Oh, God. I flatten my palms on the floor beneath me, attempting to ground myself, but it doesn’t really work since that ground isn’t stable.

We could plunge to our deaths at any minute.

We *cannot* be here for a while.

I have to get out of here.

My heart slams against my ribs, and the all too familiar signs of panic grip me in a choke hold.

An invisible weight sits on my chest, crushing me.

My throat closes.

Oh, God. I can’t breathe.

I can’t . . . I just can’t.

“Ashlyn . . .” My name is distant. *Muffled.*

“Ashlyn, look at me.” Brandon takes my face in his hands and turns it toward his. “Stay right here. Stay with me, okay, baby?”

I bring my eyes to his, but the pain doesn’t lessen, it only gets worse. “I can’t . . . I can’t breathe,” I wheeze. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes.

“You’re okay.” He takes my hand and places it over his heart. “We’re both okay. You feel that?”

I nod as his strong heart beats under my trembling hand.

“Okay. Now tap your hand with the rhythm.” His fingers lace with mine, and I try to follow his lead.

I try to focus on the movement of my hand in sync with the rhythm of his

heart.

Eventually, the tightness begins to lessen in my chest, but I don't dare move away. Instead, I laser-focus in on the strong beat of his heart and nothing else.

Not my shaky breath.

Or my throbbing head.

Not the fact that we could die at any moment.

Or that I won't get to tell my daughter I love her one last time.

I force it all away.

Into the box, like a therapist once told me.

Out of sight. Out of mind.

"That's it. Slow and steady. Focus on me." The timbre of his voice is deep and warm and velvety smooth. Soothing me as his big, rough, callused palm rests on the back of my hand, dwarfing it. Moving in time with mine.

I'm not sure how long we stay like this before the tightness inside me *slowly* subsides.

"That's a good girl. Stay with me."

I blow out a shaky breath.

"Talk to me." Brandon smirks. "Who was that tool I saw you with earlier?"

"What?" I ask, completely taken off guard.

My hand stops, but he keeps it moving for both of us.

"Was he your date?"

Oh. Him. That already feels like hours ago. "He was supposed to be. But it was never a real date. He failed to mention I was there to make his ex jealous."

Something flashes in his eyes before he mumbles, "His loss."

"What about Chloe? Is she waiting for you in the lobby?"

"Man, between you and Maddie . . ." There's a rasp in his voice. It's frustration mixed with something else. Something sexy. "Do you know—" He stops himself before he finishes his thought. "We just walked in together. Chloe's a friend. That's all."

"Do I know what?" I look up at him and stare into his obsidian eyes. What I really want to ask is if he's ever fucked her. But I don't. I can't. I don't have that right.

Brandon never moves his hand from mine, and I try to keep my focus on that instead of the ugly green knot of jealousy growing inside me.

“This is what I used to do with Maddie when we were kids and the anxiety would get to be too much for her. We’d talk about something else. Sometimes it was the only way to get her through it.”

I wish to God I wasn’t making a fool of myself in front of him.

How many times do I need to do that in my lifetime?

I mean, I’d rather not be living my worst nightmare at all, but did it really need to be in front of *him*?

“Why is she just a friend?” I push.

The lights flicker on, giving me a tiny glimmer of hope before cloaking us in darkness again just as quickly.

Yeah. We’re gonna die.

Okay. Pretty sure I’m spiraling.

I clamp my mouth shut and try to stop myself from saying anything else I’m going to regret. I don’t really want my last words to be something humiliating.

Brandon shrugs his massive shoulders and unties his tie, then unbuttons the top two buttons of his crisp white dress shirt, revealing just a glimpse of tanned skin. He rolls up his sleeves with precision, like he’s done it hundreds of times in his life. Probably because he has. And my God. This man is so much more gorgeous today than he was the night we met. He was still a boy back then. Cocky and sexy. But this Brandon . . . this one is all man. Confidence oozes off him in waves as the muscles in his forearm flex.

Yummy. Arm porn.

I love forearms. There’s something about bulging veins wrapped tightly around corded muscle. Add a big fat watch, and you’ve got the cherry on top of a mouthwatering sundae that’s always done it for me. Maybe it’s the hint of controlled strength peeking out of a starched shirt. Maybe it’s just that I haven’t had sex since my daughter was born. But my goodness, Brandon’s arms have only gotten more beautiful over the years.

“Ashlyn . . .”

“Hmmm . . .” I answer as I lift my eyes to his.

His lips tug up on one side, leaving a sexy, crooked, boyish smile I don’t think I’ve ever seen on this man’s face before. And I’ve watched. Trust me. I’ve watched from afar more than I’ll ever admit.

“I don’t date. Chloe and I, *we’ve never* . . . I just don’t date. What’s your excuse?”

I slide his jacket off my shoulders and hand it back to him, suddenly very,

very hot. “The last man I dated, died in bed with another woman six months after he married me.” I think about how hard that should have been but wasn’t. “Truth be told, he and I . . . we never dated. So I guess you could say I don’t have the greatest track record. I wouldn’t even know how to do it if I wanted to.”

“Wait.” He stares at me for a confused beat, and I see the gears turning. “How’s that possible?”

I laugh soundlessly. “Which part? The one where I married a man more than twice my age, and he died cheating on me with a model two years younger than me? Or the one where I haven’t dated since?” I might as well embrace the embarrassment.

“If he cheated on you, he was obviously a fool.”

“John Kingston was a lot of things. A fool wasn’t one of them. I was the fool.” I lean back against the wall, stretch my legs out in front of me, kick off my silver heels, then stretch out my toes and cross my ankles, one over the other. The pale blue chiffon layers of my gown cascade over my legs as they peek out of the thigh-high slit.

“Why’d you do it, Ashlyn? Why did you marry John Kingston? Why did you stop answering me. What happened?”

“God, Brandon. You do deserve to know. But I swear it wasn’t you. It was everything else. It was a million things that were completely out of my control. And a few very specific things I *could* control. I married a man who promised me safety and security. Two things I was desperate for.”

“I would have given you safety and security. I would have given you fucking *everything*,” Brandon tells me quietly as he stretches his long legs next to mine, close enough to bump up against me. “I know a thing or two about the lengths we go to for the sake of safety.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I knew that too. But I wasn’t going to let you give up the life you worked so hard for, for me.”

“Care to explain what the hell that’s supposed to mean?”

I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes. “Do you know how long I’ve watched you? With Maddie. The way you are with Aurora and Teagan. It always seems like you’re waiting for something to happen. Something bad. Like you need to protect them. And you know that’s exactly the boy I remember from that night.” Wow. I can’t believe I just admitted that.

I turn my head and lift my eyes in time to see Brandon’s crinkle with his

smile. “So you’ve watched me, huh?”

“That’s what you got out of that?” I guess that’s one way to break the tension.

I gently jab his ribs with my elbow.

Big surprise. There’s no give. *None.* He’s solid muscle.

“That’s what any man would focus on.” His words are easygoing, but they’re hiding what I’d bet is hurt.

“Really?” I ask, sure I know the answer.

“No. If you knew that from the first fucking night we met, why the hell didn’t you talk to me after the Olympics? Why stop answering? Why marry John?”

“Because I was in agony. Because I was weak. Because I was a coward,” I admit, holding back a sob. “Because I was tired of being hurt and controlled and thrown away. Because John promised to take me away from it all and keep me safe. He promised he’d deal with it all, and at that point in my life, I don’t think I could have done it myself. He promised I’d never get hurt again and neither would anyone I cared about. I’d just lost Nina. I didn’t have any family. She’d been the closest thing and thought I . . .”

“Thought. What?” Brandon pushes for an answer I can’t give him.

And when I look at him with tears in my eyes, he stops pushing and wraps an arm around me.

I lay my head against his shoulder and suck in a breath.

“I thought it was the only choice I had . . .” I whisper into the dark.

Brandon’s chin rests on top of my head, and we sit in silence for so long I think he may have fallen asleep until he finally speaks. “I’ve never found anyone I could trust enough to date. You were it. The first time and the last time. I thought I might have found it once after that, but she was in love with someone else.” He goes quiet for another long moment, then adds, “That was a few years ago.”

What stupid girl wouldn’t grab this man with both hands and refuse to let go?

Besides me.

“We’re kind of a sad pair, aren’t we?”

“Ashlyn.” He turns his body toward mine and forces my head up. “Us? A pair?” A deep laugh rumbles through his chest. “I guess, tonight, we are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snap, my emotions playing a vicious game of ping pong.

“We’ve spent the past decade trying our best to ignore each other.”

“Yeah . . . I guess we have.” I’m not sure how much more I can take of reliving the past before I break, so I try to change the conversation. I lay my head back on his shoulder and close my eyes again, soaking in the warmth of his arms. “Are you still considering retirement?”

“I’m supposed to meet with Scarlet and Coach on Monday to make it official. But they know it’s coming.”

He tightens his hold on me, and I don’t dare budge. “Do you know what you want to do after football?”

“Not really. I’ve had a few networks reach out to me about joining them as a commentator, but I haven’t confirmed my status yet, so I’m limited with what I can explore for now.”

“But you don’t like to talk,” I tease.

“I talk plenty, just not to you,” he fires back, and there’s something about the tone in his voice that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Ouch. That hurts.” And it really does. More than it should.

“That’s not what I meant.” He tries desperately to pull his words back, but it’s too late.

They’re already out there.

“Sure, it’s not.” I scoot away from him. Guess I got a little too comfortable.

I forgot . . .

“Ashlyn. *Stop*. I don’t talk to you because you’re—” He cuts himself off and pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’re you. You’re a *Kingston*. You’re high society and fancy dinners. You’re my fucking boss, if you want to get technical. You’re the girl who got away, and then I had to watch you marry the owner of my fucking team,” he yells.

I stand up and step away from him.

I don’t do well being yelled at.

Haven’t for a long damn time.

Shitty elevator forgotten, I spin on him. “Are you saying you don’t talk to me because you don’t like me?”

“Jesus Christ. No.” He stands and throws his hands in the air, exasperated. “I don’t talk to you because you live in a different world than I do.” His voice grows softer. “A different . . . *league*.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I hiss back.

“You curse?” He looks at me, shocked.

“Yes, I fucking curse. You’ve heard me curse, you ass. And I’m not from a different world or a different league. Or whatever other bullshit you just spewed.” I push him back with a shove to his chest. *His very hard chest.* “First of all, you’re a professional football player, Brandon. A pro-bowler. An all-pro. A first team all-league player. A goddamn captain. You’ve got endorsement deals with one of the biggest brands in the world and God knows how many others. You’re not some guy off the streets who’s begging for change on the corner of the Ben Franklin Parkway. Believe it or not, you’re wealth far exceeds mine.”

“I didn’t know you knew that much about football,” he mumbles, and I want to scream.

Scream.

“I’ve only missed a handful of home games in over a decade. Yes, I know a lot about football. But like I’ve told you before, I don’t own the team. I’m not your boss. My daughter and her siblings own it, smartass. I just hold her proxy so I had to learn as I went. And you want to know what else? I’ve talked to Maddie plenty over the last few years.”

I step into his space, spitting fire.

But the funny thing is, I’m not insulted for myself.

I’m insulted for him.

“Want to know what your sister told me?” I don’t bother waiting for him to answer. “Turns out, we didn’t grow up so differently. She was just luckier than me. She had you to protect her. I had a mom who realized I could skate and exploited that as much as she could. Then when she couldn’t get anything else out of me, she basically sold me to the first coach who was interested in getting to the Olympics. And he was one step above a fucking animal. Dogs have been kinder than that son of a bitch. I didn’t have anyone to protect me. I had to figure out how to do that myself. And let me tell you something else . . .”

Somewhere deep down, I know I’m yelling, and he doesn’t deserve it.

But I’m on a roll now, and there’s no stopping it.

“He would have killed me, Brandon. My coach would have killed me when Nina died. He didn’t get his gold. He didn’t have his daughter. He’d put me through hell for years. Physical hell. Mental hell. He had more power over me than I ever should have given him, and John offered me a way out. You’re right. I’m a Kingston. My *daughter* is a Kingston. My family, the

only one I have, are Kingstons. So I do what I have to do for her and for them. *I do what's expected.* And if that means you won't talk to me, then that's your loss, big guy."

I take one step backward, then another. So fucking angry. At him. At myself. At the unbelievably cruel world I grew up in. One I swore I'd never put my daughter in. But damn, if she didn't beg to learn how to skate from the time she could walk.

Brandon stands in front of me, fighting an internal war.

One I'm all too familiar with.

Then the look on his face changes.

Smooths out.

And he takes one step forward.

Getting close. *Too close.* His lips tip up in that lopsided smile. A dimple pops deep in one cheek. And he shakes his head. "Big guy?"

Why does he focus on such tiny, little pieces of the things I say?

I press my hands against his chest as we stand in front of each other in the darkened elevator. The glowing phone, long forgotten on the floor, giving off the only dim light. The tension so thick you can feel it threatening to absorb all the oxygen.

I reach my hand out and tentatively cup his cheek. "Yeah," I whisper. "That's what I put you in my phone as that night."

He bends his knees bringing us so damn close, I can't think.

I can't breathe.

I can't focus on anything but how much I need this man.

A sharp trill rings in the space, breaking our connection, and we both scramble to answer the emergency phone. Brandon gets there first and rips it off the wall. "Tell me you're getting us out of here."

I step closer until he moves the phone away from his ear and angles it between us. "No, sir. We're sorry, but the entire area is experiencing the blackout. The hotel has generators but not everyone is as lucky. It's making things . . . *difficult.*"

"What exactly does difficult mean? If the generators are working, why aren't we moving?" I ask, not bothering to hide the growing hysteria in my voice. I'm done. I cannot stay in here all night.

There's a noise on the other end of the phone, then a new voice answers. "Ashlyn, it's Henry. Are you okay?"

Brandon looks at me in question, and I take the receiver from his hand

and whisper, “Henry’s the manager,” before jumping into the call. “Henry. Oh my God. *No*. We’re not okay. Get us out of here. Please,” I beg my friend.

“I’m so sorry, Ashlyn. The repair man hasn’t been able to get in yet. The streets are a mess. Half the city went dark. There are reports of traffic lights out. We’re trying everything we can.”

My heart sinks. “Try harder,” I blurt out, frustrated, and slam the phone on the receiver with tears burning the back of my lids. “We’re not getting out of here.” I crumble.

Suddenly, I’m enveloped in strong arms. Dixon’s crisp clean fresh scent surrounds me as a hand runs over my hair. For a moment, I let myself soak in the safety of his very solid chest. “They’re going to get us out of here,” is whispered softly against my head, and a shiver skirts down my spine.

I try to slow my breathing, but suddenly the elevator isn’t the only thing making my heart race.

When I lift my head, Brandon’s eyes are boring into mine.

Deep and dark and so damn knowing.

Like he can see into every scarred inch of me.

With a shaking hand, I reach out and trace his face. His cheek. His lips. Until he grips my wrist and holds it suspended in his hand. “I’m not out of anyone’s league, Brandon. No one has taken the time to get to know me—the *real* me—in so damn long.” His lips press against my thumb, and holy hell . . . I feel it everywhere. Feel *him* everywhere. “I keep it hidden.”

He cups my face in both hands and holds me close enough to feel his heart beating. “Hiding is the easy way out.”

“What if I said I was tired of hiding?” I whisper, my skin warm and prickly as the electricity hums between us.

Slowly . . . so slowly, he lowers his mouth, gently brushing his lips over mine. “I’d say, thank fucking God.”

BRANDON



The world around us stands still when I finally claim her mouth. Slowly. Savoring her soft lips and sweet sigh. And like a sucker punch to the gut, she's fucking flawless. Just like I remember. *Better.*

Ashlyn gasps and melts against me, like she was meant to be there. Wrapping her arms around my neck, her soft curves press in, aligning with every hard inch of my body. Smooth and warm, and so fucking perfect in my arms.

I savor my first taste of her.

Red wine and chocolate cake.

And I know one taste will never be enough.

"Brandon," she sighs and scrapes her nails against my scalp, pulling a groan from deep within my chest.

The sound of my name on her lips breaks something that's been dormant inside me for a long time, and I lift her off her feet, deepening our kiss. *Hungry . . .* Fucking ravenous for her.

Ashlyn locks her long legs around my hips and grinds her heated body against my hard cock.

"Fuck, baby . . ." I wrap a hand around her throat. My thumb presses over her fluttering pulse. "Tell me you want this, Ashlyn."

She hums against my lips and moves her fingers to my shirt, unclasping the buttons, and pressing her hot mouth to my throat. Tiny moans slip past her lips as she swivels her hips. "Don't stop, Brandon."

My little ice queen shoves my shirt off my shoulders and drags her hand between us, down my bare chest, tracing each indent of my abs, before she lifts her molten eyes to mine. "Please don't stop."

“I couldn’t if I tried.” I lean her back against the wall and press my lips to the hollow of her throat, loving the way she trembles in my arms. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to taste your skin.”

Her creamy skin glows in the darkened room around us, and I slip one thin blue strap off her delicate shoulder then the next, needing more skin. Wanting to see all of her. Knowing this might be my only chance.

A desperate, needy, impatient sound floats past her lips as she slides her arms out of her dress and unlocks her legs from my waist. The soft blue fabric clings to her tits, and my eyes catch on the promise of more before I’m pushed back.

She slowly lowers her feet until they’re firm on the floor. Then Ashlyn lifts up on her toes, closing the distance between us, and presses her lips to mine. She kisses the corner of my mouth, then licks along my lower lip. “If it’s even half as long as I’ve thought about having your mouth on me, it’s too damn long, Brandon.”

Her dress swirls out as I spin her away from me and run my hands over her ribcage, then down her sides. Framing her hips. Cupping her ass. Memorizing each curve of her body.

The one I’m going to spend as much time worshipping as I can.

Tonight. Tomorrow. Next week.

Ashlyn might not know it yet, but this is only the beginning. And this time, I’m not letting her get away.

She presses her palms against the wall and looks over one shoulder with a sexy smile on her gorgeous face. Her long hair kisses the middle of her back in pretty waves.

I torture us both and take my time tugging down the long zipper on the back of her dress. The tinny sound is deafeningly loud in the silence surrounding us. Each snick of the metal shows the tiniest bit more skin until I’m staring at two perfect dimples at the small of her back.

Her beautiful body is a fucking masterpiece. Long, lean muscles. A subtle strength she’s never ignored that I’d worship with my dying breath.

I drag my lips over each bump of her bare spine and squat down behind her, helping as she carefully steps out of the soft blue fabric pooling at her feet. Leaving her in those shoes she loves so much.

My lips press to the small of her back. “Turn around, Ashlyn.” The command comes out harsh as I run my hands over the tiny white lace panties covering her perfect round ass, shredding any strength I had left.

She turns slowly, smiling softly.

“You are fucking perfect.”

“Perfection is a lie, Brandon.” Her face softens before she gently tugs me to my feet up in front of her and unbuckles my belt. “I don’t want pretty perfect lies. I want brutal honesty.”

I rest a palm against the wall beside her head and suck a breath in through my teeth as she shoves my pants and boxers down.

“I want to feel.” This beautiful fucking woman licks her lips as her eyes grow wide, and my cock springs free. “*Everything.*”

Fuck . . . “Ashlyn, I don’t . . . *Fucking hell.* I don’t have a condom with me.”

She presses her lips to mine, taking control in such a sexy fucking way. “I don’t care. I’m clean and I’m protected. I just want to feel you, Brandon. I don’t want gentle. I don’t need flowers. I just want you.”

I drag my hands up her rib cage, stopping just under her breasts and run my thumbs along her soft skin. “Are you sure, baby?”



Ashlyn

*H*is words are a balm to my soul.
Am I sure?

He’s giving me an out.

He’s asking what I want, and I have no doubt that even now, with both of us naked, if I told him to stop, he would.

With my smile stretching across my face, I press my hands against his hard chest and push gently. “More sure than I’ve ever been.”

Brandon takes a step back, then sits on top of our clothes, his legs stretched out in front of him, and I let myself really look at this man. At the stacked muscles stretched tight under his skin. The beautiful eyes. Pupils blown wide with desire.

The man I’ve fantasized about. Dreamed about. Longed for.

My one true regret. My what if . . .

I promised myself if I ever got a second chance with Brandon Dixon, I

wouldn't waste it. And now that I have it, I don't know what to do.

Unsure of myself, I lock eyes with him and shiver. The charged heat staring back from those obsidian eyes mirrors the absolute desperation in mine.

Sensing my nerves, he wraps an arm around my waist and drags me forward until his face is buried against the lace of my panties. He slides them slowly down my legs, then drags his tongue back up, and my knees threaten to buckle.

"Brandon . . ." I gasp and sink my fingers into his hair with the very first stroke of his tongue against my sensitive skin.

"Your pussy is soaked, baby, but I need to make sure you're ready for my cock."

I nod, as my body trembles, and my clit throbs in time with my pulse, while a delicious want wars with desperate need.

I can't breathe or think or speak as a wave of need, strong and powerful, threatens to drag me under. With each long stroke of Brandon's flat tongue, my grip tightens, and my fingers dig deeper. Pull harder. I hold his face against me. "God, yes."

He tips his head back as a sexy grin spreads across his glistening lips. "Your cunt tastes so fucking good, Ashlyn," Brandon groans, then kisses each hip bone.

A whimper lodges in my throat when his thick finger teases my tight entrance before pushing inside. Stretching me. Filling me. His rough thumb circles my clit, teasing me, while he holds me like I weigh nothing in his hands. Dark eyes never leaving mine.

I suck in a breath, and my hips press harder against him.

Needing more.

"That's it. Fuck my face, baby."

As if his words were what I needed, my orgasm rips through me embarrassingly fast and hard. My body pulses and shakes, but instead of pulling away, Brandon drags me closer, bringing me back to his mouth. Fucking me with his fingers and his lips and his tongue. It's everything and too much all at once.

"Too much," I plead but grind shamelessly against his lips, chasing a second orgasm that crashes down over me faster than the first one.

"It'll never be too much." He drags me down to him, his lips crashing over mine. His tongue slides past my lips, and I taste my tart taste and

straddle his waist, my drenched pussy teasing his beautifully thick cock.

I raise up on my knees and deepen our kiss. The scorching heat between us is so fierce, it's as if we've been burned by the sun.

My thumb runs over the tip of his cock, swiping through the tiny bead of precum leaking from the head, and Brandon shudders as I raise over him. "Take me inside you, baby," he growls against my lips, and my toes curl at the desperation in his voice.

I lower myself slowly down onto his cock. My body singing with pain as I stretch around him. I'm soaked, but he's huge, so I take it slow, taking him inside my body, inch by excruciatingly thick inch. Sliding up and down as the burn of my walls stretching threatens to bring tears to my eyes.

Brandon's hands slide up my back, and God, his big, rough hands against my skin send goosebumps racing down my spine. "Tell me what you need from me, Ashlyn," he groans in a deep and raspy voice, as if he's holding on by a gossamer thread that's threatening to disintegrate before our eyes. "I'm trying to let you have the control here. I want you to feel safe. I want—"

I run a finger over his full lips, then suck the bottom one into my mouth. "*I want your hands on my body.*" I kiss him again. "I want your mouth on mine. I want to feel you for days, Brandon. I. Want. Everything."

The gossamer snaps, and I'm suddenly slammed down on his massive cock. Brandon buries a hand in my hair and catches my scream between his lips as sparks of pain mix with waves of pleasure.

His forehead presses against mine as I shake. "Breathe, baby."

"I'm not sure I can," I whisper and wrap my arms around his neck, wanting to be closer. My peaked nipples brush against his chest, sending a shockwave straight to my core, and I rock slowly against him, needing more.

"That's it," he murmurs and drops his mouth to my breast.

My knees tremble, and his strong hand grips the globe of my ass, pulling me close. Holding me up. Keeping me together as I threaten to shatter. "Oh, God," I moan while he pounds into me, setting a punishing rhythm I fucking love.

I slam myself down harder as he fucks into me. Filling me so completely . . . Brushing against every inch of my walls. Hitting a spot . . . "Oh, God," I call out.

His fingers dig into my hips, moving me faster as we both chase our pleasure.

The tangy, tart, metallic taste of my impending orgasm threatens to drown

me.

To drag me under, and never let me up, and I give in to it.

Give up and give myself over to the mind-blistering, soul-shattering, life-changing pleasure. My orgasm steals my breath, and I cling to Brandon as he pounds into me, whispering filthy words. His lips worshipping my skin. Holding me as I fall apart until a deep, guttural groan is ripped from his throat, and his cock jerks as he comes deep inside me.

Unable to move or think, to question anything, even our safety, I'm limp in his arms. Our heavy breaths and racing hearts the only sound in the quiet darkness. I lie draped against his chest while Brandon's hand runs up and down my spine, his lips pressed against my head.

My face is tucked into his shoulder, my lips running along his neck. "Brandon," I whisper almost hesitantly.

He presses another kiss to my head and tightens his hold. "Yeah, Ashlyn?"

So this is what safety feels like.

I pull my head up, and his dark eyes dance over my face. "Why the hell did we wait so long to do that?" I whisper quietly and drag my teeth over his sharp jaw.

Then the world crashes back down on us.

I blink, momentarily blinded as my eyes adjust to the harsh fluorescent lights of the elevator that flash on at the same time the shrill sound of the ringing emergency phone breaks our quiet calm and the elevator starts to move.

Oh. My. God.

ASHLYN



*H*oly. Shit.

Everything happens all at once.

The lights come back on.

The emergency phone rings.

And the elevator begins to move.

Controlled this time, like it hadn't just annihilated my world as I know it, setting it on end, and sending it spinning to a new direction.

The world is no longer threatening to crash down around us.

Better yet, we're not threatening to hurtle into the basement.

Oh my God. I'm completely naked.

My bones are limp, and my body can't seem to get into focus as I trip over myself, trying to stand up and get my dress back on.

I push up from Brandon's chest and stumble backward, nearly falling on my ass if it weren't for his big hand righting me. "Get dressed," I hiss. "If we're naked when they open this door, I'll die. And it will be a slower, more painful death than crashing could have ever been."

I pick up his shirt and throw it at him as he laughs at me.

Holy hell.

Broody Brandon is always a gorgeous sight. But laughing Brandon does naughty, naughty things to my body. Or maybe that's just the leftover hormones from the hottest orgasm of my life.

I stand stuck in place and watch as Brandon tucks his shirt in and buckles his belt. Damn. This man . . .

With shaking hands, I pull up my dress and turn my back to him. "Could you please zip me?"

His fingers skim up my spine before he kisses the back of my neck and pulls up my zipper. Both big hands cup my shoulders before running down my arms. “Ashlyn . . .”

I’m not sure if I’m hearing regret in his voice, but I don’t have time to figure it out now. “Where are my panties?” I whisper-hiss as I look everywhere, frantic, just before the doors open and I see white lace shoved into his pocket.

Brandon and I look at each other for one quick, quiet moment before chaos erupts.

Juliette cuts through the crowd of family and races toward me, cutting off Henry, who’s standing just outside the sliding doors of the elevator. She throws her arms around me and squeezes, just before I feel her fixing my dress in the back. “I want to know everything tomorrow. But for now, just run your hands over your freshly fucked hair, tell the whole family you’re fine, and Becket and I will take you home.”

I squeeze my best friend back and catch a glimpse of Maddie clinging to her brother. Tears are streaming down her cheeks, only he’s not looking at her. Those dark eyes have me locked in their sights.

I quickly look away as if I’ve been seared from the inside out.

Henry clears his throat and takes a step toward me. “Excuse me, Ashlyn. Could we speak?”

“Not tonight, Hank,” Jules blocks him. “We’re taking her home.”

I force a smile. Henry and I have been working together for years, but I don’t have the energy right now to listen to him try to apologize for what just happened. “Thanks, Henry. It’s fine. Really. I’m just glad to be out of that death trap.”

Becket kisses my cheek and drapes his jacket around my shoulders. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.” When I married John Kingston, Becket was the first of his family to welcome me in. As one of John’s oldest sons, Becks is a few years older than me, and we’ve always had the closest relationship.

I lean into him and take the support he’s offering. “Thanks, Becks.”

The rest of our big family closes ranks around Brandon and me, and I don’t get to say another word to him before I’m swept away to Becket’s waiting SUV. “Did anyone tell Lindy or the girls what was happening?” I ask as Becks holds the back door open for me.

“No,” Jules answers as she sits down next to me in the back seat. “We

didn't want to worry them. I texted Kenzie a little bit ago, and they were having a scary movie marathon. She said they were eating ice cream and making fun of the movies."

"Okay, so I'm just the chauffeur tonight, cupcake?" Becks teases his wife for leaving the front seat empty.

Without missing a beat, she tosses her purse next to him and grins. "Shut up and drive, Charming. Us girls need a few minutes." She crosses her legs and leans an arm against the seat next to me. "Tell me everything."

I glance at Becks, then back to Jules and roll my eyes.

"Act like he's not here."

"But he is here," I argue.

"And *he* can hear everything. Why are you hounding her, Jules? It's been a long night. Give Ashlyn a break."

Juliette tsks. "Because girlfriend here has freshly fucked hair, and the layers of her chiffon gown are all sorts of messed up, husband. Now shut up and let the adults talk."

"Jesus Christ," he mumbles.

"Jules," I gasp.

"Oh, come on. Tell me I'm wrong, and I'll stop."

I look out the window as the city skyline passes by on our way back to Kroydon Hills. "We'll talk when you pick Kenzie up from my house tomorrow."

"That means you're not wrong, cupcake." Becks smirks.

"Shut up, Becket," we both answer together, then laugh.

"Becket Kingston . . . so help me God. If you breathe a word of this in the family group chat, I will castrate you. Slowly. Painfully. And then I'll hang your balls around my rearview mirror like fuzzy little dice for the world to see. Do you understand me?"

Becks shivers dramatically from the front seat. "I'm a United States senator, Ashlyn. I don't spread gossip."

"Bullshit, Becket. I've seen you dish more dirt than the ladies at the hair salon," I laugh back at him.

"Promise her, *husband*. Or you and your potentially soon-to-be-removed balls will be sleeping on the couch tonight." And this is why she's my best friend.

"Fine," Becks huffs. "I promise."

I lean my head against the headrest and close my eyes.

A glass of wine and a hot bath.
That's about all I can handle right now.



Two hours later, after half a bottle of wine and a soak in the tub so long, my skin has officially pruned, I'm no more relaxed than I was when those elevator doors opened in the lobby. I change into my sleep shorts and a super-soft tee, brush out my hair, and make my way down to the basement where the girls are spread out all over the giant sectional.

These girls have been attached at the hip for as long as I can remember. It's been Lindy and Scarlet's daughter, Brynlee, since the day Bryn joined the family. The Sinclair twins turned the girls into a foursome the following year when they all took ballet with Gracie and Everly's mom, Annabelle. But it wasn't until Kenzie came into the family a few years ago that this crazy, awesome, inseparable bond seemed to form between the five of them. They're spread out around the room. Empty soda cans, half full bowls of popcorn, and a rainbow of nail polish bottles cover the coffee table. The television is still on, and I'm pretty sure Michael Myers just killed some poor blonde girl, who was rocking some definite eighties hair before she got to have sex.

Damn. At least let the girl have an orgasm first.

That thought strangely puts a smile on my face as I walk back upstairs.

Maybe because I just had my first non-self-induced orgasm.

Yeah. I'm going to go with that.

Back in the kitchen, I grab what's left of my bottle of wine and a cold slice of pizza from the fridge before I make my way to the couch and pick up the remote. I don't think I'm ready to close my eyes yet tonight. Sleep never comes easy for me, but with the emotional warfare the evening has already waged, I'm not even sure if it's going to come at all. Nothing a little Netflix and maybe some Henry Cavill can't help.

If you can't sleep, you might as well be watching a gorgeous man growl

on TV. I reach back for my favorite blanket and startle at a knock on my front door. Sometimes I love my family. Other times, they're just so much. I have no doubt either Sawyer or Hudson just walked over to check on us.

I toss the blanket down but don't bother letting go of my wine.

The Kingstons take overprotective to an extreme, and I definitely don't have the energy for it now. My wine sloshes over the side of the glass as I yank the door open, primed and ready to tell the guys to go home, but it's not Hudson or Sawyer at my door.

"Hey, baby."

And mic drop.

Those words uttered again . . . well, damn.



Brandon

Fuck, this woman is gorgeous. A worn black Philly Kings t-shirt with the logo in hot pink hangs off one bare shoulder, and tiny black sleep shorts barely graze the tops of her sexy thighs. Long, damp hair frames her face, and the prettiest little surprised O tugs at her lips.

Yeah . . . I like that O.

It takes her a minute to shake off the shock before her eyes narrow. "Brandon . . . what are you doing here?"

I shove my hands in the pocket of my hoodie and drop my eyes. "You gonna invite me in, Ashlyn?"

"Sorry." She shakes her head and pushes the door wide. "Come in."

I take in the quiet space for the first time. It's all soft colors and comfortable furniture.

Natural and understated. Just like the woman in front of me.

"You want a glass of wine?" She moves in front of an L-shaped couch and picks up a slice of pizza. "I have cold pizza too. Late night snack of champions."

I shake my head no but don't say anything.

Not until I move right into her space and take the glass and pizza out of her hands and put them down on a wooden tray on top of a tufted ottoman.

Ashlyn's eyes grow wide. "Listen, Brandon—"

"No," I growl, holding her face in my hands. Anchoring my hands in her hair, I tug her head back, gently. Her soft skin warms under my touch, and I want to fucking touch it all. But this is more important. "It's my turn to talk."

She squeaks as I run my lips over hers, then protests with a tug of my sweatshirt when I pull back. *Yeah*. That's what I needed to know. It's not just me.

"The last time you left, I thought there was something between us, and the next time I saw you, you were married."

"Brandon . . ." Her quiet voice shakes with my name.

"I'm not done yet, baby."

My words take some of the fight-or-flight instinct out of her but not all of it. Not yet.

"It only took one night, and I knew you were special. I knew it then without a single fucking doubt, but I had no way to fight for you. No power. No money. Not yet. Not then. But I'm not that man anymore, Ashlyn. I'm not letting you walk out of another goddamn room without knowing where your head's at."

She leans her cheek into my palm and closes her eyes. The muted TV behind us gives off enough light to catch the transformation. Her face goes from hesitant to confident in a matter of seconds. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Not gonna lie," I rasp out and lay it on the line. "Watching you walk away tonight didn't feel great either. But like I said, I'm not that man anymore. I'm not gonna stand by and let you walk away. Not again. But I get it. I know your family. And they're . . ." I'm careful about my next words. "They're a lot. And they're fucking everywhere."

Long, black lashes flutter before her green eyes open. "They are. But I still shouldn't have just walked away. It all happened so fast, and everyone was there, rushing us. We didn't get to talk or think. We didn't . . ." She blows out a long breath, obviously flustered. "I didn't think. I just let myself be ushered out of there. I should have stopped."

Her hands move to the waist of my sweats and slide underneath my shirt and hoodie, flattening against my abs. "I'm sorry."

"Me too. I should have said something before you left the hotel instead of waiting to come here and guilting you like a little bitch. *Fuck*, Ashlyn. You've got no clue what you do to me. What you've always fucking done to me."

“I might have an idea how it feels,” she whispers, then tugs me down onto the chaise part of the couch and tucks herself into my side. “I felt it back then too.”

“Then why did you marry another man?” I know enough about this woman to be pretty damn sure it wasn’t money. “You gotta give me something.”

Ashlyn sighs. “John was in the right place at the right time. He saved me from something by marrying me.”

We sit in silence after that bombshell for a long time, until eventually she picks up the TV remote. “Have you ever seen this show? The new season just came out, and I was about to start it when you knocked.”

Guess that’s all I’m getting tonight. I debate for a minute whether to push but decide not to tonight. Instead, I stretch my arm around her and inhale her citrusy scent. “Didn’t feel like going to bed?”

“Nope. I’m not the best sleeper. Never have been. Kinda goes hand in hand with the small spaces thing. I’ve never been the biggest fan of them or of the dark.” She pulls a soft cream blanket down around us, then wraps her arm back around my waist and lays her head on my chest. She fits against me like a missing piece.

“You wanna talk about it?” I tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear and watch her eyes shutter before she locks down like I expected her to.

“Not tonight. I feel like we’ve already danced with too many demons already.”

“We’re going to have to talk at some point,” I push.

“I know,” is all she gives me before she hits play on the remote.

I’ve got a bad feeling that this woman’s demons rival my own, and I fucking hate that I haven’t already slayed them for her.



“*S*hh . . . you don’t want to wake them up.”
A girl’s voice penetrates my sleep.
A teenage girl.
One I know.
She’s not quiet.

“Why is Aunt Maddie’s brother asleep on your couch?”

Shit. I think that one is Brynlee. Nothing like the boss’s kid finding you asleep on the couch.

“Umm . . . hello? How about the fact that your mom’s face is plastered to Brandon Dixon’s chest?”

“Evie—”

“Come on, Grace. Don’t Evie me. His hand is on her butt, and her face is on his chest. Pretty sure your aunt’s brother is banging your mom, Lindy.”

That might have been Declan’s twins.

“Shut up, Everly.”

Oh yeah. That was Lindy.

“Hey. She could do worse. Dixon’s the best center in the league. And he’s hot.”

Declan’s got his hands full with that one. But at least she’s got good taste.

“Eww. He’s your dad’s age.”

That one was Kenzie.

I force my eyes open and regret it immediately when I see five teenage girls surrounding us. Yup. Us. Ashlyn is lying on top of me. Her face is indeed plastered to my chest. At least I have my t-shirt still on, even if I threw off my sweatshirt during the night. And oh yeah, that’s my hand on her ass. Fuck . . . she’s got a great ass.

I force myself to slide it up to her back before doing some serious ninja moves to get off the couch without waking the beautiful blonde still sleeping.

Five sets of eyes stare at me as I stand and stretch, but nobody says a word.

“You guys hungry?” I whisper and take a few steps toward the kitchen.

Most of the girls move ahead of us, but Lindy hangs back. She looks over to her mom then back at me, assessing. *“What are you doing here, Brandon?”*

“Good morning to you too, shortcake.”

She cocks her head to the side, and yeah . . . this kid isn’t stupid.

But how the hell am I supposed to answer her?

“We fell asleep watching TV. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh . . .” Another quick glance back at her mom, who’s sleeping peacefully under the blanket with her head on my discarded sweatshirt, only this time when she looks at me, she’s smiling. *“How are you at pancakes?”*

Pancakes, I can handle.



The girls and I have just about finished making breakfast by the time Ashlyn walks into the kitchen. She's slipped my sweatshirt on, and it hangs down, hitting her mid-thigh, covering her shorts and showcasing her bare legs. *Fuck*, I like seeing her in my clothes.

Her green eyes sparkle when they see me flipping the last pancake before she looks around at our audience. "Good morning, girls."

The girls look up from their various places around the kitchen. The twins are cutting berries. Brynlee's setting the table. Kenzie's working on the bacon, and Lindy's got the OJ in her hands. "Hey, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie." She kisses the top of Madeline's head and runs her hand over Brynlee's curls. "Hello, girls. This all looks delicious."

"Brandon made the pancakes, Mom."

Ashlyn bites down on her lower lip as she looks at me. "Any other hidden talents, Dixon?"

It's my turn to hold back a smile. Instead, I move next to her, and whisper, "I'm pretty sure you've seen a few, but I've got plenty more whenever you're ready."

Ashlyn's face flames red.

Very aware of how impressionable teenage girls are, I take a step back. "I better get going. But we'll talk soon."

It's not a question. I refuse to accept any other answer.

She nods, and Lindy jumps my way. "I'll walk you out."

She links her arm through mine and walks me back over to the couch where my sneakers are. When she stops, she crosses her arms over her chest. My guess is she's trying to look tough. "So, Brandon . . . What are your intentions toward my mom?"

What the hell? Really?

"Listen, shortcake. Your mom and I have a history. I've cared about her for a long time. That's all you're getting out of me, so how about you go ask her. Just don't do it when everyone's around. That's not cool."

Her pretty eyes roll, and she giggles. "Fine. You're no fun."

I grab my keys and wallet and follow her to the front door.

She presses up on her toes and hugs me tight. "She deserves a good guy,

and I'm pretty sure you're one of the best."

"You giving me your blessing, kid?"

She throws the door open with a flourish. "Maybe I am."

"Well, maybe I appreciate that." I step outside and pick up a pink Sweet Temptations bakery box and hand it to Lindy. "You expecting a delivery?"

She opens the card taped to the top of the, then yells back to her mom. "Mom. Your admirer has upgraded to cookies, and there's a note this time."

What the fuck?

Ashlyn quickly moves next to her daughter and rips the card out of her hand.

When she opens it, I read it over her shoulder.

Since you didn't like my roses, I thought I'd try your favorite sweet.

-The Collector

With shaking hands Ashlyn rips the cookie out of Lindy's hand before she gets it in her mouth, then grabs the box too and tosses it all into the trash can. When she looks up, there's tears in her eyes. "Girls, I need everyone to go get dressed, okay?"

The teenagers all jump up, sensing now's not the time to argue.

Everyone except Madeline. "Mom. It's time to tell somebody."

"I know, honey. I'm going to call the police."

My head whips to Ashlyn. "What the hell's going on?"

"Mom's—"

"Upstairs, now, Madeline," Ashlyn cuts her off, then gives her daughter a turn toward the stairs.

I wait until she's out of ear shot. "Want to tell me what's going on?"

"I think I have a stalker."

BRANDON



I stand in the kitchen, my arms crossed over my chest, watching as Ashlyn escorts two Kroydon Hills PD detectives out of her house later that morning. Lindy would probably tease me that all I do is watch. Who knows, maybe she's right.

Half the Kingston family is gathered in their home, including my sister, who's been eyeing me like a lion about to pounce on its prey. Lucky for her and the rest of them, they kept quiet—or at least as quiet as a Kingston can be, for the most part—while the detectives were interviewing Ashlyn and Madeline.

Not that they weren't watching with interested eyes how Ashlyn's hand kept finding mine or the way I refused to leave her side. But no one said a word. Not about that or about her stalker.

Not when Ashlyn asked her daughter to go outside while she finished up with the detectives.

Not when she admitted the roses had been coming, off and on, for close to six months.

No. They stayed quiet.

The minute the doors close behind the two men, however, all bets are off.

Scarlet, Lenny, and of course, Jules, close ranks around Ashlyn as Hudson and the others start talking security system upgrades and getting Amelia's husband, Sam, on top of it.

Me . . . I stand there, watching.

Waiting.

Until Ashlyn looks over at me and offers me one of her shy smiles.

Sorry, she mouths silently, and I shake my head.

She doesn't have a goddamned thing to be sorry for.

"Silent communication, huh?" Maddie asks with a knowing look.

Not happy when I ignore her, she elbows my ribs. "How long?"

When I turn my head to silence her, she sucks in a breath. "Wow."

"Madison," I warn her and let myself out through the French doors in the kitchen, knowing my sister will follow. I stop at the edge of the covered porch and watch Lindy, Brynlee, and Mackenzie chasing Teagan and Aurora down by the lake. My nieces look like little Maddie mini-me's, giggling and squealing.

Happy.

Not a care in the world.

Just like it should be.

Not at all like Maddie and I were at that point in our lives.

"I like her, Brandon." I turn and watch my sister as she moves next to me and leans on the wrought-iron railing. She glances out over her girls, and a serene smile stretches across her face. "I think she could be good for you."

"Madison," I grunt. "Don't start."

"Don't even think about Madison-ing me, big brother. I live next door. Do you think I didn't see your car in her driveway last night? Or this morning? I was going to wait a day or two before I poked you about it, but now . . . Consider yourself free game. When did you and Ashlyn become a thing? Because clearly you are."

When I raise my brows, she chuckles. "You were her strength in there. The way she gravitated to you. That's not casual. That speaks of a comfort that's not new. And you haven't ever done anything but casual. So spill."

"It's a long story, Mads. Too long for today."

"Fine," she huffs. "How are you doing with this whole stalker thing? This has got to bring up all sorts of hell for you, Brandon."

"I'm fine," I ground out through gritted teeth.

"You keep everything locked down so tight. You know you don't have to, right? It's not a bad thing to let other people in." Maddie leans her head on my shoulder and sighs. "I'm here. I always will be."

"This isn't about me, Mads."

"Okay. Say I go along with that. I'm going to need you to explain to me why I—your favorite and only sister—had to find out there was a you and Ashlyn by spying through my windows. What the hell?"

"I thought you were going to give it a rest?" Not that I believed her when

she said it.

“Have you ever known me to give it a rest? I’m sorry. I’m a little stunned. You two make perfect sense. I’m not sure how I didn’t see it before.”

I’m not sure there’s anything about Ashlyn and me that makes perfect sense, but I don’t bother correcting my sister. Maddie does know me better than anyone. Hell, she and I spent two years in therapy together and separately after she moved out, just working through the trauma of our childhood and the fucked up scars it left on our souls.

I quietly watch the girls play, thinking that in a different lifetime maybe Ashlyn and I would have made sense. Maybe Madeline could have been mine.

Fuck that.

We can still make sense.

I pull out my phone and shoot off a text to Coach and Scarlet.

DIXON

Listen, I know it’s Sunday and we actually have a day off, but I really need to meet with both of you.

COACH

Today? I thought we were meeting tomorrow.

SCARLET

I’m in the same damn house as you. Why are you texting me?

DIXON

I need thirty minutes today.

COACH

Want to swing by my house or does this need to be in the office?

SCARLET

I’m not going into the city today. Your house works for me, Coach.

DIXON

When?

COACH

Three?

SCARLET

Okay.

DIXON

Thank you.

The sound of raised voices coming through may be what has me heading back inside, but it's the fat tears clinging to Ashlyn's dark lashes that has me moving through everyone standing in the living room until I'm next to her. More like in front of her. "What the hell's going on?"

"Ashlyn was—" Juliette stops speaking when I turn my back on her and everyone else in the room and bend my knees so I'm face-to-face with Ashlyn. "You okay?" I ask as I wipe her tears with my thumbs.

She wraps her arms around my waist and leans her forehead against my chest. "I'm just tired and emotional, and I don't want to make any decisions today."

"What *decisions*?"

Juliette clears her throat. "What I was about to say, before you cut me off, is that we were just telling Ashlyn it might be better for her and Lindy to come stay with Becks and me until this gets straightened out."

"We've got great security and the most privacy," Becket adds. "Just think about it, Ashlyn. It's the safest place for you both."

"I'm not leaving my home. I'm not moving my daughter out of her home." Ashlyn moves around me and sighs as I slide my hand to her hip. "I appreciate that you want to keep us safe, but we're safe here." Then she looks at Sam Beneventi, who hasn't said a word up till now. "Can you get the security system in place today, Sam?"

"Yeah. My guys should be here soon. We'll have this place locked down tight." He wraps an arm around his wife and kisses the top of her head. "We're going to head home now, so I can make sure we've got you covered. I know the cops are going to have guys driving by, but one of my guys will be sitting on your street until we find out who the fuck this asshole is."

"Sam . . ." Ashlyn trails off, and Sam moves in front of her and kisses her head the same way he just did to his wife. Ashlyn's big eyes blink up at him.

"I'll let the police handle it. But we're not taking any chances with you,

you got me?” Amelia takes Sam’s hand in hers and hugs Ashlyn close to her.

“Let him do this, please?” she asks.

Most of the time, it’s easy to forget that Sam Beneventi is the head of the Philadelphia Mafia. When he’s with his wife and kids, he’s Sam, the family man or sitting at the poker table with a group of us shooting the shit like anybody else. But times like now, when he’s protecting his family . . . fuck. I wouldn’t want to cross this dude in a dark alley.

I take a silent step and motion for Hudson to do the same, then meet him in the kitchen.

My goofy fucking brother-in-law smiles like a teenager who just finger-blasted his first girl. Giddy almost. Bouncing on his toes. “Dude. You *are* banging Ashlyn.”

My hands snaps out and wraps around his throat in a split second. I don’t care if he is the former MMA champion. I have him up against the wall and standing on the balls of his feet so he can still breathe. “Say it again. I fucking dare you,” I growl.

“The fuck?” he wheezes.

“I was real nice when you wanted to be with my sister. I’d call myself supportive. And that’s the first fucking thing you say to me, shithead?”

“Sorry,” he wheezes again, and I loosen my hold. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Fucking right, you weren’t.” I let go and cross my arms over my chest. The tight knot in my stomach feels harsher than fucking ever. “Listen, I’ve got somewhere I have to go this afternoon, but I don’t want to leave Ashlyn and Lindy alone. Think you can come up with a reason to stick around for a little while?”

Hudson straightens his shirt and eyes me warily. “Yeah, man. I gotcha covered.” His goofy fucking grin slides back in place. “Does your sister know you’re going to be my stepdaddy?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Hud? Were you hit in the head one too many times in the cage?”

The big oaf shrugs. “Maddie’s got no complaints.”

“Fuck off,” I throw back. “I don’t want to know.”

“Nah, you don’t.” His eyebrows shake, and I shove him away, one step closer to my new end goal.

ASHLYN



Sam wasn't kidding. His guys had my existing security system ripped out and a new one in place not long after he left. Cameras cover every inch of my property and each corner inside our house. He also had a team upgrade the security at Ever After, since that's where I spend most of my days. I assumed once that was done, my family would feel better about leaving. It's rare that I'm the one everyone fusses over.

I should have known better.

As soon as I sent the text earlier, letting everyone know I might have a stalker and had called the Kroydon Hills PD, they showed up in full force. This family . . . *my family*. They still surprise me.

The majority of them, including Brandon, had left a while ago. But Hudson, Becks, and Jules are still here, and they don't seem like they're leaving any time soon. Takeout was ordered and eaten. Maddie eventually headed home to put the girls down for a nap. And still there's no sign the others are even thinking about leaving.

Instead, they're watching a hockey game on the television that's pitting family against each other. The youngest Kingston brother, Jace, plays for the Philadelphia Revolution. And this afternoon, they're playing in Las Vegas against one of their division rivals. Jules and Becket's adopted son, Easton, is the goalie for that team.

Judging by the yelling and groaning, I'm pretty sure Jace just scored.

I drop my second load of clean laundry on top of my bed when Juliette corners me in my room. "So . . . you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." I dump the basket and sit down to start sorting. "I'm pretty sure I've had enough time being the center of attention today, Jules. I'm at

my limit.”

She drops down next to me, blocking the laundry and yanks the towel out of my hands. “Okay. I get it. But you know we’re all just worried about you.”

“I know,” I whisper, suddenly exhausted. “And I love you for it.”

“So . . . when I left you here last night, you were alone . . .”

I smile sheepishly and reach around her for another towel.

“Oh.” She blocks my move and whacks me with the towel. “That’s how we’re going to play this?”

With a tired sigh, I lie back on the bed and close my eyes. “Nothing happened last night.” When Jules hums a sound of disbelief, I crack an eye open. “Okay, nothing happened when Brandon came *here* last night. The elevator may have been a different story.”

Juliette throws herself back on the bed next to me and turns to her side, stuffing her hands under her face the way Nina and I did as kids. “Are you going to make me beg? Because you know I’m not above begging, Ashlyn.”

I roll to my side and face her. “Did I ever tell you I met Brandon a few weeks before the Olympics?”

“What?” she gasps, then narrows her eyes. “I think I’m mad at you. How have you never said a word?”

“Well, we did. And don’t feel bad. I never told anyone.”

Because I never had anyone to tell.

“Did you bang him? Wait . . . no. John was your only. Okay. *Shit*. I’m too excited. I need to calm down for this. Details, Ashlyn. I need details.”

“Juliette,” I laugh. I can’t help myself. In my entire life, I’ve only ever had two women I was completely comfortable with. One of them is dead. And Jules is the other. I’m thankful every day that she came into my life. But she’s still not getting details.

Those are mine.

Well . . . mine and Brandon’s.

“It was one night, a very long time ago, followed by texting and FaceTiming. Then life got in the way, and I married John. I never thought I’d see Brandon again. And even after he joined the Kings, I still didn’t really *see* him. Not until Hudson and Maddie got together. And I swear to God, the minute I heard him speak . . . the second I felt him in the same space . . . I don’t know. I was just gone.” I flop onto my back and look up at the ceiling fan rotating above me. “Do you remember the first time you met a man and thought he could be important to you? One who was supposed to matter in

your life?”

Jules rolls over too and links our pinkies together. “I do. I married him. He’s downstairs, trying to teach our son not to curse while Hudson and he scream at the hockey game.”

I don’t bother telling her I heard Blaise say *shit* earlier today.

Toddlers pick up everything.

“Really?” I ask. “You never felt that way before Becket?”

“Really. I don’t know if you get that feeling too many times in your life. So I’m going to go out on a limb here and give you a little advice.”

I take our linked hands and shove her away. “You’re crazy. You give me and everyone else who’ll listen advice every chance you can.”

“Okay, fine. I do. And I’m going to stand by this one. If that man feels important, like he matters to you, grab him with both hands and don’t let go.” She leans her head against my shoulder and sighs. “Unless the sex is bad. Then kick that fine ass to the curb.”

My body vibrates with silent laughter. Okay, maybe I’ll share one detail.

“The sex was incredible.” I lean my head against hers.

“That’s my girl.”



Eventually, Becks takes Juliette, Blaise, and Kenzie home. Lindy goes to her room to study, and I fill my teapot with water and set it on the stove as I glare at Hudson, who’s cleaning up the mess Becks and he made during the game. “You know you only live next door, Hud. You can go home. I’m sure Maddie misses you.”

He chokes.

“Hud . . . It’s okay. We’re safe. Lindy’s upstairs. The security system is armed. We’re good. I can call you if I need anything, and you’d be here in minutes, wouldn’t you?”

Hudson considers it for a moment before he shakes his head.

“You know I’m right. Just go home.”

He puffs out his cheeks, like he’s going to answer me but doesn’t. Instead, Kingston blue eyes stare at me for a long moment before Hudson finally breaks the tension. “Just let me hang out a little longer, okay?” He

wraps one of his massive arms around me and drags me in for a bear hug. “This is as much for me as it is you and Lindy.”

Tears sting the backs of my eyes.

All these years, and I’m still not completely comfortable with the kind of all-accepting love the Kingstons show to their circle. “I’m lucky to have you, Hud.”

“Try to remember that the next time I piss you off,” he chuckles.

“Fine,” I shove him back and hand him the full trash bag. “You might as well make yourself useful.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The goofball salutes me, my teapot whistles, and the doorbell rings all at once.

Shit.

I accidentally graze the palm of my hand on the hot kettle, and pain shoots through my skin.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Cold water. I need cold water. I turn the faucet on and shove my hand under it for relief, but apparently whoever’s at the door is impatient because they ring the damn bell again.

“Mom,” Lindy comes skipping down the staircase leading into the kitchen but stops when she sees my hand under the water. “Did you burn yourself again?”

“I’m okay,” I lie. “Go back upstairs. You’ve got a test tomorrow.”

“Fine,” she agrees in that way only a teenage girl can, and I wrap ice in a towel and gently hold it in my hand before walking to the door and peeking through the peephole.

Okay, this guest is welcome.

Brandon stands on the other side, the same gray sweats from last night hanging low on his hips. His black Philadelphia Kings tee stretches across his incredible chest and fits nice and tight on his bulging biceps. A brown leather weekender bag is thrown over one shoulder, and a thick, chunky watch is wrapped around his wrist. The whole package is sinfully delicious, but it’s the smile on his face with that little hint of a single dimple that makes butterflies take flight in my stomach. “What are you doing here?”

He drops the bag at our feet and takes my face in his hands. “I quit.”

Then he kisses me.

There’s nothing soft or tentative about the way he claims my mouth. His lips crush against mine. Commanding mine. Good lord, he’s good at that.

It's like I have no control over the way I respond to him.

And oh my, do I respond.

Chills skate down my skin as my pulse spikes and my nipples peak.

Brandon sweeps his tongue along my lower lip as he drops his hands to my ass and lifts me. My legs circle his waist, and there he is. His dick is hard and heavy, straining against his sweats. Right against my core.

With one foot, he kicks the door closed behind us and takes a few steps into my living room, then sits on the couch with me in his lap. One hand slides up my back, and his fingers dig into my hair, then someone moans. I think it's me.

"Wait." My brain tries to play catch-up to his words, but I'm not sure I'm firing on all cylinders at this exact moment. Not when I'm in his arms. Not when all I can think about is how much I want this man inside my body.

Wait . . . *wait*. "What do you mean you quit?"

Brandon presses a kiss to my temple and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

Cue more chills.

"I met with Coach and Scarlet after I left earlier. I told them I'm retiring at the end of this season. They knew it was coming, but now it's official. Do you know what that means?"

I curl a hand around his neck and lower the one holding the ice-filled towel down to my lap.

"What happened?" He asks, concern lacing his tone as he picks up my hand and inspects my palm. Soft lips press gently against the small burn, and I almost forget what I was saying. Almost.

I lift his chin up and stare into those dark, fathomless eyes. I want an explanation. "Focus, Brandon. What are you telling me?"

"I'm saying you're not my employer after the end of this season." He leans his forehead against mine. "I'm saying you being the owner of the team no longer matters. I'm saying hopefully, I've got three more months, then you're no longer my boss." Then he groans. And oh my, that groan does incredible things to me. "At least not on the field."

"I was never your boss," I murmur, wondering if he's going to regret this.

"And yet, you've always been the one in charge." His lips brush over mine, and I melt.

A distinctly male throat clears behind me, and I bury my face in Brandon's shoulder, grateful it isn't Lindy. "If you're good, I'm gonna head

home.” I can hear the smile in Hudson’s words without ever turning around.

“I’m good,” I squeak, embarrassed to be caught making out like a teenager.

Brandon nods, and Hudson lets himself out the front door.

“He was waiting for you, wasn’t he?” I ask, a lightbulb going off in my brain.

“Yeah. I’m spending the night tonight. I needed to make sure you and shortcake were safe until I got back.”

“Brandon . . . Lindy is . . . I’m not sure how to explain this. She’s young and impressionable. I appreciate you wanting to be here, but—”

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” His thumb grazes my cheekbone as his eyes strip me bare. “*For now*. I get that you’re a package deal, baby. We take this at your pace. But you’re not staying here alone. Not tonight. Not with everything happening.”

“That didn’t sound like a question . . .”

“It wasn’t. That gonna be a problem?” I almost laugh at the certainty in his voice, but this man’s confidence is so very sexy.

“No.” I brush my lips over his. “Not a problem.”

He captures my mouth with his, and I slide closer.

“Oh, gross, Mom.” Of course, *now* she walks in. “I mean, bedrooms have doors for a reason.”

Please . . . someone dig me that hole I can hide in.

“Hi, Brandon.” She chuckles as she walks by us and heads for the basement. “I’m done studying and need to get in a workout before Andrew picks me up for practice.”

“Okay, honey,” I call out, mortified.

“Andrew?” Brandon asks.

“Her skating partner.”

His eye twitches, and I swear I can read the expression on his handsome face with ease. “Do we like this guy?”

“Yeah. He’s a good kid. He’s been her partner for years. Between him and their coach, Lindy’s experience is light-years away from mine. You’ll like him.”

“We’ll see about that.” Brandon tightens his hold on me, then his lips tip up on one side, and that damn dimple pops deep in his cheek. “Guess you better not sneak down to the couch in the middle of the night. No doors down here and all.”

“Smartass.”



There's something so normal about having Brandon in our space. Something so right about the way he slipped into our lives.

Like there was a space open, waiting for him to fill.

We fell asleep, watching TV again, only this time I woke up and forced myself to go to bed. Okay . . . there might have been a little making out that happened before that, but it was strictly over the clothes. And once Lindy got home from skating, we stopped.

The next morning, the divine scent of bacon and eggs drags me from my bed into the hall, where I literally bump into my daughter. “He cooks . . .” I muse.

She and I aren't the best cooks. Let's just say there's a whole lot of take-out meals in our weekly repertoire.

“He cooked yesterday too,” she whispers as we creep down the back staircase that leads to the kitchen, where we're greeted with Brandon in a pair of basketball shorts and another tight t-shirt. This one has the Crucible MMA gym logo on it. The dark green looks incredible against his skin.

We sneak down one more step and see the plates on the counter. “Can we keep him?” Lindy asks before she rushes into the room. “Dude . . . Mom never makes breakfast.”

“Dude?” Brandon mocks her playfully as he hands her a plate.

“Whatever, big guy. This looks so good. Thanks.” She kisses his cheek. Seeing the sweet, shocked look on his face as he watches her walk to the table might be the moment I remember as the exact moment I fell hard for him.

Harder than before.

I'm pretty sure there's a word for what I'm feeling, but I push that thought away.

I need coffee before I start thinking that deep.

And maybe a little more making out too.

UNKNOWN



*A*shlyn. Ashlyn. Ashlyn.

I give you roses, and you throw them away.

I bring you cookies, and you repay me by letting a man spend the night.

Do you think I don't see you?

That I don't know you're trying to make me jealous?

It's working. I'm jealous.

I'm also patient.

But even my patience has its limits.

-The Collector

BRANDON



“*H*ow long have you been sleeping on the couch?” Declan asks as we grab lunch on Friday.

I crack my neck and admit, “It’s been a few days.”

“Doesn’t she have a guest room? Where the hell do the girls all sleep when she has them over?” He smiles at our waitress as she refills our water and watches me for my answer.

“Her guest room is her home office.” I groan. It’s been a long week. Falling into a routine with Ashlyn and Lindy has been easy. It’s everything else that’s been . . . *hard*. “We’re trying to be good with Lindy in the house, so we’ve basically reverted to acting like teenagers who make out whenever we think we won’t get caught. It’s been a lot of over-the-clothes action.”

Dec fucking snorts water through his nose, he laughs so hard. “Dry humping?”

“Asshole,” I grumble.

“Is that what you were doing at sixteen?” he asks.

“At sixteen, I had no fucking clue what a healthy relationship looked like. All I cared about was my sister, football, and getting my dick wet.” The order of importance varied from week to week.

Declan fucking laughs again, so I go in for the kill. “Dude, your girls are almost sixteen. You really want to think about what we were doing at their age?” I thoroughly enjoy his pained, disgusted face, as it turns green and kinda queasy. “I wasn’t real picky about where or who. And I’ve already wanted to kill some little shitstain who was mean to Lindy. Not sure how you’re handling all that with two of them who look like little versions of your wife. You’re so fucking screwed, man.”

“*Fuuccck . . .*” He sucks in a pained breath. “You had to go there, didn’t you, asshole?”

Okay, so my responding smile is cruel. I know it is. But man, when you’re as close as Declan and I are, you know exactly what buttons to push. “I’ve been sleeping on my woman’s couch for almost a week. My dick is basically chafed from the dry humping. Though, I’m thinkin’ the blue-ball frustration will definitely fuel some good fucking anger for the game this weekend.” I shrug and finish my burger.

“Girls are supposed to make you nicer, Dix.”

“Must be why you’re such a softy, Dec.”

He shoves a fry in his mouth. “The fuck I am. I’m gonna need my boys to keep me out of jail when the girls start dating. Why the hell couldn’t my sons be born first?”

I think about how I scared the shit out of every boy and man who even looked at Madison until she met Hudson. Then I shut that shit down real fucking fast.

Maddie’s safe. We made it out of the viper’s den of those foster homes, and she came out un-fucking-harmed.

“I feel bad for those girls when your oldest boy gets just a little older. He’s gonna be such a little asshole.” I don’t bother trying to hide my laughter.

Declan and Belles have five kids.

Five.

Three boys and two girls.

I never thought I wanted any.

I’m still not sure.

I was raising Maddie long before our mother died.

When our mom was good, she was real good.

But when she was bad . . . Drugs fuck everything up.

Childhoods. *Entire lives.* Whole worlds. All fucked.

And our mom loved *them* more than she ever loved *us*. I was in first grade when my sister was born, and I made more bottles and changed more diapers than our mom ever did. I got up with her in the middle of the night. It was me she came to when she was scared. It was my job to keep her safe. From Mom. From the men Mom would bring into the apartment who she tried to pass off as *uncles*. From every disgusting foster family they placed us with. I know there’s good ones out there, but we never got them.

The idea of having my own kid . . . I'm a strong motherfucker.
But even the strongest of us can be broken.



*A*fter lunch, I walk down Main Street to Ever After Event Planning. The bells chime overhead as I push through the glass door, and my woman walks out of her office looking like a wet fucking dream. A tight black skirt comes down to just below her knees, highlighting every sexy curve of her long, toned legs. A white blouse stretches tight across her chest with the top few buttons undone, just enough to give a hint of cleavage. Black glasses sit on her pretty face, and her long hair is piled on top of her head. And her pouty lips are painted crimson red, begging to be kissed. To be fucked.

Damn . . .

“Hey baby.” I plant my feet on the carpet so I don’t cross the room and pin her against the wall like I want to. Lindy’s not here, and there’s gotta be a door with a lock somewhere.

Her face pinches, and she looks away, clearly not thrilled I’m here. “I told Sam not to call you.”

“What?” My plan forgotten, I quickly cross the room, stopping in front of her. Cupping the back of her head in my hands, I force her eyes to mine. “What are you talking about? Sam didn’t call me. Declan and I just got done with lunch at The Busy Bee, so I thought I’d stop by.” An uneasy feeling hits me in the center of my chest. “Why would Sam call me, Ashlyn? What happened?”

She chews on her bottom lip.

“Ashlyn . . .”

“I got an email,” she answers quietly.

“You what?”

“I got an email. I already called the detectives and forwarded it to them. Then I called Sam. He stopped by and grabbed my laptop a few minutes ago. I was just locking up back there before you walked in. I’m heading home.”

“What did it say?” My muscles string tight, bracing for the hit they’re about to take.

But I’m still not ready.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “Let me get my purse so I can get out of here.”

“Ashlyn.” There’s no hiding the strain in my voice. “What did it say?”

Her shoulders rise and fall with a deep exhale. “He knows you’ve been staying at my house, and he’s not happy.” A sad sound slips out. “I’m guessing it’s a *he*. But who knows?”

“What else did it say?” I growl, my body vibrating with a kind of anger I haven’t felt in years.

“He told me I had to stop whoring myself out and stay pure for him.”

I drop my hands from her face and fist them at my sides.

My anger burns and flares.

I want to fucking kill someone.

“Who the fuck is this guy?”

And how the fuck am I supposed to protect her from someone we can’t find?



Ashlyn

JULES

Now this asshole is emailing you?

LENNY

Who’s emailing who? And are they sending dick pics because that’s not cool.

SCARLET

You’ve been married for how many years? Why the hell is anyone sending you dick pics?

LENNY

Whatever. I’m not saying I get sent dick pics. I’m just saying . . . dicks are not the prettiest things in the world. Why do men like to send dick pics?

JULES

That’s a shame. Your brother’s dick is perfect. Fucking beautiful.

LENNY

OMG. STOP.

SCARLET

Juliette!

AMELIA

I could have gone without ever knowing that.

SCARLET

So who's getting nasty emails?

AMELIA

Ashlyn is getting the emails. And I told Jules to be discreet with that information.

JULES

I kept the text message to just a few of us. That's as discreet as I get.

ASHLYN

I liked you better when you were quiet.

JULES

I was never quiet. I just hid my crazy back then. I embrace it now.

LENNY

Truth. She's always been a loud mouth.

JULES

And you still love me.

SCARLET

What did the email say?

AMELIA

Sam is handling it.

ASHLYN

I can handle my own life.

SCARLET

Let Sam handle this. He's better with criminals than you are, babe.

AMELIA

It's one of his talents.

LENNY

Wanna tell us about his other talents?

AMELIA

Does the fact that I'm ready to pop with his fourth child not speak for itself?

LENNY

You're no fun.

AMELIA

Nope. But I trust my husband with my life and all of yours. Listen to what he says, Ashlyn.

ASHLYN

Fine. But I don't like this.

JULES

Well, we love you and aren't going to let anything happen to you or Lindy.

LENNY

Yeah. So suck it the fuck up, buttercup.

SCARLET

Way to keep it classy, Len.

LENNY

I do what I can.

*J*no sooner exit out of the one text thread before another pops up from Lindy.

LINDY

Mom. Can I sleep at Kenzie's tonight? Andrew said he could drop me off after practice.

ASHLYN

Isn't Easton coming home tonight?

LINDY

Yeah. He's coming over once they land.

ASHLYN

Okay. Tell him I said hi and text me tomorrow when you want me to pick you up.

LINDY

Love you, Mom.

ASHLYN

Love you too.

“Hey . . .” I look up from my phone when Brandon walks into my bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist and a bead of water dripping slowly down his chest and kissing each ab. Lucky water. His muscles stretch and ripple as he reaches down and grabs his bag from the floor, and I chew my bottom lip to keep myself from moaning.

He clears his throat, and I lift my eyes to see a wicked smile.

Okay, he might as well have said *busted*.

“My eyes are up here, baby,” he murmurs as his eyes turn molten and my face flames. “I left my bag in here.”

Without overthinking it, I cross the room and take the bag from his hand and drop it back to the floor. “Lindy just texted me.” I trail my finger down his mouthwatering chest, following the path the water dripped moments ago, then press my lips to his pec.

Brandon's hands circle my waist, and he drags me against him, making sure I can't miss the enormous bulge not at all hidden under the fluffy white towel.

A magnetic current beats between us, the pull unavoidable.

I close my eyes, reveling in the feel of one big hand sliding deliciously up my back before it sinks into my hair. He cradles the back of my head, and I purr like a happy kitten and press my mouth to his.

His gravelly groan is *everything*.

It holds a promise.

One I'm about to cash in on.

“She asked if she could spend the night at Kenzie's.” I trace his lower lip with my tongue before nipping at the corner of his mouth. “Andrew will drop

her off after practice.” I link my arms around his neck and squeeze. “She won’t be back until tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks as his hands slip to my ass and squeeze.

“Uh-huh.” I nod as I drag the tips of my fingers over every defined muscle on his chest, stopping at the knotted towel. “Do you know what that means?”

Holy hell, his eyes go fucking feral. “Why don’t you tell me, baby?”

I drop to my knees, then drop his towel. “It means we’ve got the house to ourselves.”

BRANDON



*M*y towel falls to the floor, and Ashlyn's beautiful green eyes look up at me through long dark lashes. "Let me taste you, Brandon."

Fuck, what those words do to me.

I gather her long hair in my hands so I can watch her as she wraps a fist around my dick, and an unfamiliar pressure builds in my chest. A dull roar starts in my ears with the first touch of her tongue as it swirls around the head of my cock. Tentatively testing. Tasting.

I run the backs of my knuckles over her jaw, and her lips part on a pretty moan before she wraps those pouty lips around me. Her catlike green eyes water, and I fucking groan.

"You look so pretty on your knees, baby."

Ashlyn opens her throat and takes me down as she swallows, gagging.

Her tight skirt inches up her thighs, and she snakes one hand between them before I pull it back with a wicked grin. "No way."

Her eyes fly to mine as I pull her to her feet and slide my hand up her thigh.

She's fucking soaked.

My index finger runs over the lace covering her pussy, and I groan as I dip inside her and curl my finger until she's writhing beneath me. "I'm the only one allowed to make you come, baby." Once I've got her where I want her, I drag that finger over her pouty lips and groan as she licks the tip. "Your orgasms belong to me."

She sucks my finger the same way she just sucked my dick, and I think if I died right now, I'd be a happy fucking man. She's moaning when I cover her mouth with mine, and fuck me, the taste of us is fucking intoxicating.

She's warm and soft and clinging to me as I carry her to the bed.

The late afternoon light filters in through sheer curtains, bathing her in a golden light as I drag her skirt down her thighs and she rips her blouse off. She's magnificent, splayed out on the bed, her toned creamy skin a stark contrast to a black lace bra and matching thong and silk thigh-highs.

She's every fucking fantasy I've ever had come to life, and I'm going to savor her. Worship her. The word *mine* rings in my head like a fucking anthem.

"Jesus Christ . . ." I fist my cock and press my face to her cunt, not bothering to move the scrap of lace out of the way. Instead, I pull the strings tighter. "You're fucking soaked for me."

"God, yes," she moans and lifts her hips.

With every long stroke of my tongue, the lace pulls tighter against her sex, and Ashlyn squirms until she finally plants her feet on the bed and grinds her pussy against my face.

"That's it." I nip her clit, and she screams—*fucking screams*—and sinks her fingers into my hair, holding me where she wants me as her body quivers. "I'm so close, Brandon."

"Take it, Ashlyn," I growl against her hot core. "Take what you need and give me what I fucking want like a good girl."

She comes on a sharp, hard, keening cry, shaking. I pull her closer, burying my tongue in her pussy, licking and sucking, *fucking feasting*, until I've wrung every last tremor from her body.

As soon as she's stopped, I flip her over and shred her panties.

Ashlyn curls her toes and giggles before coming up to her hands and knees. Her long hair kisses the middle of her back until she turns her head toward me, looking over her shoulder with a coy smile. "Are you going to fuck me now, Brandon?"

"Like anything could stop me," I answer and take a step back.

"Where are you going?" she asks in a suddenly confused voice.

I run a hand over her hot skin. "To get a condom, baby."

"I'm on the pill," she breathes out. "Please, Brandon. I just want to feel you. *Us*."

It's the *please* that does me in.

Like I'd ever be able to deny this woman anything.

My hands skim over her hips and up her ribs. Then my lips follow the same course until I slide the sexy lace bra off and tease her hard nipples.

I settle myself behind her and drag the head of my cock through her drenched sex. “You ready for me, baby?”

“God, yes. I’m ready,” she whimpers and pushes back, searching. “Don’t be gentle. Don’t hold back. I want it all.”



Ashlyn

Slowly, so slowly I could cry, Brandon finally pushes inside me, and we both moan at the unbelievable ecstasy of my body stretching around his cock. I drop my forehead to the mattress and try to steady my breathing, but it’s pointless.

I’m drowning.

I’m so far over my head, I may never catch my breath again.

My walls clench around him as he drags out every slow thrust. Each delicious grind against my clit. *In and out*. Building me up. Kissing that spot I wasn’t sure truly existed, only to quickly pull back and do it again . . . and again until finally, I beg. “Please, God. Brandon,” I keened in a voice I don’t even recognize. “I need . . .”

I gasp when his hips snap against mine.

“I know what you need, Ashlyn.”

Oh God. Another hard thrust.

In and out.

I close my eyes and grip the sheets beneath me as my entire body hums and screams with mind-numbing, soul-stealing pleasure.

He drives his hips relentlessly against me.

Just when I’m not sure I can take any more, he wraps a hand around my throat, cupping my jaw, and pulls my back up against his chest. Then he bites down on my ear, and as my world comes into hyperfocus, he growls, “Breathe, Ashlyn.”

His hips slow as if moving in time with each shallow breath that leaves

my lips. And *oh my God*, it's like every sensation is magnified. Every nerve ending raw and crackling with the heat of a thousand suns. Scorching me.

This man . . . *Oh God*.

He's controlling my movements.

My pleasure. My breathing.

And I'm giving it all over to him, willingly.

Trusting him with my body and my heart.

Pleasure thickens my veins as a twin pulse beats in my ears and throbs in my pussy.

I shiver, wanting and so needy, as Brandon's thumb rubs against my thrumming pulse, and his hot breath skates over my ear. "You're so close, aren't you, baby?"

"Yes," I breathe out in a quiet, raspy moan and loop my arm back around his neck.

Our bodies move together. Soaring. Pleasure pushing us higher and higher.

"Should I let you come, Ashlyn?"

Holy shit. Why are those words coming out of his mouth so fucking hot? The noise that slips past my lips sounds foreign and distant as I reach back and circle my other arm around him, moving with him until we're both desperate and sweaty. Until we're moving as one. Until I can't possibly last another second.

He growls in my ear, "Come now, Ashlyn," and his fingers find my pussy. He runs it along my drenched lips, then pinches my clit as his grip on my throat tightens, and a searing heat covers my skin as I shatter.

Exploding like a kaleidoscope of colorful fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Brandon thrusts into me again and again, and I swear to God, it's like a never-ending orgasm. Every inch of my skin is alive. Hypersensitive and red hot.

His hand slips away from my throat and cups my breast, palming it with his deliciously callused skin. Fucking me over and over until I'm screaming. *Practically sobbing.*

One orgasm rolls into another until my voice is hoarse and my body limp.

Until his strength is the only thing holding me up. Holding all the broken pieces together.

Until a raw, guttural sound rips from his chest.

Until he slams into me one last time and roars, my name a benediction on

his lips.

When we fall to the bed, tangled and sated, I know without a doubt, nothing will ever be the same. “Brandon,” I whisper, completely raw. Vulnerable and unsure what I’m even trying to say.

He curls his strong arms around me, dragging my back to his broad chest. I bury my face in the pillow, not wanting him to see the tears in my eyes, not sure why I’m crying or what this foreign feeling is.

“Sleep, Ashlyn.” He presses a long kiss to my head.

And it’s there, in his arms, that I figure it out.

That feeling.

Those tears.

It’s safety. Security. Peace.

Three things I’ve never known before.

I’m finally home.

And Brandon Dixon is the first person who’s given that to me.



Brandon passed out as soon as he pulled the blankets over us and never moved again. Not while I figured my shit out. Not as the late afternoon sun faded and the silvery glow of the moonlight slipped into the room. Not when I rolled over and pressed a kiss to his chest. Or when he rolled over and I wrapped an arm around his lean waist and let my fingers trace the sexy muscles beneath his ribs. But the minute I press my lips to his bare back, his breathing changes. And as I moved the tips of my fingers gently over the raised skin there, Brandon’s entire body goes rigid.

His back is covered in raised, white scars, barely visible in the moonlight. Little circles. Similar sizes. My fingers circle each one before I press my lips against them.

Someone hurt him.

These aren’t the kind of scars you get from an accident. They’re too similar. They’re . . . “Brandon . . .”

“Don’t, Ashlyn.” He stops me in a clipped tone. No room for question. But he doesn’t turn over. Doesn’t face me. “Don’t pity me.”

“I don’t,” I whisper. If anything, I understand. “Who hurt you?”

He doesn't answer me or look at me, so I wrap an arm around his chest and rest my chin on his shoulder. There's no way I'm about to let this man ice me out. Not now. "How about I don't pity you if you don't pity me?"

After another long minute, he rolls over slowly and gathers me in his arms. I drape my arm over his chest until I can feel the strong, steady beat of his heart, and my mind drifts back to our time in the elevator. "Abuse comes in so many forms. Not all of them are visible, big guy," I whisper. "I can't stand being stuck in an elevator because whenever I had a bad practice or a bad performance, my coach locked me in a closet for hours. Sometimes days."

When his muscles tighten beneath me, I lay my palm flat on his chest. "Your turn."

"We're coming back to that," he promises as his chest rises up on a long inhale. "I started sleeping on the floor in front of Maddie's door when I was little. I'm not even sure how old I was. It was just something I always did. Before I even understood what they wanted, I knew the men my mom brought home wanted something from my sister they shouldn't want. It got worse when we started bouncing between foster families. Maddie got older, and the way those sick fucks looked at her got more obvious. I don't think I slept on a bed until I was in college. It worked most of the time. But we had this one foster father . . ."

His words trail off, lost in thought, and I wait.

Too scared to push.

Not wanting him to close up, now that he's finally sharing.

His fingers move in my hair, and I tilt my head back to look up at him.

"Eventually, we got moved into the last house either of us would have to live in. That family turned out to be the best one we ever had. Thank fucking God. I'm not sure I'd have ever left Maddie and gone to college if it wasn't. That one was safe enough. But it was the house before that. The one we moved to right before I started high school. We weren't there long, but it was enough."

His voice changes. As if he's back there again instead of here with me.

"I was a big kid, but *he* was bigger. A grown fucking man, preying on kids. Didn't matter though because I was fighting for *her*. Protecting *my* family. That kind of thing gives you a strength you don't know you have. He tried hitting me, but I hit back." Brandon swallows then adds, "That's when he tried other shit. The scars are from cigarettes. But at the end of the day, it

didn't matter. He never fucked with Maddie again. That was all that mattered."

Tears slip down my cheeks, and I press my lips to his chest, right above his heart.

He's baring his soul to me.

Maybe one day, I'll be strong enough to give him that too.

ASHLYN



*I*t's chilly outside Saturday morning when I walk down to the teak lounge chairs we have beside the lake with my coffee in hand. My favorite, soft, cashmere throw is wrapped around my shoulders. Goosebumps pepper my legs, and I curse myself for not changing out of my sleep shorts. Then I look out over the lake and take my first deep breath of crisp air and relax.

This view, *right here*, is why I finally bought this house. It's like a perfect painting come to life, especially now. It's early enough that the fog still rolls in off the lake in a soft, dewy haze. The leaves have started falling, but some still cling to the trees in vibrant yellows and burnt orange. And the waterfalls are perfect. They play a calming soundtrack which relaxes me instantly.

It's my little piece of heaven. My haven. And I love it.

I left Brandon sleeping in my bed after losing track of how many times we reached for each other into the early hours of the morning. My body aches in that sinfully delectable way that only comes from the perfect kind of overuse, and I'm loving that too. I think it's safe to say I may never want to sleep alone again.

Wait, that's not true.

I tuck my feet up under myself and open my journal.

*It's not the sleeping with someone I loved . . . It's him.
It's having Brandon beside me. He looked peaceful when I*

left him in the quiet house.

Peace . . . I think I've fought my demons back for so many years just for a chance at peace, and it seems like all I needed to do to get it was open myself up to this man. If I'm honest, I never stopped wanting him. He's the only man I think I ever truly wanted for myself.

Life may have gotten in the way, but I guess it really does have a way of working itself out.

Is that something else I have Nina to thank for? It's hard not to think of her when I think about meeting and losing him. She definitely had a hand in both.

Maybe somehow, she's had a part in me finding him again too.

Leaves crunch behind me, and I close my journal and quickly glance over my shoulder, relaxing when I see Brandon behind me, smiling.

"Mornin', baby." He pulls me to my feet, then steals my seat and tugs me down next to him.

"Good morning," I murmur against his lips and wrap my arm across his chest, tucking us both in under the blanket.

"You didn't wake me up . . ." His nose runs up the side of my neck, and I shiver and snake my palms underneath his soft tee, resting them against his warm washboard abs.

"I wanted to let you sleep. What time do you have to leave today?" I ask and lay my head against his chest, enjoying the strong, steady beat of his heart under my cheek.

Brandon presses his lips to the top of my head. "Gotta be at the airport by one. It's the first time I can remember when I wasn't looking forward to football. I don't want to leave you."

“We’ll be fine. Sam has the place locked up tight, and believe it or not, I do know better than to open the door for strangers,” I tease. “You can’t be here all the time.”

“What if I want to be?” he asks softly and tightens his hold around me, sparking a frisson of awareness between us.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach at the certainty in his words, even if he’s gentling them for me. “Don’t you feel like we’re doing this whole thing backward?”

“No.” His answer is immediate, leaving no room for doubt. Those big hands wrap around my neck and anchor in my hair, massaging the base of my skull. “What’s backward?”

I keep my voice light. “We’ve never even been on a date, big guy.”

“Do you need me to take you to dinner to feel better about us, Ashlyn?” he challenges. “Because I’ll take you anywhere you want to go, if it’ll make you happy.”

“Don’t make fun of me.” I scrape my nail over his nipple and enjoy his harsh intake of breath as it pebbles under my touch.

He tugs my head back and lowers his mouth to mine, drinking from my lips. “I wasn’t making fun of you. I’d never make fun of you. I’m just not sure what you’re asking me.”

I choose my next words carefully and whisper them quietly, afraid of the power they hold. “I wasn’t expecting to need you. Not yet. Not so quickly. And maybe not ever. It’s been a long time since I allowed myself to need anyone for anything. I spent my life relying on other people for everything because I was never given a choice. But that’s not me anymore. It’s not who I’ve been or who I want to be. I promised myself the day Madeline was born it would never be me again.”

I run my teeth over my lip and push down the fear warring with something else.

Something stronger.

Something far scarier.

Something that could fracture me to the depths of my soul.

“I think that scares me because I *need* you. I’ve never done this. I’ve never brought a man around my daughter. *My family*. Into my life and hers. Theirs. I’m giving you the power to break me and *no one* . . . not a single soul has had that power in a long time. I wasn’t sure I’d ever let anyone ever have that power again. But you do. And I think what scares me most is you’re

here, in my house and my life, because of a threat. You're not here because we dated and fell in love. We didn't do the whole getting-to-know-you thing. We skipped those steps because our history is messy. You're here because you wanted to keep us safe."

He moves to interrupt me, and I silence him with a gentle finger over his lips. "Just let me say this, okay? You're a good man. Probably the best I've ever known. But Brandon . . . you're a protector on a molecular level. It's written into your DNA. And I'm scared that when this threat—*whoever he is*—is gone, you will be too."

My shoulders slump a little once I've said my peace, and I lock into the hard glint in Brandon's eyes. "You about done, baby?" His voice is cool and detached.

I nod with the tiniest movement, scared I just destroyed whatever this is before it ever had a chance to grow but knowing it had to be said.

"You aren't getting rid of me that easily, Ashlyn." His grip on me tightens. "You're right. Protecting my family is part of my DNA. It always will be. But what you're not seeing is that includes you and Lindy. *Jesus, woman.* How do you not know that? You and shortcake, you're mine, whether you know it or not. Now, you can sit here and tell me I'm wrong. You can try to fight it, but I don't think you will because, baby, I'm pretty sure you feel this too. I think you felt it then, and I fucking know you feel it now."

"We have history." He presses his forehead to mine and breathes me in. "And fuck yes, it's messy. But baby, you and me, we're meant to be. Twin flames. One day you're going to share your pain with me. You're going to let me help you carry it. I'm willing to wait because I know you'll tell me when you're ready. And I know better than anyone how difficult that is. We're survivors, Ashlyn, and I think we both know how to fight for what we want. For what matters. You matter. I'll do whatever I have to, to protect you." His lips feather over mine. "To earn you." He deepens the kiss, and I nearly forget everything we've both just said and let go. "To keep you . . . *Forever.*"

If anyone ever asks when things changed for me, it was that last whispered word. *Forever.*

"Brandon . . ." My chest tightens as I think back to that time in my life. To the Olympics and the weeks and months that followed. "I owe you an explanation."

He cups my cheeks, giving me his strength but not saying a word.

No doubt realizing how close I am to shutting down.

But I keep going, knowing it's now or never.

Closing my eyes, I go back to that night. The smell of the rink. The roar of the crowd. The eerie feeling that washed over me after Nina fell but didn't get up. The four minutes and thirty seconds I spent skating the best routine of my life. I remember the weight of the medal as it was placed around my neck and the way it was crushing me because I knew Coach wasn't going to be happy.

Nina was supposed to get gold.

If she didn't, I should have.

We would both have been punished for letting him down, but she humiliated him.

He would never forgive that.

"I knew as soon as Nina skated off the ice, life was never going to be the same, but I had no idea what that meant. You've got to understand . . . Coach Ron broke us by whatever means necessary. Physically and mentally."

Brandon sucks in a breath. "He hit you?"

"Oh, big guy. He was a master of abuse. It took many forms. He was a classic master manipulator. And a narcissist, so you can be sure he lost his mind after Nina's long skate at the Olympics. Then I didn't win gold, and it was bad. He and Nina . . . they got into a huge fight when we got back to our room, and she threatened to expose him to the whole community. Skating is like every other sport. Once you get to a certain level, everyone knows the players, and he was a top tier player. But he'd never had an athlete win gold. Never. And that killed him. If she exposed him . . . exposed the abuse, he'd never work another day in the international figure skating world. Ever."

I pull my knees up to my chest and stare out at the lake, remembering the sound of her voice the day before. "She'd threatened to burn it to the ground. Everything. She'd screamed that at him, and he grabbed her by her throat and threw her up against the wall. I remember the way her eyes had bulged, and her nails clawed at his grip on her throat. I was frozen until she got quiet and the look in her eyes dulled. Something snapped into place, and I threw myself at his back and raked my nails down his face."

"Baby . . ." His hold on me tightens, but I don't look at him.

Not yet.

Not if I want to get through this.

"When he left that night, Nina and I locked the door behind him, moved

the dresser in front of it, and laid in bed together all night, crying. Sobbing for everything we lost. Everything we never had. Our childhoods. Ourselves. Our families. Mine sold me, and hers was a monster. When I woke up the next morning, she was gone. I never saw her again. The police told us hours later that she drove off a cliff about an hour from the Olympic village. She rented a car. She didn't pack a bag. She didn't bring anything with her, and she drove off a fucking mountain because dying was better than living under his thumb."

I push myself up from the chair and take a few steps before I turn around and look at Brandon. His muscles are strung visibly tight with the control it's taking him not to move. He's watching me, weighing his next move, when I put my hand up to stop him.

"She left a me a note." The tears stream down my face, their salt coating my lips. "I found it the next day, hidden between my leggings in my suitcase. She told me this was the only way out for her. For us. She told me to run before he killed me too."

I get lost in the memory and don't even realize Brandon's gotten up until I'm wrapped in his arms. "No one will ever hurt you again, Ashlyn. I promise you. Never again."

I look up at him, hating what I need to tell him now.

But I've already come this far.

No turning back.

"There was a press conference I had to attend that afternoon. I didn't know what I was going to do, but for the sake of my career, I knew I had to be there. And let's face it, I needed my career. It was the only thing I'd ever done. The only skill I'd ever had. Ron cornered me in a small conference room after the press conference, and I told him I was done. I'm not sure why I did it. I should have kept my mouth shut. He backhanded my face so hard, he cracked my cheekbone. He told me I'd never be able to leave him. He'd lost Nina, and he wasn't going to lose me too." I swallow, knowing this next part is going to be the worst, and whisper, "Then he threatened you."

"What?" he roars.

"He told me he knew about you. Knew who you were and that you were hoping to get drafted. He told me he had connections back home and could destroy any chance you had before you ever got it. He told me no little whore was worth losing it all over, and I slapped him. I shouldn't have. I know that now. I knew it as soon as I did it. But I didn't think. I reacted, and it was such

a dumb thing to do. The next thing I knew, I was on the floor being kicked repeatedly until someone pulled him off me and got me out of there. It was John Kingston.”

“Ashlyn . . . Baby, I . . .” He gently lifts my face to his, and his eyes are wild. Feral. They’re everywhere, like he needs to see I’m okay. That I’m here and I’m real.

“He rushed me out of the hotel into a limo and got me private medical attention. King Corp. had been one of my sponsors. Nina and I both. I guess because we were local girls.” I close my eyes not wanting to see his face when I admit, “He offered to deal with Ron. To take care of everything for me. I practically fell at his feet, I was so thankful. Then he told me we’d get married before we left Paris, then do it again in the states. He said no one would ever be able to touch me again, once I was his wife.”

My body shakes as I remember the fear. The adrenaline. “I was so tired, Brandon. Emotionally exhausted, physically broken, and permanently scarred. Scared for my life. Put yourself in my shoes. Nina had just killed herself so her father couldn’t do it to her. He’d just broken me. Threatened you. I was so young and so damn naive. And so, I said yes.”

I square my shoulders and press my trembling lips together as I look at this incredible man in front of me and break his heart.

“I married John Kingston because I knew he could protect me, and I couldn’t do it myself. I didn’t question what he was getting out of it, and he never told me. I was a pretty wife. A trophy on his arm. A prized possession he could brag about. But he never mistreated me. He was kind. And he gave me his family. He made me a part of something.” Then I lower my voice to just above a whisper. “He gave me Madeline. So for the rest of my life, I’ll be grateful.”

UNKNOWN



I 've given you time, Ashlyn.
But you've turned to him instead of me.
You've hurt me, and hurt leads to anger.
Don't make me angry.

-The Collector

ASHLYN



Place an egg white omelet in front of Lindy as she sets two glasses of pineapple-orange juice on our kitchen table late Sunday morning. We work together in the kitchen like a well-oiled machine. We may not be the best cooks, but our eggs are on point, and we make killer grilled cheese. The rest is typically takeout or eating on the run between her rink time, school, and Ever After.

Today, however, we both slept in.

We had cheesy popcorn and decided to have a scary movie marathon last night in my bed, since it was just us. I'm not sure what time we fell asleep, but I'm feeling sluggish today. Lack of sleep for the past two nights and having my first cup of coffee a little later than normal today have caught up with me. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

I mean, *it can't actually be* that I was restless last night because Brandon wasn't here.

I've only slept in bed with him once.

Something I'm hoping to fix very soon.

Instead, I'm going to blame my exhaustion on my daughter, who slept like a starfish, taking up the entire bed, the way she's done since she was a baby. Some things change, but others, thankfully, stay the same. I watch her over the top of my coffee and let the caffeine work its magic, wondering when she became this incredible young woman.

Her curls are gone, replaced by long sheets of straight dirty-blonde hair. High cheekbones sit where full chubby cheeks used to be, and don't even get me started on her strong, lithe frame. One any elite athlete earns day in and out with hours spent honing their skills. She's beautiful inside and out, and

I'm lucky to be her mom.

Even if I'm not quite ready for this next stage in *her* life.

So how exactly am I supposed to talk to her about this new stage in *my* own life?

I told myself I'd talk to her about Brandon when I picked her up from Kenzie's house Saturday, but I didn't. I thought about trying to work it into the conversation last night but stuffed my face full of popcorn instead. *Definitely mom of the year.*

"So . . . what do you want to do today?" I ask, chickening out. The tough questions can wait until after I'm caffeinated.

"I thought I could study while we watch the game. I'm loving this *mom-time*, but I've got a calc test tomorrow." Yup. Too mature in some ways and still so much my baby in others.

"You know what?" I lean forward and smile, trying not to look too excited. That's the kiss of death with a teenager. Let them know you're happy about something they're saying or doing, and that shit stops right away. Forget looking cool. They'll fight you for fun. "That sounds perfect to me."

"What time is Brandon coming home?"

Oh shit. I think I need stronger coffee.

The little brat smiles at me, and I realize a little too late, I walked right into her trap.

Abort. Abort.

It's like there's a voice from mission control in my head, warning me to tread very carefully. Wait . . . does that make me crazy? Am I hearing voices?

"Mom . . ."

Right. No time like the present, I guess. "Well, I wanted to talk to you about that . . ."

The doorbell rings, and I jump out of my seat as if my ass were on fire. It would be comical if I was watching someone else do it. "One sec, honey."

"Check the cameras, Mom."

I check the cameras because I was going to, not because my fifteen-year-old told me to. The security feed shows Maddie standing outside, and I rush to the door, swinging it open. "Hey, Mads. Come in."

"Good morning." Maddie smiles, then peeks around me and waves at Lindy. "Hey little M," she calls out.

"Hey, big M," my daughter responds with an even bigger smile. "Are the girls with you?"

“Nope. I left them at home with Hudson. I thought I’d see if you ladies wanted to come over and watch the game today.” Maddie brings her eyes back to me, and there’s a knowing challenge there.

Before I even have a chance to answer, Lindy pops up from her seat. “That sounds perfect. Let me go get changed.” Then she’s off, up the stairs, and slamming a door behind her. Leaving me standing in front of Hudson’s wife, who’s looking at me very much like the overprotective sister of the man I’ve fallen for.

“Want a cup of coffee?”

“Sure.” She walks past me and helps herself, pouring a cup, then turning and topping mine off. “How about we sit outside for a few minutes?”

“Maddie,” I stop her. “You’re not about to try to scare me off your brother, are you? Because I love you, but I’ve got to warn you, that’s not going to work.”

She laughs.

Actually laughs out loud, spilling some of her coffee in the process. “Come outside with me, Ashlyn. It’s a beautiful day.” She tugs me behind her onto the deck, and we curl up in the sun on the outdoor sectional. “So . . . I’m not going to warn you off my brother, as you put it.” Her cheeks flush as she sips her coffee. “But I do want to talk to you about him.”

“O-kay,” I answer slowly, my muscles stringing tight. “What do you want to know?”

She’s quiet as she looks down into her mug for a long moment. “Do you love him?”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation. “But he deserves to know that before you and I discuss it. Next question.”

Her entire posture changes. Her blue eyes light up with so much happiness, it rolls off her in big, fat, thick waves. “Be patient with him. He’s such a good man, Ashlyn. And he deserves someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” I ask, watching the tears pool in her eyes.

Maddie nods her head. “Someone kind. Someone with a big heart and a big family to love him. Brandon has never been good at letting people in. But I think he’s let you in. And that’s . . . Well, that’s huge.”

“He makes me happy, Mads. Having him here. The way he’s seamlessly fit into our lives, like he was always supposed to be here. I still have to have a talk with Madeline because she’s a young, impressionable, teenage girl. And I need to make sure she’s okay with all this, but I plan on keeping Brandon.”

Then I quietly but confidently add, “Forever.”

A crash comes from Lindy’s balcony above us, followed by her high-pitched voice. “I’m okay. Sorry. Keep going.”

I close my eyes and sigh. “My daughter, who’s apparently been eavesdropping.”

Madison giggles and finishes her coffee. She lays her hand over mine and squeezes. “Game starts in an hour, and I’ve got plenty of food. I might even have an extra Dixon jersey, if you want it.”

“Thank you.” I cover her hand with my other one and fight back the emotion clogging my throat. “That means a lot.”

“I’m glad it’s you, Ashlyn. I wouldn’t do well in jail, and if it was some gold-digging whore, I might have to cut a bitch.”

I laugh so hard, tears stream down my face before Maddie leaves and I walk inside to deal with my nosy daughter.

Once the dishes are done and put away, I decide that’s enough stalling. I walk upstairs and knock on her door. Privacy is a big deal in our house, even if she seems to have forgotten that. “Can I come in?”

“It’s open,” she calls out from the other side, and when I push through, she’s curling her hair at her vanity. “Did Maddie leave?”

I nod.

“What time are we going to their house?”

I take the curling wand from her hand and section off another piece of hair. “How much of that conversation did you hear?”

Lindy looks at me sheepishly through the reflection in the mirror. “All of it. My balcony door was open.”

“Okay . . . then I guess the floor is yours, kiddo. Do you have any questions?” I work my fingers through the warm curl before moving on to the next section.

“Is Brandon going to move in with us?” She looks up at me with hopeful eyes. “Like, officially?”

“We haven’t talked about that yet. Would you be okay if he did?” My stomach churns as I wait for her to answer me.

She chews her lower lip the way I always have, and I silently wonder if that’s learned or inherited. “Mom, I’ve loved Brandon for years. He’s a good guy. And he makes you smile. I was surprised when you made him sleep on the couch.”

I wrap one last section of hair around the barrel and stare back at her

reflection. “Sweetheart, I know fifteen feels so grown to you, but it’s not. You’re still a child—an impressionable one. So I want you to hear what I’m about to say. Letting a man into your bed and into your life is never something you should do lightly. You need to make sure they respect you and your boundaries. That they’re with you for the right reasons. Especially you. You’re a wealthy young woman from an extremely high-profile family. I don’t want you to worry about everyone’s intentions, but I want you to be careful where boys are concerned. Listen to your intuition and follow your heart. I’ll always do my best to lead by example. *You* are the biggest prize you can ever give a man, Madeline. Make sure they’re worth it.”

I place the wand back on the vanity and run my hands over her shoulders. “Do you understand?”

“Is *he* worth it?” she asks quietly.

“I’m pretty sure he’s worth everything. But he’ll never come before you. You’ll always be my highest priority. And I need to know you’re okay with all this before I do anything else.”

She turns and wraps an arm around my waist. “You gonna let him move off the couch now?”

“Are you okay with that?” My nerves triple in the time it takes for a smile to break across her face.

“Yeah. I’m okay with that. But I don’t want to hear any funny business.”

And . . . my sweet moment with my girl is done.

She laughs out loud when she sees the look on my face. “Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

BRANDON



Declan stretches out next to me on the team's private plane and smacks my chest.

Fuck, that hurts.

“Good game today, man. You sure you want to give this up?”

The flight attendant comes over the speakers and tells us we'll be taking off momentarily, and I close the shade. I fucking hate flying. You'd think by now it wouldn't bother me, and maybe if we could do it without the taking off and the landing, I wouldn't care. But yeah . . . not a fan.

I lean my head back and adjust my pillow. “Sorry, man. I'm done at the end of this season. Every fucking bone in my body hurts. I don't think I could do another season of this if I wanted to. I need to be able to walk away while I can still physically walk. You got any clue how many more seasons you've got in ya?”

Dec reclines his seat, and our rookie running back behind him grumbles but isn't dumb enough to voice it too loudly. “I'm not sure. I just know I'm not done yet. Belles has been great about it, but I know she wishes I would. She's a rockstar, holding down the fort. I know it comes at a price. But I fucking love it. I'm not sure I'd know who I was without football.”

“Yeah. I feel that. But I figure it's about time I find out.”

I pull my phone from my pocket and look at the texts I got earlier from my agent.

HUNTER

Word's getting out. I've had a few calls from networks asking if you'd be interested in discussing commentator positions. Let me know if you're interested.

I also think you should consider doing a podcast. I've told Declan the same thing. You two would be great together.

Great fucking game, man.

I'll call you tomorrow. We need to meet soon.

BRANDON

Tapes tomorrow afternoon. Talk after.

HUNTER

Got it. I'm flying in this week. Dinner Thursday?

BRANDON

OK.



BRANDON

Gonna be late tonight, baby. I've gotta stop by my place and get some clothes.

ASHLYN

Let yourself in when you get here. Lindy and I are both going to bed soon. She's got early rink time before school tomorrow.

BRANDON

Okay. Arm the alarm.

ASHLYN

It's armed. And Brandon . . . Come upstairs when you get here.

I read the last line a few times.

I didn't want to leave her yesterday.

Not when I woke up and she wasn't in bed.

Not after she opened her fucking soul to me and ripped mine out in the process.

This woman. She's so much stronger than she gives herself credit for.

She's a survivor.

She's mine.

Fuck. It's gonna be a long-ass flight.



*T*urns out, it was longer than I expected. The flight from Dallas back to Philly usually takes about three hours. Tonight, we hit a storm and had to be rerouted, so it was closer to four. I'm sore. I'm tired. And I'm in desperate need of my woman when I get to my house.

One more stop before I can get to hers.

Stale air greets me when I walk into my house, and for the first time since I bought it, I look at it through different eyes. Most rookies were buying cars and hookers. I was buying what I thought was a home. A place for me and Maddie. Some place that could be ours. And it was. This was the first place we had our own Christmas. It was small. Like we were scared it wasn't real, but it was ours. Our first real Thanksgiving dinner . . . when she burned the shit out of a turkey and we ended up ordering takeout. We tried though. That's what mattered.

Mads didn't fall in love with the holidays until Hudson Kingston forced it on her.

She, in turn, forced it on me.

Now, each year, I'm in matching pajama pants on Christmas morning, sitting in their living room, watching the girls open their presents. I grumble

about the stupid pajamas, but I kinda love them. Not that I'll ever tell her that. Too much power goes to Maddie's head.

Somewhere along the line, this house started to feel less like a home and more like a place I lived. It only took one fucking week with Ashlyn and Lindy to understand why. One week. But seriously, who the fuck am I kidding? It took one night to fall for her, so it makes sense that it would only take one week with her to know what I want. Maybe I always knew if Ashlyn and I ever got a second chance, that would be it. *Game over.*

Is that why I never went after her all these years?

That shit rattles around in my head as I empty out my bag and pack a new one. And yeah, okay, I throw more clothes in this one than I did last week, then look around my room. There's not a single thing in here that says it's mine. No pictures. No memories. Just the stuff Maddie picked out for me when I moved in. I still have no clue why the bed has *seventy-two* pillows on it, but she said it looked good, so I let her buy them.

Hell, I basically handed her my credit card and let her decorate the whole house.

I should feel something, coming back here after being gone for a few days, but I don't. And if that doesn't tell me something, I'm not sure what would. Because all I can think about is getting home to my girls and how much I like the sound of that.

I might not have ever wanted a kid of my own, but there's no denying that Madeline carefully carved out a spot for herself in my heart since the day I met her. Pretty sure she's the best of both worlds. She might not have been born mine, but that doesn't fucking matter one little bit to me.

Time to go home.

I make the short drive through the streets of Kroydon Hills in a torrential storm, feeling happy. They won't even be awake when I get there, but I'm fucking happy, and that's a bit of a foreign thing for me.

It's almost enough to make me forget about the asshole stalking Ashlyn.

Almost.

It's close to midnight as I slow and turn down Ashlyn's street, seeing a dark car sitting across from her house. But as I get closer, it pulls away. Doesn't even turn the fucking lights on. Just drives. *Shit.*

I pull into her driveway and grab my phone. Years ago, a bunch of us started getting together for poker nights, it was a little weird to know I was sitting next to Sam Beneventi. I mean, I knew his brother, Bash, because he

played for the Kings with me long before I knew him as Lenny's husband. I was aware of who Bash's older brother was. *Is*. But it wasn't until I was sitting with Sam that it sunk in that he was *the* Sam Beneventi. *Boss* of the Beneventi family.

When he answers the phone on the first ring, I forget about all that.

"Sam."

"Dix, this better be good. I'm in bed," he clips out.

"I just got to Ashlyn's house, and a dark sedan was sitting across the street. I thought it could have been one of your guys, but they left the second they saw me."

"Got it. I've got the whole area covered. I'll get someone to pull the plate and do some digging." He murmurs something, probably to his wife, before asking, "You got a gun, Dixon?"

"No. Never needed one," I grunt, ready to kill someone with my bare fucking hands.

"Stop by my house tomorrow after practice. Call first. Now go take care of your woman, Dix. 'Night."

"Thanks, man." I end the call and grab my bag.

This was not how I wanted to end my night.

I sprint through the rain to the front door and let myself in, then rearm the alarm. The house is quiet, and the lights are all turned off as I look at the couch and remember Ashlyn's earlier text. Taking the steps two at a time, I head upstairs.

Ashlyn's office door is open, and the room is empty. Lindy's door is cracked, and I peek in just to make sure she's safe, then move further down the hall, and stop in front of Ashlyn's bedroom's double doors. They're cracked open the slightest bit too, and a low hint of light creeps through.

I stand there longer than I should before finally pushing through the doors quietly. Almost silently. Not wanting to wake her or Lindy. Knowing in my gut, this is a big deal.

A candle flickers on a dresser, and the storm whips through her open windows. Flowy curtains blow with the wind, and the rain plays a sensual rhythm against the lake outside. And there she is, taking my breath away, tucked under a chunky throw blanket, asleep on her bed. Lightning cracks in the distance, and she rolls toward me, tugging the blanket down enough for me to see she's wearing a Kings jersey.

I drop my bag at my feet and lock the bedroom doors, then carefully

make my way over to the bed and watch her sleep. She's gorgeous, and she's wearing *my* jersey. And when I gently tug the blanket down, all the blood leaves my brain because this incredible woman isn't wearing anything else.

Ashlyn slowly opens her eyes and smiles. "Hi, big guy."

"Hey, baby."

Her sleepy eyes warm, and my heart pounds harder, threatening to crack in my chest. "You're all wet."

"It's storming out," I answer quietly, not wanting to make any noise.

I just want to hold her in my arms. Know she's safe. Know she's mine.

"You played a great game," she whispers with a hoarse voice. "How's your rib? They kept saying it looked like you were hurt the whole last quarter."

My girl sits up and gently runs her fingers over my ribs. Her hair spills around her shoulders in pretty waves, stopping just over her breasts, and any lingering pain is forgotten. "Can I get you something for the pain? Tylenol? A hot bath? What do you usually do after a game?"

I grab her hand and press my lips to her palm, needing to feel her. "I usually drink a beer, take a few pain relievers, and go to bed."

My blood thickens when she stands up in front of me and my jersey falls to the top of her bare thighs. "I've got beer in the fridge and some over-the-counter stuff in the medicine cabinet."

"I've already got what I want tonight." I wrap an arm around her and pull her in close. "Not gonna lie, Ashlyn. I really fucking like seeing my jersey on you."

Heat flushes high in her cheeks. "You can thank your sister for that. She said it's one of your old ones that you let her have." She reaches up on her toes and presses a kiss to my lips. "What's underneath though . . . that's all me."



Ashlyn

randon's hand slides down to cup my ass, and a low fucking growl rips from his throat. "Ashlyn . . . Are you wearing anything underneath *my* jersey?"

B I shake my head slowly from side to side and unbutton his shirt. Brandon watches me with hooded eyes as I push it off his shoulders and trail my fingers down his biceps, then back up his lats. Purple bruising blooms over his ribs, and when I touch them, he silently sucks in a breath.

“I missed you,” I tell him, and I gently press my lips over his ribs as I unbuckle his belt and ease down his pants until he’s standing in front of me in nothing but tight, black, boxer briefs that do nothing to hide his thick erection.

“You sure I can’t do anything for you,” I ask as I guide him to the bed. “Anything?” I push.

Brandon kicks off his boxers and sits down, then leans back against my tufted headboard. “Come here, baby.”

I stop next to the bed.

“Leave the jersey on, Ashlyn.” And oh my, that voice . . . He’s a man holding on by a thread, and I want to shred it.

I climb onto the bed and straddle his lap.

His hands immediately go under my jersey and grip my hips.

“Tell me what you want, Brandon.”

“Line me up, baby.” The words are said softly, but the tone . . . oh, that tone holds a promise. That tone holds a controlled power I’d like to see snap.

I lift up on my knees and lick my lips as excitement courses through my veins, then wrap a hand around his thick erection and run it along my wet core, teasing him. Loving the feel of him against my heated skin.

Another hiss leaves his lips, and I swear to God, I could come now, just thinking about the effect I’m having on this man.

“I want inside that sweet body, baby. You ready for me or do I need to eat that pretty pussy first?”

Heat floods my belly, and I lower myself over him, taking him inside me.

“No. Tonight, I just want you inside me,” I whisper softly against his lips.

My eyes fly to Brandon’s as his grip on me turns deliciously biting. “Fuck, baby. That’s it. Rock your hips.”

Big hands slide up my rib cage and cup my breasts under the soft jersey, and the sound that lodges in his throat as I lean back and plant my hands on his thighs behind me sends a shot of pleasure straight down to my core.

It’s my turn to tease. “You like that?” I rock my hips again, loving this new angle, and Brandon shoves my shirt up and takes my breast in his rough

hand.

“Your body is incredible.” He runs his tongue around my nipple, then scrapes his teeth over it. “Fucking made for me, baby.”

I hiss and clench around him. Desperate for more, I wrap my legs around his waist, using his shoulders for leverage and take him deeper until I feel like he’s splitting me in two.

“Fuuucckk . . . Ashlyn.” God, I love the way he says that.

Brandon thrusts up into me, wrapping his arms around me, chasing what we both need.

Any pretense I’m in control is eviscerated, and I moan. “Brandon . . .” I breathe out on a whisper, my mouth pressed to his.

His tongue slides against mine, sending shockwaves through me.

Claiming me.

Owning me.

Worshipping me.

Taking everything I have and giving me all of him as I shatter and throb and pulse around him. “Brandon,” I whisper as he fucks me through my orgasm and his, devouring my lips and destroying any walls I might have had left.

ASHLYN



The storm rages outside, thunder clapping and lightning striking over the lake. It's powerful and intense, just like the man holding me in his arms, and I'm not sure I've ever felt more at peace. Everything outside those doors can go to hell, but this, right here . . . everything inside this house is what matters.

Brandon's hand drags lazy circles over my bare back, tracing my spine and tangling in my hair. I'm pretty sure I never want to move again. "I should get downstairs, baby."

"Why?" I prop my head up to look at him, and he laughs at me.

"You are so fucking beautiful." His smirk slides into place, and I want to kiss it off his face. "Even when you're pouting."

"Hey." I nip the bottom of his chin, working my way down to his chest, then bite down gently on his nipple, teasing. "I'm not pouting," I protest and gently kiss his chest. "Stay here . . . with me." Okay, so maybe I can hear the pout in my voice, but I ignore it.

He cradles my face in his hands, like I'm something precious and kisses my forehead. My heart flutters as my eyes close. "What about Lindy?"

"She and I talked about a few things while you were gone," I admit in the quiet of the night.

"Oh yeah? Am I allowed to ask what you talked about?" God, this man . . . There's an uncertainty in his tone. He has no clue what he does to me.

"I'd hope so because we talked about you, among other things."

He tickles my side playfully. "Other things?"

"Yes. Other things. Girl things. Boy things. All the things she's going to

be dealing with as she grows up. Hopefully not yet, but eventually. But what started the conversation was you.”

“Do I even want to know what was said?” There’s a hint of hesitance hidden behind his teasing.

I press my lips to his heart, then settle my cheek against it and soak in the heavy, steady beat. “We took a vote and decided we want to keep you, if you’ll have us.”

He places a knuckle under my chin and lifts my face to his. “There’s nothing that’s gonna keep me from you and Lindy, baby. I’m already yours.”

“What would you think of moving in with us?” I whisper as a crack of lightning lights up his face in time for me to see the heat in his eyes.

“I’d think you need a bigger couch.” He runs his fingers over my hair, and I tilt my head, leaning into him, a happy hum vibrating in my chest.

“You can get a bigger couch, if you want it, but I want you sleeping in here . . . with me. We’ve wasted so much time, Brandon. I don’t want to waste another minute.”

He rolls me over to my back and slides between my legs. “Never again, Ashlyn.” The tip of his dick glides against my pussy, taunting me, as I wrap my legs around his hips. “We’ll never waste another minute.”

His hips flex, and I moan as he surges inside me, thick and hot. I cling to him, moving with him, as he nearly splits me in two. The pain and pleasure mixing and growing. The thunder crashing as my heart shatters and soars and irrevocably breaks, knowing it belongs to him. Only ever to him. “Never again . . .”



Brandon

“*W*hat are you doing up so early, shortcake?” Madeline skips down the kitchen steps, a devious look on her face.

“I have ice time before school today.” She makes a show of looking around me into the living room. “I don’t see a blanket or pillow on the couch this morning, big guy.” She cocks her hip and rests a hand against it. “Does this mean you and Mom finally stopped sneaking around?”

I can make a three-hundred-and-fifty-pound lineman my bitch week after week, but the idea of saying the wrong thing to this tiny wisp of a teenage girl has me fucking petrified. I look up the stairs, as if Ashlyn is going to come down and save me from this conversation. But I'm not sure my woman is going to be moving much this morning.

My chest puffs up for a second before Madeline catches my eye again, and I deflate.

"Don't look so scared, Brandon. I told her I was okay with this." She steals my bagel when it pops out of the toaster, then grabs the peanut butter. "You're good for her. You make her smile. Mom doesn't smile enough, but she does when you're around."

She sits at the counter and pushes half the bagel my way before slicing a banana and adding it to her half.

"You're okay with it?" I ask, still caught on that. "If I move in here . . . you'd be okay with me living here?"

"You're pretty much living here already. At least this way, you wouldn't be trying to fit your big-ass body on that little couch." She chuckles. "But seriously, yes. I like you here. I kinda like the idea of you and Mom together. Do you think you'll marry her?"

I cough and choke on my bagel. "I never really thought about marriage before," I admit, laying it out there for a fifteen-year-old. "Do you think your mom wants to get married?"

"She plans weddings for a living, Brandon." She looks at me as if I'm the dumbest creature she's ever seen. "Her business is called Ever After Event Planning. Yeah. I think she wants to get married. But I swear to God, if you guys decide to have more kids, I'm not babysitting. That train has sailed. Wait . . . that's not right. Ships sail, trains leave the station. Either way, it's not happening, so don't ask."

I sit there, frozen, as Lindy argues with herself.

I hadn't considered Ashlyn might want more kids.

She's already got a teenager.

What if she wants more?

Can I do that? Can I give her that?

A car horn beeps, and Lindy grabs a bottle of water and her bookbag from the counter. "That's Andrew." She kisses my cheek. "See you after school." And then she's walking away, and I'm left staring after her, wondering what the hell just happened, until her voice calls out, "Brandon—"

“Yeah, shortcake?”

“I always hoped it would be you.” She smiles, and my heart cracks wide open. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for this kid or her mother.

Something settles in me.

Maybe it’s an acceptance.

A realization that I’ve got something good.

Something I never thought I’d have.

Something I’d fight for. *Kill for*. Die for.

I walk over to her and wrap an arm around her shoulders, tugging her against me and dropping a kiss on top of her head. “That’s because it was always supposed to be us.”

She tilts her head back and laughs silently to herself. “Just keep the sex quiet. I don’t need to hear that stuff.”

My mouth drops open, and I pray for patience. “You’re fifteen. What the hell do you know about that stuff?” I cringe. *Nope*. I do not want kids.

“I’m fifteen, big guy. Not five.”

“I think I liked it better when you were five.”



“*Y*ou know how to shoot a gun, Brandon?” I stand in Sam and Amelia’s basement, staring stupidly at the Kingston sister who resembles Snow White. Her pregnant belly stretches her tight shirt. She looks like she’s hiding a basketball under there.

I’ve heard the rumors about her. Heard she once killed a woman to save Declan Sinclair’s wife. It was the year before I was drafted to the team. Some stories never stop making the rounds. But seeing her standing here—holding a revolver with the same ease she would a cupcake at her shop—it’s hard to accept the two different versions of her.

“You ever shot a gun, Dix?” Amelia asks as she hands me the revolver.

I check to see if it’s loaded, then look down the site. “Yeah. A few times. Mostly shotguns as a teenager. Had a foster dad that liked to hunt. But he let me shoot a few of his other guns too.” I accept the ammo Sam hands me and load the gun. “But it’s been a while.”

Amelia points to the locked door behind me. “You’re welcome to practice

down here. We have our own range. I'd offer to help you, but . . ."—she rubs her stomach—"but you're going to have to wait a few weeks before I can shoot again."

Sam kisses his wife's temple. "Shame too. Amelia's the better shot."

She beams as she leans into him, then rests a hand on my bicep. "Get a safe. We may have an extra one around here. Lindy and the kids are in and out of Ashlyn's house all the time. Keep it locked—somewhere you have easy access to. Hopefully you never have to use this, but if you do . . . aim small, miss small." She turns to leave, then stops. "And never aim to warn. If you're going to shoot, shoot center mass."

Maybe it's Amelia I should be scared of . . .

Sam watches her go back upstairs, then guides me into his personal shooting range where we go over the basics and shoot a few rounds until I'm more comfortable.

"I need you to do me a favor, Dix."

"What's up, man?" I ask, hoping this is my friend asking, not the head of the Philadelphia Mafia.

"You gotta get Ashlyn to talk through who she thinks this fucker could be. Whoever he is, he's good. He knows his shit, and he's got the cyber stuff down. We haven't been able to catch even a small fucking trace, and I've got the best hackers in the fucking state. He's rerouting his shit so many ways, it's impossible to crack."

"You think she knows him?" Concern coats my skin like sticky sweat.

"He's sent more emails, Dix. One a day for the past few days. We've got him flagged so Ashlyn never sees them, but they're getting worse. More aggressive. This is personal to him. Does she have an ex she didn't want to mention before? Someone whose heart she broke?"

"Nah, man. Her last ex is buried six feet under. She hasn't dated since Kingston died."

"I'm telling you, this is personal to this guy."

"Yeah," I fucking growl as I cock my gun to aim and shoot. Dead center. Aim small. Hit small. "Well, he's never fucking met me. He might think it's personal, but he's got no fucking clue how personal this is for me."

"We're gonna figure this shit out. We're gonna take care of it. We're gonna keep your woman safe."

"Sam," Amelia calls down the steps in a strained voice, and we step out into the hall to hear her better. "My water just broke."

Sam looks at me, a shaken smile on his face as he holsters his gun. “Holy shit. We’re gonna have a baby.”



*A*melia didn’t want everyone waiting around the hospital, so Ashlyn’s phone chimed like crazy all night long. Seriously, their family phone tree is something else. So different from the way Maddie and I grew up. This family has no clue what it means to not be in each other’s business on a good day. On a day like today, *fuck me*, the texts were constant. Lenny and Bash were the only two allowed to stay at the hospital, and they kept everyone else in the loop.

Lucian “Lucky” Beneventi was born at ten twenty-two on October 22nd, joining his big brothers Maddox and Rome, and big sister, Caitlyn. And when I held him for the first time a few days later and those dark eyes looked up at me while he yawned, I wondered if maybe, *just maybe*, I was being too hasty on the whole kid thing.

ASHLYN



HUDSON

Captain's log – Day 18. There's still a large truck parked in Ashlyn's driveway. It leaves every day and comes home every night. It's safe to say it's not an abandoned vehicle.

SAWYER

I can also report a certain sister-in-law's brother has been seen taking out the trash at the same house.

HUDSON

Good. Does this mean I don't have to do it anymore?

SCARLET

What the fuck is wrong with you two?

ASHLYN

Hudson, when did you ever take out my trash?

HUDSON

That time . . .

ASHLYN

ONE TIME!

BECKS

They have too much time on their hands. Ignore them.

SAWYER

Whatever you say, Senator.

BECKS

Don't be a dick, Sawyer.

SAWYER

Yeah well, mine's bigger than yours.

SCARLET

Little boys. You're all little fucking boys.

JACE

Seriously. Don't you have better things to do? Like maybe your wives?

LENNY

Jace!

JACE

What? I'm too busy with my own wife and kids to notice that Brandon Dixon and Ashlyn have been playing house for weeks. No hate. Just sayin I married the last person to move into my house.

LENNY

We're pretty sure you Stockholmed your wife into marrying you.

SCARLET

OMG. Stop Peeping Tomming on Ashlyn. It's creepy, and she's got enough of that.

MAX

It was the kid. Indy fell in love with Cohen. She got stuck with Jace.

JACE

Kiss my ass Maxipad.

BECKS

You better be careful or Dixon might accidentally beat the shit out of you, thinking you're the stalker.

AMELIA

Or shoot him. It's been known to happen. Just sayin . . .

HUDSON

Like he could take me.

LENNY

He already did. By the throat. In the kitchen.

SCARLET

Looks like Lenny just won Clue. Did he use a candlestick?

ASHLYN

You're all insane. Yes, Brandon has officially moved in with Lindy and me. Yes, he's no longer sleeping on the couch. Yes, he takes out my trash.

JACE

I hope that's not all he takes out. I'm too old for another little sister.

LENNY

It doesn't work that way, dumbass.

ASHLYN

Most importantly, I'm happy and so is your sister.

HUDSON

Does this mean my brother-in-law is about to be my stepdaddy too?

SAWYER

That's some serious inbred shit there, brother.

ASHLYN

You're all stupid.

MAX

But we all love you.

ASHLYN

Love you guys too.

I put my phone down on the counter next to Brandon's messy pile of phone, wallet, and keys and bite down on my lips as I hold back my laugh. They might be batshit crazy, but they're my family, and I love them. *Definitely batshit crazy though.* I giggle and grab a knife to finish dicing the tomatoes for the salad I'm throwing together for dinner, then startle as Brandon comes downstairs.

Today's sweatpants are gray and sit low on his hips. The ribbed tank he threw on is white and mouthwateringly tight over his chest, and I'm suddenly no longer interested in tomatoes or salad. *Nope.* That's not what I want in my mouth.

"Hey, big guy."

He places his palms on either side of me, gripping the counter, and kisses

the back of my neck, and *ho-ly hotness*, I love the way this man smells when he gets out of the shower. Fresh and clean and so very, very mouthwatering.

“Hey, baby.” He nips at my ears, then presses his erection against my ass. “Is Lindy home yet?”

I shimmy my hips back, and one of his warm hands wraps around my waist, flattening under my shirt against my cool skin. “No. She and Andrew have ice time.”

“Really?” He pops open the button on my jeans and slides that same hand down, teasing my sex and coaxing a moan from my lips.

My head drops forward as the blunt tip of one finger pushes inside. “Have you been a good girl, Ashlyn?”

“Maybe,” I hum. “Is my reward better if I’m good or bad? Because I think bad sounds like more fun.”

“Depends.” He wraps my hair around his fist and yanks until his lips are on mine. “Did you make yourself come after I left this morning?”

He pulls his finger back, and I cry out at the loss. “Brandon . . .”

“Baby. When Lindy needed you this morning, I told you we’d finish this later. I told you not to get yourself off. Did you listen to me?”

He drags his coated finger through my drenched sex and teases my clit.

When I don’t answer fast enough, he pinches me and pleasure courses through my body. “Answer me, Ashlyn.”

I lean my head back against his chest and admit. “No. I didn’t.”

I didn’t want my fingers. I didn’t want a vibrator. I just wanted him.

I always just want him.

He picks me up and lays me out on the counter. “Good fucking girl,” he growls in my ear as he plunges in again, knuckle deep.

“Fuck . . .” I keel. “Right there.” With shaky hands, I grasp at his sweats, squirming with need.

He groans as his hand moves under my shirt and pushes up my bra.

When he cups my breasts and grazes his finger over my nipple, my belly tightens, and heat pools between my legs. So fucking close already.

Always so close.

With my knees bent and Brandon cradled between my thighs, I arch into him, desperate and needy. Always so needy with him. I pull his face down, and his warm tongue teases my nipple. His mouth closes around it—and fuck, yes—I tug at his head, and he teases and tugs and scrapes my nipple with his tongue and teeth.

I cry out and close my eyes, my orgasm just out of reach.

“I need you,” I murmur as I lift my hips and rock into his hand.

“Eyes on me, Ashlyn. You need to watch me fuck this greedy cunt, baby.”

God, yes. That filthy fucking mouth.

I love that voice.

That commanding tone sets my entire body on fire.

My eyes fly open as my body tightens like a bow strung tight, waiting to be used all damn day.

“Good girl.” He pulls me to him and fills me with his cock in one hard, thick, demanding thrust. We both moan before he pulls out just as quickly and carries me into the pantry, still hard against my body.

My mouth is covered with his hand just as the front-door sensor chimes, followed by the sound of people walking into the house.

Lindy’s voice calls out for me before she tells her friends I must not be home.

Brandon’s mouth skims my ear. “I saw Lindy on the monitor in the kitchen, walking up to the front door with Gracie and Evie,” he whispers and leans his forehead against mine.

There’s something so incredibly hot about the tight strain in his jaw.

I love knowing I do that to him.

His cock jumps between my thighs, and I grind down, my eyes locked on his.

“Think you can be quiet, Brandon?” His eyes flare with red hot need before I hear the girls in the kitchen.

Brandon’s eyes grow heavier and heavier as he slowly, silently leans me against the back wall. and I grind down again and angle my hips as his cock brushes my entrance.

The girl’s laughter fades away until all I hear is our shallow breathing.

Tuning everything else out.

Brandon’s hands mold to my body.

His lips press to mine. “Quiet, baby.” Then he slides back inside, hitting an entirely new angle, and *oh my fucking God*.

My head lolls back against the wall as Brandon fucks me achingly slow, and I cling to him, my nails digging into his massive shoulders.

He sucks the sweet spot where my neck and shoulder meet, and I open my mouth on a silent scream.

“Shh . . .”

“Don’t stop,” I whisper, pleading but practically silent against his lips, then tightening my legs around his waist.

“So fucking pretty,” he growls in my ear. “So fucking mine.”

He cradles my face in his hand, worshipping my mouth and pushing me higher and higher until there’s nowhere to go and nothing to do but shatter into a million pieces. My orgasm rips through me in a violent, crashing wave.

Brandon swallows my silent screams as he fucks me through my orgasm. Never making a sound. Never missing a beat. Pounding into me. Filling me over and over until I can’t move or speak or fucking think, and he finally comes.

I have no idea how much time goes by before he lowers me to the floor, then helps me dress while a dopey smile spreads across my face.

For a hot second, I feel like a teenager trying not to get caught. But then I remember I have a teenager who I hope and pray is nowhere near ready to have sex yet, and push that thought aside.

We listen for voices or signs of life. “Do you think it’s safe?”

Brandon presses his ear up against the door and waits. “I don’t hear them, and those girls aren’t usually quiet.”

“Okay.” I kiss his lips and smile deviously. “I’ll go first.”

“You always go first. That’s the rule, baby.” His hand snakes out and smacks my ass, and I gasp and giggle.

“Such a gentleman.” I quietly open the door and step into the kitchen, followed by Brandon, who quite literally plows me over as I stop on a dime. His hand reaches out and steadies me before I can face-plant, and I stare in horror at Everly Sinclair, who’s sitting at my counter, her phone in her hand. Her pretty blue eyes are huge orbs of shock.

She looks down at our two phones on the counter, then picks one up and offers it to us. “Pretty sure this is yours, Dixon. It’s been blowing up for a few minutes.”

He takes it from her with horror-filled eyes.

This is bad.

We just got caught.

Like teenagers.

By a teenager.

“I just ordered a pizza. It should be here soon.” She stands from the chair and shoves her phone in her pocket, then points at my shirt. “You might want

to fix your buttons, Mrs. K. And don't worry. I didn't hear anything. I swear."

Ohmygod.

I stand there, frozen in place, unsure if I'm on the verge of laughing or crying, until she's out of sight, then lean my head against Brandon's chest. "Did that actually just happen?"

"You think she's telling Lindy?" he asks.

"Oh yeah. That girl can't keep anything to herself." *Shit.* "Who's texting you?"

Brandon opens his phone, and I read it over his shoulder, trying to hold in my laughter.

DAPHNE

Dixon. Rumor has it, we should be including you in this group text.

INDY

Welcome to the spouses' safe place. Buckle up and be grateful we all refuse to be part of the traditional family group chat. Rule one of fight club We stay banned together as a family and hold our ground. You do not want to be in that chat.

BASH

Rule one of fight club is we don't talk about fight club. Watch the movie, Indy.

SAM

I thought I removed myself from THIS fucking chat.

CADE

You did. I added you back.

WREN

If I'm in this, so are you, Beneventi.

SAM

I'm scarier than you, Davenport.

MADDIE

Don't scare my brother. Remember he's a Dixon and Dixons don't do well in large group settings. We're not what you call good at people-ing.

DAPHNE

You make him sound like a scared animal.

CADE

If I'm in this, Dix has to be in this too.

MADDIE

You're married to the scariest Kingston, Cade.

BASH

Umm . . . I beg to differ. My wife is insane.

JULES

She is fucking nuts. But she's fun.

SAM

Amelia's got Scarlet and Lenny both beat. It's the quiet ones you've got to worry about.

MADDIE

Hehehe . . . Yup. Us quiet ones are always scary.

JULES

You couldn't be scary if you covered yourself in pig's blood and walked around town with a machete, Mads.

WREN

Well that was oddly specific, Jules.

JULES

Kenzie's been on a scary movie kick. I blame her.

INDY

Do you think we scared him away?

DIXON

Uh . . . No. You didn't scare me away. But this is the weirdest fucking text chain I've ever read.

JULES

Ha! Just wait till you accidentally read one of the Kingston chats and then feel like you need to bleach your eyes. I think they might be feral.

DAPHNE

And you still married one.

JULES

His dick is H-U-G-E.

SAM

I'm out.

BASH

Me too.

CADE

Poker this week?

SAM

Guys only?

BASH

I'm in.

DAPHNE

You guys suck.

WREN

Welcome to the family, Dix.

DIXON

Thanks?

“They’re not wrong, you know.”

He wraps an arm around me and pockets his phone. “Which part?”

“All of it,” I sigh. “Dating me doesn’t just mean me. I come with a daughter and a ton of overly involved family members. Most days, they *are* feral.”

“Guess I better take you on an actual date then.” He kisses my temple.

“Why . . . Brandon Dixon, are you asking me out?” I tease.

“I think it’s about time, don’t you, baby?”

“I’ve got your come dripping down my legs as we stand here. I’d say a date isn’t out of the question, big guy.”

He scoops me up into his arms and walks toward the stairs. “Sounds like you need a shower. Want some help?”

I wrap my arms around his neck. “Always, Brandon. Always.”

UNKNOWN



*Y*ou haven't responded to me, my pet.
I don't like being ignored.
I think I might be done waiting.

-The Collector

BRANDON



“*H*ow have you not taken her on a date yet?” Watty looks at me from his hospital bed the day after his surgery, with a spoon in one hand and piss-yellow Jello in the other.

“How the fuck can you eat that shit? It looks disgusting.”

He makes a show of putting a big spoonful in his mouth before swallowing. “Don’t answer a question with a question and think you can get out of this one, Dix. You’ve been living with her for how long now? Weeks? Months?”

Yeah . . . I guess technically, it’s been months if you count my time on the couch. “Listen. You know what the season’s like. And Lindy had a competition in Chicago last week. Life’s been a little crazy.”

“Did she win?” Watty asks as he finishes the extra cup of Jello he conned the nurse into giving him earlier.

“Yeah. She’s amazing.”

“Look at that proud papa smile,” he teases, and if I was allowed to hit the fucker, I would. “Did you tell her partner if he drops her, you’re gonna drop *him*?”

“No,” I grumble. “Ashlyn told me I couldn’t threaten him.”

Watty makes a whipping motion and noise. “Damn, man. She’s got you locked down.”

“Shut the fuck up and help me figure out where to take her tonight. I was thinking about that little place on South Street we used to go to. The one that had the best tacos.”

“She’s a fucking heiress. You can’t take her to a place with paper plates, no matter how good the tacos are, you idiot. Take her to Speakeasy in the

basement of the hotel with the shitty elevator. It's classy without being showy. Chicks like that shit. Plus, they have real napkins, not paper towels."

"That's actually a good idea." I pull out my phone and make a reservation for tonight, then stand and push the rest of Watty's food out of his reach, just to fuck with him.

"What the fuck, man. Give me back my sammy."

"No one calls a sandwich a *sammy* past the age of eight, dickhead." I pat his stomach. "Besides. Just because you're not playing anymore doesn't mean you need to get fat."

He flexes both arms. "Fuck off, asshole. I'm not fat. I'm fucking hungry."

"Didn't your momma ever tell you not to eat your dessert before dinner?" I inch the rolling tray back just a bit, and he grabs it out of my hands.

"It's lunch. Momma never said nothing about lunch."

I look at him, broken in that fucking hospital bed and cringe. Surgery went well. He's lucky. "Call me if you need a ride home when they release you, brother."

"Hey, Dix . . . Have fun with your girl."

My girl . . . Yeah, that never gets old.



BRANDON

Hey shortstuff, you got a free hour or two after school today?

LINDY

For you, big guy? Of course.

BRANDON

Pick you up from school?

LINDY

Any chance you can come now so I can skip calc?

BRANDON

You got a test?

LINDY

Nope.

BRANDON

Promise not to tell your mom?

LINDY

Are you above bribery?

BRANDON

Nope.

LINDY

Perfect. I know just what I want.



“You gonna tell me where we’re going?” Lindy asks as we pull into the parking lot behind the row of stores in Center City, Philly.

“I actually wanted to ask you something first.” I turn off the truck and take a minute before I face the teenage extortionist.

“What’s up?” She tucks her phone back in her purse and gives me her full attention.

“You know I love your mom . . .”

Lindy’s violet blue eyes grow wide as she looks over my shoulder, then suddenly back to me. “Holy shit. That’s Tiffany’s. I recognize the building. Ohmygod. You’re gonna propose to my mom.”

Well, I guess she figured that out.

“I’d like to ask her to marry me, but I want to make sure I do it right. Sometimes people ask someone’s father for their blessing because he’s supposed to represent the person that loves them most in the world, giving permission to the new person to love them more. At least, that’s what Maddie

told me after Hudson asked me for permission to marry her.”

“Mom doesn’t have a dad.”

“Yeah, shortcake, I know. But your mom has you. And no one in this world will ever mean to her what *you* mean to her. She’ll never love anyone the way she loves you. And I thought it was only appropriate to get your blessing before I ask her to marry me. Because I’m not just asking her, I’m asking you too. I’m asking to be a part of your family. I’ll never be able to replace your dad, and I’ll never try—”

“I never knew my dad, big guy. He died before I was born, and I’ve read about how he died. It’s not like he really loved my mom, so he probably didn’t care about me either. Replace away.” A pretty pink rises on her cheeks before she whispers, “If I could ever choose someone to replace him, I’d choose you.”

“Come here, shortcake.” I wrap my arms around her, and she buries her head against my shoulder. “I’d choose you all day, every day, kid. I love you, Madeline.”

“Love you too, big guy.”



Once we’ve picked out the perfect ring, I find myself in Lenny and Bash’s living room, surrounded by a mountain of English bulldog puppies. A literal mountain. Lindy is sitting in the center of them while they all climb on top of each other to get her attention. But I’m pretty sure the shy little white one—the runt sitting off to the side, fascinated by the new sparkly infinity necklace Madeline picked out at the jewelers earlier—is the one she’s going home with.

The one her mom might kill me over.

And seconds later, when she picks the tiniest puppy up and it licks her nose, I know I’m screwed.



We push a cart through the local pet store while Lindy extorts me for puppy toy imaginable. “Kid, it’s a dog. A little one. Does it seriously need a hundred-dollar bed it’s going to shit on?”

“Don’t be such a grump, Brandon. You don’t want Myrtle sleeping on the cold floor.” She kisses the puppy’s head, and I add the bed to the growing pile.

“When you said bribery, I didn’t know this was what you had in mind,” I grunt.

“When you said we were going to run an errand, I didn’t know we were picking out an engagement ring for Mom. I may have adjusted my bribe to the size of your secret.”

I pat my pocket, just to confirm the small blue box is still there and move into the food aisle. “Did you know Bash’s dog, Butkus, was actually one of the puppies from my old college roommate’s dog, Rocky?”

She crinkles her eyes and runs a hand over Myrtle’s soft fur. “Was Rocky a boy or a girl?”

“A girl. Jamie was drunk when he named her. But he loved that dog.” Me, not so much back then. But I kinda like that one of Rocky’s grandbabies is coming home with us.

“O-kay . . . You guys were so weird.”

“Yeah. We were.” I smile and pat my pocket again. “You think your mom’s gonna like the ring?”

“I think she’s gonna love it.” She kisses my cheek, then holds Myrtle up so she can do the same.

Ashlyn’s gonna fucking kill me.



I’m stretched out on the couch with *Sports Center* playing on TV while Lindy sits on the floor with the puppy snoring on her lap when Ashlyn comes through the door after work.

“Honey . . . I’m home,” she calls out, then drops her bag on the chair and curls up next to me before her body goes rigid. “What is *that*?”

Lindy turns slowly and holds up the puppy. “Mom, meet Myrtle.”

“Myrtle?” Ashlyn asks skeptically. “Are we puppy-sitting?”

“Yes, Myrtle. Like Moaning Myrtle from *Harry Potter*. And no. She’s ours. Brandon and I got her today from Lenny and Bash. Every girl needs a dog, Mom.” Just then, Myrtle opens her eyes and yawns, her ridiculously long tongue curling out in front of her.

Ashlyn shakes her head, then whispers in my ear, “Every girl needs a man with a tongue that long. How did my daughter con you into a dog?”

“Lucky you, everything about me is long, baby,” I whisper back, and Ashlyn giggles, then Lindy groans.

“You guys are gross. I can’t even hear what you’re saying, but she’s blushing. Eww. You’re too old to blush, Mom.”

“I better not have to do one single thing for little Miss Myrtle, Madeline, or so help me, my face will be red with anger. Got it?”

Lindy stands carefully with the puppy. “I got it. But we can keep her, right?”

Ashlyn rests her head on my shoulder and sighs. “Yes, we can keep her. But remind me to call your sister and tell her she owes me.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Mom.” Lindy rushes the two of us and kisses her mom, then me as Myrtle nips at my nose. “I promise. I’ll do it all.” She takes a few steps back and heads for the stairs. “I’m going to go FaceTime the girls.”

I wait until she’s out of sight before running my knuckle down Ashlyn’s cheek. “Think we should break it to her that Myrtle’ll want to go out in the middle of the night?”

“Nope.” She presses her lips to mine. “Let her find that one out herself.”

I slide my hands down to her hips and lift her onto my lap, and my girl comes willingly. Her fingers dig into my hair as she opens for me, and I devour her mouth. “We’ve got two hours, baby.”

She cocks her head to the side, smiling hesitantly. “For what? Not another dog, right?”

“No. Not another dog.” I drag my tongue along her lip, then bite down. “I’m taking you on a date.”

“Ohh.” She runs her teeth over her bottom lip. “Like you’re going to wine and dine me? Should I tell you now that I’m a sure thing or let you find that out after?”

This woman.

She’s class and elegance.

Kind and soft and warm and caring.

And funny. She's so fucking funny.

I cup her face in my hands and press my forehead against hers. "I love you, Ashlyn." The words slip out as naturally as my next breath. "Every beat of my heart belongs to you. It always will."

"Oh my God," she whispers as tears pool in her dark green eyes. "I love you too, Brandon. I think a piece of me fell in love with you a lifetime ago, and I never let go of that piece. I hid it for safekeeping because I think I hoped we'd find our way back to each other one day."

I shift and pull the box from my pocket, then crack it open. "I wasn't going to do this now. I had a plan. We have a reservation. I was going to do this at dinner."

"Brandon," she gasps.

"Lindy helped me pick it out. Do you like it?"

She nods her head as the first tear falls. "Do you have something you're going to ask me?"

"Marry me, Ashlyn. I want to spend my life loving you and Lindy. I think there's a reason you came back into my life when you did. I had to work on myself before I was a good enough man for you and Lindy. But I am now, and I'll spend the rest of my life proving it to you, if you let me." With shaking hands, I take the ring out of the box and slide it on her ring finger. The brilliant-cut solitaire sparkles on her long finger, just like Lindy said it would.

"You have nothing to prove, Brandon Dixon. I'm yours. And I'm pretty sure I claimed your heart as mine that night in the elevator when my hand rested over it, relaxing more with each beat. You're my home, Brandon. My safe space. You're my haven, and I love you with my whole heart and soul."

She presses her lips to mine, her hot tears trailing over both our faces.

"You've got to say it, Mom," Lindy squeals as she flies down the stairs on heavy feet, the dog still in her arms.

I open my arm for shortcake and pull her down next to us.

And my God, these two women take my breath away.

"Yes, Brandon. Yes, I'll marry you."

ASHLYN



I knock on Lindy's door and wait for her to open it. "You ready for dinner?" We decided to make tonight a family date, instead of just Brandon and me. "Brandon should be back from dropping Myrtle off with Hudson and Maddie any second, and I'm starving."

"Two minutes," she promises and darts back into her closet as I laugh and grab my chiming phone from the pocket of my dress.

Brandon asked if it would be all right if he talked to Maddie before we told everyone else, and I swear I fell just a little bit harder.

Apparently, Hudson didn't care.

HUDSON

Ashlyn's got a secret.

LENNY

Am I the only one who hears Huddy singing this when I read his text?

JACE

Dude. What did I say about pulling out?

SCARLET

You actually said taking out, which is something totally different from pulling out, jackoff.

AMELIA

OMG. Are you pregnant? Is she pregnant?

MAX

Congratulations, Ashlyn. That's great news.

SAWYER

My wife the OBGYN says you're a complete dick for not letting her share the baby news herself, Hud.

BECKS

My wife, Ashlyn's BFF, says there's no way she's pregnant and Hudson knows first.

ASHLYN

I'm not pregnant. But Hudson is definitely an asshole.

JACE

Oh thank God. I'm too old to be a big brother again.

SCARLET

You're too something, alright.

ASHLYN

I was going to wait to tell you all at the game this weekend, but I guess Hudson didn't like that plan.

HUDSON

In my defense, Maddie knows, so I know. Because – hello – husband. And you all should know by now I can't keep a fucking secret.

LENNY

Should I be insulted? Why does Maddie know?

HUDSON

Ashlyn . . . Care to tell the class?

ASHLYN

Maddie knows because Brandon wanted to make sure she knew before anyone else. Well, besides Lindy. She knew first. He asked her for permission.

MAX

Permission for what exactly?

ASHLYN

Permission to marry me.

SCARLET

It's about fucking time.

LENNY

Finally.

AMELIA

He's a keeper.

JACE

Did you say yes?

HUDSON

Of course she said yes.

SAWYER

Congratulations Ashlyn!

ASHLYN

Thanks guys. I'm kinda surprised there wasn't a bet going on this.

HUDSON

My wife might be small, but she's fucking mighty and she'd kill anyone that bet against her brother.

ASHLYN

Smart woman.



When we pull up in front of the hotel, I turn and glare at Brandon. “Here? Really?”

“I have reservations for Speakeasy. Don’t worry, we’ll take the steps.” His dimple pops deep in his cheek as the valet opens my door. “Good evening, Mrs. Kingston.”

“Good evening, Rob.” I smile back and wait for Lindy and Brandon, who skims his lips over my ear. “Not for much longer, if I have anything to say about it.”

I link my fingers with his, and he lifts them to his lips while we walk through the door.

“Ashlyn,” Henry calls from where he stands, discussing something with one of the bellhops. “I didn’t expect to see you or Juliette until our meeting Monday.”

“Hi, Henry.” I don’t miss Brandon’s possessive hold as his hand slides around my hip. “Yes. I’ll be here Monday to discuss that event. But tonight,

Brandon, Madeline, and I are having dinner at Speakeasy.”

“Mom and Brandon just got engaged,” Lindy announces, giddy.

Henry’s eyes fly down to my ring before coming back to mine, a somewhat shocked expression there. “Well, that’s wonderful news. I’ll have a bottle of Dom sent to your table.”

“Oh, please don’t, Henry. You know that stuff goes straight to my head.”

Brandon squeezes my hip, and I smile at Henry. “We’ll see you Monday.”

“Looking forward to it, Ashlyn,” he calls out as we head for the steps that lead down to Speakeasy.

“I don’t like him,” Brandon murmurs when we follow a hostess moments later to our table.

“That’s just leftover annoyance from the elevator,” I whisper back before sitting down. “Ignore him. He’s harmless.”

“Yeah, big guy. You already won.” Lindy lifts her glass of water into the air and taps it dramatically with a spoon. “I’d like to make a toast. To our family. It certainly took you two long enough to figure out what Maddie and I already knew.”

“What?” I sputter and stare at my daughter.

“I told Maddie years ago I thought you two belonged together,” she tells us proudly.

Brandon cocks a brow. “And what exactly did Maddie tell you?”

“She said to leave the adulting to the adults. But she smiled and winked when she said it. It was just a matter of time before we worked our magic. And look now. Everyone’s happy.”

Brandon smiles like he just won a Superbowl. “Do you always get your way, shortcake?”

“Yup. Most of the time, big guy. You’re lucky I’d been planning on you and Mom all along.”

He reaches for my hand under the table and squeezes. “I certainly am.”



*W*hen we stop at Hudson and Maddie’s house to pick up Myrtle, my plan is to be in and out. But judging by the amount of cars in the

driveway, I'm pretty sure my soon-to-be sister-in-law had other ideas.

Brandon gets out of the car, groaning. "Is the whole family here?"

I do a quick scan of the cars as Lindy rushes inside and drop my head against his chest. "I think so."

"Baby." He gathers me in his arms and buries his face in my hair. "Can't we just go home? Let Lindy get the dog. Hell, let her spend the night. Let her enjoy everyone else. How about we be sneaky and just go now?"

His hands slide down to my ass, and there's no hiding the delicious way my body immediately reacts to his. "Take me home, Brandon. Take me home and take me to bed. Now."

He picks me up and throws me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, then jogs across the lawn with my ass in his face and my hand on his ass. "What about the car?" I laugh.

"We'll get it later," he answers, never breaking a sweat or breaking his stride as he gets us to the door and pulls out his key.

"Brandon." I push up against his back and pinch his ass. "We're blocking Max in over there."

"He'll live, baby. But if I don't get you inside this house for ten fucking minutes before one of our family members interrupts us, *I* might not."

Brandon hauls me into the house and deals with the alarm, then sets me on my feet.

I stare at him, so happy, I could cry.

"Baby . . . what's with the tears? Did I hurt you?" He gently wraps a hand around my neck, and his thumbs sweeps over my face.

I dig my fingers into his hair and pull his face down to mine. "You said *our* family," I whisper against his mouth as I melt into a puddle at his feet. "Ours, Brandon. Yours and mine. I guess I'm just a little overwhelmed over how happy I am."

He scoops me up like a groom about to carry his bride over the threshold, and chills race over my skin. "I'm making it my mission in life to make you happy, Ashlyn."

I press my lips to his. "That goes both ways, big guy."

He sets me on my feet once we're in my room and stares, those deep, dark eyes filled with desire. "I want to worship you, Ashlyn. I want to lay you out on that bed and fucking feast on your pretty pussy for hours before I finally let you come on my cock."

Oh, God. Yes, please.

Without thought, I turn my back to him and move my hair. “Unzip me?”

“Baby, we’re gonna have to make this fast. You know someone is gonna knock on the goddamned door at any minute.”

I strip out of my dress and turn around in my most expensive black Le Désir lingerie, silk thigh-highs included. I run the tips of my fingers over the tops of my breasts, teasing my nipples through the sheer demi cups. “Then you better fuck me fast and hard this time. We can go slow and soft after everyone’s asleep.”

I giggle as I’m picked up and tossed on the bed. “Keep those shoes on, baby.”

Brandon strips naked faster than ever before, and my mouth waters over every inch of hard muscle. “You are so fucking sexy,” I moan and slide my hand down the front of my panties, running my fingers through my wet sex.

“Hands off my pussy, baby.” He stalks my way, and I don’t move my hand, feeling a little extra naughty and enjoying the possessive gleam in his eye. “You don’t trust me to take care of you?”

He pulls my fingers from my body and sucks them clean, then drags me to the edge of the bed and settles between my legs, and I pant, “I trust you to take care of everything. I was just taking the edge off.”

“What if I want you on edge?” He grabs my knees and pulls me closer, then runs his hands up my legs and circles them around his back.

I dig my stilettos into Brandon’s solid ass and squeeze my breasts together, enjoying the way his pupils blow wide in his eyes. “I’d say you’ve gotten your wish. I need your cock . . . now. Please. Give it to me.”

Brandon fists his thick cock, and I lick my lips. My mouth waters over the way his skin is stretched so tight, each vein pops, while precum pearls at the thick tip.

He runs it through my sex, coating himself in my wetness before notching the head of his cock at my entrance. His dark eyes watch as he finally presses inside me, and I gasp and tighten my legs around him.

“I fucking love you, Ashlyn.” Those big rough hands dig into my hips, and his eyes lock with mine, an understanding passing between us.

“I love you too, Brandon. Now please, God, fuck me. I need you.”

He lifts my ass from the bed and slams me against his cock, seating himself inside me, balls deep, in one hard, fast, mind-numbingly perfect thrust. “You’re mine, Ashlyn.”

“Yours,” I moan and reach for his arms, my nails scoring his skin. “Only

ever yours.” I moan and pant and claw at the sheets, wanting him. Needing everything.

“Mine to protect.” He picks up speed as his hips piston in and out, fucking me mercilessly. “Mine to love.” The base of his cock hits my clit. Every. Single. Time.

“Oh God, I’m so close.”

“Tell me who this cunt belongs to, baby.” His hot words are each punctuated with another snap of those strong hips.

“You,” I cry out, staring into his fathomless eyes. “Only you. My heart. My body. My soul, Brandon. They’ve only ever been yours.”

He leans over me and bites my lip before sucking my tongue inside his mouth.

Then he slams into me again and again, stealing my breath from my body and all thoughts from my mind as I shatter, pulsing and quaking and clenching around him.

Brandon climbs on the bed next to me, then picks me up and puts me in his lap.

I wrap my arms around his neck and crush my mouth to his, not ready to lose this connection. Then I reach between my legs and line him up with me, sliding down over his cock and hiss at the perfect pain. My entire body is one giant exposed nerve. Hypersensitive. But fuck . . . nothing has ever felt so good.

“That’s it, baby. Ride my cock,” he growls against my lips, and I swear to God, I feel it all the way down to the depths of my core.

He cups the back of my head, angling me for a deeper kiss.

Fucking my mouth the way I’m riding his cock, and I can’t get enough.

I reach back and tear my shoes off, arching my back and tucking my feet under his thighs for better leverage.

My arched back gives Brandon the perfect angle to grab both breasts with those rough hands, and he tweaks one nipple while he sucks and bites and tugs the other until I’m a panting mess on the verge of my second orgasm.

I drop my shoes to the floor, and a moan builds in the back of my throat.

One arm wraps around my back, holding me against his chest until we’re sharing the same breath, unable to get closer. My hips circle him in small, tight movements as his hands guide me, rocking with me. Loving me.

Everything is intense.

The quiet room.

Our shared breathing.

Each tight move.

Until finally, we crash and soar. Together.

“Fuck, Ashlyn.” Brandon swallows my moan. “You’re so fucking pretty when you come. So pretty and so fucking mine.”

I dig my fingers into his hair and yank his head up, then kiss him so passionately, so possessively, I don’t want to stop. “All fucking yours, Brandon. Always yours.”



I leave Brandon passed out in bed a few minutes later and text Jules.

ASHLYN

Hey. Would you apologize to Maddie for us? We just needed tonight for ourselves. Brandon’s asleep. You think Becks could walk Lindy back over here before you guys leave?”

JULES

Sure. I tried to tell Maddie it was too soon for a party.

ASHLYN

Is she pissed?

JULES

Not really. But Dixon’s going to be kissing her ass for a few days.

I snicker to myself. He does enjoy kissing *my* ass, but it’s not really the same thing.

ASHLYN

Thanks Jules. Lindy knows how to work the alarm. I'm going to bed.

JULES

Damn. That post engagement sex really did you right, huh?

ASHLYN

You have no idea.

JULES

I always knew he'd be a stallion.

ASHLYN

This man is a thoroughbred. And he's all mine.

JULES

I'm so happy for you. I can't wait to plan your wedding.

ASHLYN

Me too. See you Sunday.

My wedding . . . I never had one of those.

I had a marriage on paper.

It saved my life, but it wasn't done out of love.

I never felt for John what I feel for Brandon.

This is my chance to do it the way I should have all those years ago with the one man it always should have been. I plug my phone in and set it on my dresser, then throw one of Brandon's Kings tees on and slide back in bed.

Brandon's arm immediately lifts until I snuggle up into his side and lay my head against his chest. Then he lowers it and tugs me closer.

"I love you, big guy."

"With every beat of my heart, baby."

ASHLYN



I roll over the next morning to hide my cold feet under Brandon's warm legs, but he's not there. Stretching my hand across the cool sheets, I grab a note from his pillow.

Took shortcake for a run around the lake. Coffee is made. Be back soon.

Brandon

My days of running are long gone, but this man knows my love language, and that involves any form of caffeine. After a nice long, hot shower where I stretch out all my deliciously overused muscles, I throw on a pair of leggings and one of Brandon's old Kroydon University hoodies because seriously, there's just something about wearing your man's clothes. Maybe it's because I never did it when I was younger. Or maybe it's just that I love being surrounded by something that's his. But it makes me so happy. Once I add a pair of fuzzy socks, I'm good to go and head downstairs.

The mouthwatering aroma of freshly brewed coffee gives me my first dopamine hit of the day. The second comes when I grab my blanket and my journal and snuggle into my chair by the lake. Okay, so I'm that girl—and

yes, I take a picture of myself holding my coffee with Kroydon Falls in the background and my sparkly engagement ring catching the morning light.

Definitely social media worthy.

I upload the pic to Ever After's page with a quick post.

Looks like Jules & I are planning my wedding next! (Want this to stand out in Vellum)

After a few minutes, the leaves crunch, followed by little-girl giggles. Teagan and Aurora run over to me, followed, albeit a little more slowly, by their mother.

I quickly close my journal and drop it and my coffee to the table before Aurora climbs into my lap. "Aunt Ashlyn, you missed your party last night. There was balloons."

Teagan ignores us completely and kicks her little soccer ball through the leaves while Maddie sits in the chair next to me. "Yeah, Aunt Ashlyn. You missed your party. I wonder what you could have possibly been doing instead of celebrating with your family?" She's teasing me, but her tone is light, and her dimples are popping, just like her brother's do when he tries not to smile but fails.

"Sorry about that," I offer, but it's a lie. Last night was perfect.

"Sure you are." She sips her coffee and kicks her legs up. "So why don't you tell Aurora why you missed those balloons, Ashlyn."

Aurora tucks herself against my chest and twirls my hair around her fingers. "Uncle Brandy didn't come either. He was supposed to be there."

I look over the top of Aurora's head and glare at her mother. "Uncle Brandon wasn't feeling well, sweetheart. I had to take care of him." I lift my brow, daring Maddie to correct me, but she finally gives in and smiles as she lifts her mug, saluting me.

"I'm sure he felt much better after you took care of him," Maddie mocks, and Aurora's head pops up.

"Did you make him better?" Aurora asks before going back to her twirling.

I kiss her nose and smile as her eyes grow heavy. "Yeah, baby. I'm pretty sure he's all better."

Not long after, Hudson grabs Teagan for soccer practice, and Aurora falls asleep, cuddled up on me while Maddie and I finish our coffee. "You forget what it feels like to have a baby asleep on you after a few years," I admit.

"I still can't believe she's already two. She's always been my sleeper."

Teagan never slept. That kid was born with FOMO. Not this one. She's up every day by six and napping by ten most of the time." She looks lovingly at her little girl. "Want me to take her?"

I shake my head.

"So where's my brother? It wouldn't be fair if I only harassed you."

"He and Lindy are doing the long run around the lake this morning. They should be back soon." Aurora pops her thumb in her mouth and digs her head in under my chin, and I sigh. Content.

"Do you think you guys want kids?"

I look over at Maddie to gauge whether she's teasing or serious.

Serious wins.

"I don't know. We've never really talked about it. I'm not sure if I want to do it all over again. Lindy's in high school already. I don't know if I can go back to midnight feedings and diapers."

"Yeah," she admits wistfully. "That's what I thought too."

"And now?" I push.

Her smile grows. "Now I don't have much choice. I'm pregnant. *Again*," she laughs. "Probably with another girl—because God is definitely a woman who wants to torture my husband."

We both watch as Brandon and Lindy race each other to the dock in front of us. Lindy falls on the leaves dramatically, huffing and puffing. "I refuse to accept that you're in better shape than me."

Brandon pulls each knee up to his chest, stretching out his quads, looking like he could easily go another ten miles. His shorts hang off lean hips, and a beat-up tee clings to his broad chest. I should probably feel bad about the filthy thoughts I'm having while I hold his niece, but I don't. Not one bit.

Not when he walks over and drops a kiss to my head, then hers, and I pull him back in for another. Not when my daughter groans or his sister gags. I smile against his lips instead. "Missed you when I woke up."

"Yeah. I needed to show Lindy football players are tougher than hockey players."

Lindy finally shows signs of life and stands up with her hands planted on her hips. "I. Am. Not. A. Hockey. Player. I'm literally thrown through the air and expected to land on a single blade that, might I add, is less than half a quarter inch thick. Let me see a hockey player do that, and I'll be impressed." She looks away from him for a second. "Hi, Mads."

"Hi, Linds." These two and their nicknames.

“What are you two up to this morning,” Brandon asks us innocently.

Dumbass. His sister is definitely going to lay into him about skipping last night.

“Well,” Maddie starts. “I was just telling Ashlyn that Hudson knocked me up again.”

Brandon immediately pulls a tight face, horrified at the thought of Maddie having sex.

“I’m almost thirty and have two daughters, big brother. It’s not like you don’t already know what’s happening.”

Brandon’s horrified face morphs into something else, and he covers Lindy’s ears as the rest of us laugh, my daughter included.

“First, I can still hear you. And second, honestly, I know how babies are made, Brandon.” My girl may be a brat, but she’s a funny brat, and I’m pretty sure Brandon actually turns a little green, thinking about Lindy and sex.

Poor big guy.

Lindy wiggles out of his hold. “I’ve got to get a shower. Mom, are you taking me to ballet today?”

“Yes. Go shower. I’ll be in soon.” We watch her run into the house, and Maddie stands.

“She never slows down, does she?”

“Nope. She’s got a decision to make soon though. If she wants the Olympics, we may have to look into homeschooling.” My chest tightens at the thought. “I don’t want that for her. I want her to have a normal life, with normal pressures. But that’s her decision.”

Brandon leans down and scoops Aurora off me, then tucks her into his chest. “Come on, Mads. I’ll walk you home.”

I run my hand down Aurora’s back and squeeze Maddie. “Thank you for wanting to celebrate last night. I owe you one.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll cash in at some point.”

Brandon shakes his head. “I’ll be right back.”

Then I hear Maddie groan. “You know I got married to move away from you.”

“Sucks to be you,” he goads.

Not a bad way to spend a Saturday morning.



Brandon

Maddie's quiet as we walk inside her house, and I lay Aurora down in her bed. Maddie closes the door quietly, then turns and pokes my chest. "Really? You couldn't stop in for a minute before you went back to hide in the house, you big bum?"

"Madison. Come on. I'm not a party guy. I've never been. You know this." I wrap an arm around her, then stuff her head in my armpit, and she elbows my gut.

"I swear to God, if you wake that child up, I will junk-punch you so hard, you'll be icing your balls for a week."

She's not kidding either.

She's done it before.

We're quiet until we get back downstairs. "Don't be mad."

She plants her hands on her hips and glares. "Promise me you're not going to pull away because there's too many Kingstons."

"I moved in next door, Mads. I accepted them when you married them. I'm pretty sure you've got no chance of me pulling away, now that I'm in love with one of them."

Her face softens, and she shoves me away. "I'd hug you, but you stink."

"Love you, sis."

"Back at ya, you pain in my butt."

I walk across Maddie's lawn and stop at the mailbox before I head inside. Ashlyn's in the kitchen, scrolling through something on her laptop. "Hurry up, Lindy," she calls upstairs as I hand her the mail.

"I'm gonna go shower. You coming back after you drop her off?"

"I was going to stop by Ever After and do a little work there until she's done. I've got a meeting with Henry Monday to go over the final details for an event on Wednesday. I want to make sure I've got everything I need."

"Okay." I grab a water bottle and lean on the counter across from her. "Does the wedding planner know what she wants to do for her own wedding?"

"Has the former bachelor decided what he wants to do about his house

yet?” she teases back as she goes through the pile of mail.

“I know we talked about renting it out, but I think we should sell it. The market’s good. We’d make a profit. I don’t see the point in holding on to it.”

Ashlyn tosses a bill in her purse and looks at me. “You don’t have any sentimental attachments to the place?”

“Not really.” I shrug. “It was a good house. A safe place for me and Maddie. But she has her own house and her own family now. And so do I.”

I move onto the stool next to her, then box her in between my arms. “I know you love this house, baby. I don’t care where I live as long as it’s with you and shortcake.”

“This house is my home, Brandon. But you’re my haven. You’re my safe place. My port in the storm. You’re the person I want to share my home with. If you want to buy a different house, we can. I’m pretty sure there’s even one available on the other side of the lake.”

I grip her chin in my hand and brush my lips over hers. “Nah, baby. I’m happy here. This place is perfect.”

“Good.” She kisses me again. “Now go shower. You stink.”

“Yes ma’am.” I stand and turn to walk away as Ashlyn gasps.

Her face is white as a ghost, and her hands tremble with a legal-sized envelope in one of them and a stack of papers in the other.

“Brandon,” she barely manages to whisper as she brings her eyes to mine.

I take the papers from her hand and freeze.

My blood boils at what I’m seeing.

Sheet after sheet of pictures printed out on copy paper.

Pictures of Lindy at the skating rink.

Lindy at school.

Lindy in Cade’s gym.

Lindy in Belle’s dance studio.

Lindy on the sidelines of a football game.

I flip the last sheet and freeze.

If you won’t come to me, I’ll come to you.

-The Collector.

I take a second to pull my shit together before I turn back to Ashlyn, not wanting to scare her even more. But this motherfucker doesn't know who he's fucking with. I wrap my arms around Ashlyn and breathe her in. "Call the police. I'll call Sam."

BRANDON



Anger is a basic human reaction.

A nice man can be angry and yet not capable of action.

Rage is a visceral response to anger.

A nice man might not understand the difference.

But I'm not a nice man.

I'm a man whose family was just threatened.

A man who's listened to detectives question the woman he loves, as if she's done something wrong.

I'm a man imagining my fists closed around a faceless person's throat as I watch the life drain from his eyes. I've always known I was capable of violence if pushed to my limit.

Today, I learned what that limit is.

I may be known in this city as a nice man, but this motherfucker just mistook my kindness for weakness. And once we find him, I'm going to show him exactly what happens to people who try to fuck with my family.

Ashlyn sits on the couch with her arm wrapped around Lindy, who hasn't stopped crying since she saw the pictures. Scarlet sits next to Lindy, holding her hand, and the oldest Kingston sister looks like she might fight me for the right to destroy this *Collector*.

Sam is the only other one here, standing sentry behind the girls with me.

We asked everyone else to stay home for now.

The last thing they needed was the entire family knocking down the door.

Kingston chaos wouldn't have helped them.

"Mrs. Kingston, I'm sorry to push, but we've got to ask again, is there anyone you can think of—anyone at all—who could be doing this? An ex-

boyfriend? A disgruntled employee? Someone who might want something? It's better to give us too many names we can look into rather than none."

"No. There's no one," she tells them, and I run my hand over her shoulder and squeeze.

"What about your old coach?" She sucks in a breath, hurt shining in her already frightened eyes. "Have you had any contact with him since the Olympics?" I ask, knowing I'm opening a wound she told me about in confidence.

But my need to protect her and Lindy outweighs *everything* else.

"Mom . . . ?" Lindy asks, a question in the word.

After a long look, she turns back to the detectives. "His name is Ron Myerson. He was my Olympic coach years ago. We had a *difficult* relationship. But I haven't seen or heard from him in fifteen years."

"What do you mean by difficult?" he asks her.

"He was abusive. Physically. Mentally. My late husband handled it back then, and I never heard from Ron again. But as I'm sure you know, we lost my husband over a decade ago, and I doubt any files he may have had are still around."

Now it's Scarlet's turn to look shocked and hurt. But she doesn't say anything as Ashlyn stands from the couch and offers the detective her hand. "If I think of anything else, I'll let you know."

Clearly having been dismissed, the detectives move to the door. "Thank you, Mrs. Kingston. We'll look into Myerson. See if we can find anything. In the meantime, my advice to you is be careful. Be aware. Don't put yourself in any unnecessary situations."

"Thanks, detective. We appreciate it." Ashlyn escorts them out, then hugs Lindy. "Honey, can you go upstairs for a little bit while we figure some things out?"

Lindy wipes her eyes. "Sure. But you know I'm just going to listen from up there."

"I know. But humor me while I have a mental breakdown, and don't make me do it in front of you, okay?" She grabs Lindy's shoulders and guides her to the stairs, then waits for her to go into her room before turning to face us. "You." She points at me. "I told you that in confidence. Not so you could discuss it with two cops, giving them free rein to put it in official reports that could be leaked at any point."

"Baby." I cross the room and wrap my arms around her, and her first sob

breaks me. “Let it out. I’ve got you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Her shoulders shake, and she lets it out.

The fear. The hurt. The anger.

“I’ve got you,” I tell her softly as I look over her head at Sam, who’s messaging someone on his phone. The look he gives me tells me he knows I want this man found, then gives me a nearly unnoticeable dip of his chin. He gets it.

Ashlyn cries until she’s got nothing left in her, then tucks her face under my chin. “You’ve got a job, Brandon. And so do I. Lindy has school and training. What are we supposed to do? Stop living our lives? That’s letting this sick fuck win. And I refuse to do that. He does not control me or my life.”

I move us over to the couch and pull her down on my lap.

Needing to feel her close to me.

“It’s not permanent, Ashlyn. Just till we figure out what the fuck is going on.” I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear and cup her face. “We need to make sure you and Lindy are safe.”

“I’m putting a man on you 24/7 until this is over,” Sam informs us. Ashlyn immediately starts to argue, but he cuts her off. “Ashlyn. *Stop*. I didn’t push it before, but it’s time. This guy is escalating. He got close to Madeline.”

“Sam,” she pleads.

“You’re my family too, Ashlyn. You and the teenage troublemaker upstairs. And I protect what’s mine.” Then he looks over at me, that same understanding passing between us. “That goes for all three of you.”

Another sob catches in her throat. “If you put a bodyguard on me, can I still live my life? What about Lindy?”

“Lindy needs someone too,” I answer her, and Sam agrees.

“Sam . . .” Scarlet doesn’t look impressed. “Are you sure we shouldn’t hire a professional? Someone who does this for a living?”

“No.” I turn Ashlyn’s face to mine. “Do you trust Sam?”

“Yes,” she whispers and wipes her cheeks, then looks at Sam. “I’m trusting you with the most important thing in the world to me, Sam. If you tell me she’ll be safe with one of your guys, I believe you.”

“I’m pulling one of my best guys and putting him on Lindy. His name’s Marco, and he’s been on Amelia’s bodyguard rotation for years. She’s still home on maternity leave, so it won’t be a big deal.” Then he looks at his

phone and grins. “And my cousin, Dean, just agreed to be on you during the day. We’ll rotate guys out for the overnight shifts.”

“Sam . . .” Ashlyn sighs. “I don’t have room for another person to sleep here.”

“You don’t need room. Dix will be inside the house with you and Madeline, and my guys won’t be sleeping.”

Scarlet cuts in. “Dix has games.”

“Put me on the injured reserve list,” I tell her.

Ashlyn stands up, glaring at all of us, suddenly switching from upset to full-on pissed. “The fuck she will, Brandon Dixon. This is your last season playing. You aren’t missing a single goddamned game to play bodyguard to me. I’ll have bodyguards, so will Lindy. We’re all going to work and school like we normally would, got me?”

“Ashlyn . . .” I hold her face in my hands. “Baby, it’s not worth taking the chance that something will happen to you or Lindy.”

“Nothing is going to happen to us. Right, Sam?” My girl is refusing to accept anything less, and I’m so fucking proud, watching her stand strong and determined.

That’s the fight we need, baby.

“Nothing,” Sam promises.

“Let the record state I don’t like this,” Scarlet glares around the room.

“Neither do I,” Ashlyn argues. “But it’s my best option. So please respect it. And while you’re all at it, please fill everyone else in for me because it looks like we’re going to have two extra bodies in the box for the game tomorrow.”

“Ashlyn,” I start to argue, but she presses her lips to mine. “I’m going to your game. I’m wearing my Dixon jersey and those black heels you like, and I’m cheering on my fiancé for the very first time since you put your ring on my finger. Because that’s what I want to do. Wild horses couldn’t drag me away from that stadium tomorrow. So you better not even think about arguing with me, got it?”

I snake an arm around her waist and drag her closer. “I need you safe, baby.”

“I will be.”

A voice clears behind us. “I’ll make arrangements for the suite level to be clear of anyone who isn’t ticketed this weekend.”

“Thanks, Scarlet.” I dip my head her way.

“Take care of our girl, Dix,” she tells me.

“Your girl can hear you,” Ashlyn snarks back.

“Good. Because you’re one of us, and we take care of our own. Like Sam said, that includes all three of you.” Scarlet presses a kiss to Ashlyn’s cheek and squeezes my arm. “I’m going home. I’ll see you all at the game tomorrow.”

When we both look at Sam, he sorta smiles, if you can call it that. “I’m not going anywhere until Marco and Dean get here. Got anything to eat?”

“Sure. How do eggs sound?” Ashlyn moves into the kitchen. “Scrambled or over easy?”

He shrugs. “I’d have been happy with peanut butter and jelly. But scrambled eggs sound good.”

He waits until she’s busy, then jerks his head for me to follow him out front. “Listen to me. This is personal, Dix. This guy is someone she knows. Call it a gut instinct. And I’m telling you, man, my instincts are never fucking wrong. I’ve got my guys looking into the coach. I messaged them as soon as she gave his name. We’ll start there. Did you get anywhere with her thinking of anyone else?”

“No. Everybody loves Ashlyn. There’s nothing out of the ordinary.” I look around the front yard, not sure what else there is I can do.

“Okay. We’re going to find him.”

A car drives down the street slowly, and an uncomfortable feeling washes over me. “He better pray I’m not the one who finds him first.”

“Yeah well, if that happens, you call me before the police. Understand?”

“Yeah, man. I got ya.”



Ashlyn

Lindy plops down on the couch next to me later that night and rests her head on my shoulder. “I hate this, Mom.”

“I know, sweetheart. I do too.” I run my fingers through her hair as she picks up the remote. “It won’t be for long. But for now, we’ve got to do this for our own safety.”

“I don’t understand why I can’t spend the night at the twins’ house.”

“Because you just can’t right now. School. The rink. The ballet studio. That’s it for a little bit longer, okay?” My heart pangs as I tell her that, unsure if I’m lying. We have no idea how long this is going to take. I almost feel like I brought this on myself. Life was *too* good. I was *too* happy. Then this. And now we have bodyguards and both feel like prisoners in our own home. But I remind myself it’s for her own good and mine. “You’ll get to see them tomorrow at the game. They can come down to our box.”

“But I can’t go to theirs?” She lifts her head, pouting. “What about the sidelines? Can I go down to the sidelines during pregame?”

“We’ll see, honey. It depends on what Marco says.”

“Yeah. Marco. Ugh, Mom. Seriously . . . he’s cute, but couldn’t Sam at least have given me a bodyguard that’s not old?”

“Madeline Corrine Kingston. He’s younger than me,” I scold, and she sighs.

“Mom. That’s still old.”

“And we don’t pick bodyguards based on their looks,” I add for good measure, to which my daughter rolls her eyes and makes a noise I can’t even categorize.

“Whatever. I’m just saying it would have been fun to have a hot one.” Lindy drops her head down on the pillow, annoyed. “Whatever. Can we watch the holiday baking show? They’re making Thanksgiving desserts tonight.”

“Sure.” I hand her the remote and wrap us both in a blanket. “But we’re not baking for Thanksgiving. We’re leaving that to Amelia.”

“It’s been years, Mom. They’ve forgotten about the time you used salt instead of sugar.”

I smile. “Oh, you sweet summer child. Your brothers and sisters don’t forget. If anything, the longer it’s been, the more time they’ve had to sharpen their teasing skills. That’s why our job is always the charcuterie board. They’ll never trust us with cookies again.”

She snuggles closer to me under the blanket. “I’m going to bake a cake this year. Maybe Brandon will help me.”

“Go for it, sweet girl. But I’m still bringing the charcuterie board.”

Hours later, I’m vaguely aware I’m being carried when I feel Brandon’s steady heartbeat under my cheek. I circle my arms around his neck and enjoy the safety I only find in his arms. “I love you, big guy.”

“With every beat of my heart, baby.”

ASHLYN



“Baby,” Brandon whispers against my cheek. “I’ve got to go.”

I open my eyes and find him already showered and dressed in a suit for today’s game. “Hmmm. Have I told you how much I like you in a suit?” I reach up and grab his lapels, then pull him on top of me, fully aware he’s only there because he let me move him.

“No,” he kisses me, not caring that his breath is minty fresh and mine is . . . not. “A suit does it for you? I’ll have to remember that.”

I nod and dive back in for another kiss. “You out of a suit does even more though. Do you have an extra minute?” I slide my hands under his jacket, and Brandon rips it off his shoulders.

“You’re gonna need to get there fast, Ashlyn. Think you can keep up?” he teases as his hands move under the super soft old t-shirt of his I’ve stolen to sleep in.

Ripping off his belt, I shove down his pants and climb into his lap. I moan in his mouth as he runs his finger through my sex and slides my panties to the side. In my next breath, he’s inside me, and I’m clenching around him. “I’m not gonna need ten minutes.”

His hands cup my breast as I roll my hips over his, and I’m right there already.

“Fuck, baby. You feel so good.”

“You gonna come inside me with that big fat cock?” I ask on a raspy moan, and Brandon jerks back.

“Such dirty words coming from that pretty little mouth.” He nips my lips. “I fucking love it.”

I grind down while leaning back until my orgasm comes crashing down,

hard and fast and so fucking good, I fight to not scream so loud the whole neighborhood will hear me.

“Fuck . . .” Brandon groans and empties himself inside me, holding me close, with his lips locked on my throat. “So damn good, Ashlyn. Always so good.”

I score my nails over his scalp and hold his face to mine. “Always. Now go win me a game.”



“Mom,” Lindy calls out from the kitchen as I tie a long black ribbon in a bow around my ponytail and grab my purse.

“I’m coming,” I answer as I rush down the steps. Dean Beneventi is sitting at my kitchen counter, glaring at Easton, who stands next to Kenzie and Lindy.

“Easton,” I throw my arms around him and squeeze. “I didn’t know you were home.”

“Hey, Ashlyn,” He pats me a little awkwardly and steps back, then looks over at Dean. “I’ve got a game in Jersey tomorrow, so I asked if I could fly in early.”

“Mom, can I ride to the game with Kenzie and Easton? He’s going to pick up the twins too.”

I look over at Dean, who came inside after Brandon left, leaving Marco outside. He’s been around our family as long as Amelia’s been married to Sam. He might be Sam and Bash’s cousin, but they treat him more like a brother. “What do you think?”

“I don’t like him,” Dean grumbles.

“What?” I ask, shocked, then look at Easton. “What did you do?”

Easton’s hands fly up in defense. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Keep it that way,” Dean growls. “Marco will follow them,” he tells me, then levels Easton with an icy glare. “Do not lose him, got it?”

“Whatever, Dean. I won’t let her out of my sight,” Easton tells him, and a muscle clenches in Dean’s jaw.

“I said *don’t lose Marco*. You’re not taking anyone down with a hockey stick today, kid. Let the grownups do our jobs and stay out of our way.”

“Okay. Let’s put some of the testosterone away, shall we?” I grab my keys and look around at everyone. “Yes, you can ride with Easton and Kenzie. Marco will be behind you, and Dean and I will be in the car with him.”

“Ashlyn . . .” Dean whines—yup, whines—because that’s Dean. A deadly goofball. Not a combination you see often. “We don’t need three cars. I think it’s unnecessary for you both to even come to the game. We’ve got security in the suite. The entire family will be there, and I’ll be leaving with Brandon. It seems like overkill.”

Okay, *overkill* may not be the best choice of words. But it seems like a lot.

“You questioning Sam, evil stepmother?” he chides.

“Who me, Mr. Supernatural? I mean, who would ever question Sam and Dean? Even evil beings shake in their boots when they run into you guys in your Impala.” We’ve been teasing each other for years, and even a stalker isn’t going to stop that.

“Hey, you loved the Impala.” His crooked smile pulls at his lips, and I laugh.

“Adults are so strange,” Kenzie groans.

Easton shoves her away. “I’m an adult, Kenz.”

“No, you’re not,” Kenzie and Lindy both answer.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” I tell the room, then herd them outside like cattle, more than ready to watch my favorite King kick some Sentinel ass on the field today.



*M*y daughter, who was so scared yesterday, seems to have completely forgotten there’s a threat out there right now. At least, she has by the time we get into the private suite at Kings Stadium, surrounded by our family. “Come on, Mom. The sidelines are probably safer than any other place in the entire building. Plus, Marco will be with us, and Easton will come too.”

“I will?” Easton asks from the buffet with a plate full of food.

“I’m sorry, hockey boy. Were my words too big for you?”

“Listen here, skater girl. I graduated with honors, and you’re thinking about dropping out to be homeschooled. Wanna see whose IQ is higher?” Easton pushes back, but he puts down his plate and moves behind Lindy, Kenzie, and Brynlee. “Can we make this quick? I’m starving.”

Juliette kisses his cheek. “Don’t hit on any cheerleaders while you’re down there, okay, E?”

“No promises, Jules.” Easton ushers the girls out with Marco following behind, and I immediately turn to Dean.

“They’re safe?”

He nods and fades into the corner of the room, his guard up and on high alert.

Lenny joins Jules and me, looking out onto the field lovingly. “I heard Dixon’s retiring at the end of the season.”

“Yeah.” I sip my soda and look for him below. “He thought about it last year. But he knew going into this year, it would be his last.”

“Bash is thinking about it too. He never thought he’d see thirty on this field. He’s thinking about getting out while he can still move well enough to play with the boys. All these years later, he’s still thinking about med school.” She leans on the glass and looks down. “I always love to watch these games against the Sentinels. He loves them too. I think they’ll always be something special for him, getting to play on the same field as Brady and Murphy. It really does just bring it all home.”

Sometimes I forget that all these guys played together in college, even Brandon.

“Have I thanked you yet for the puppy that’s probably crying in a crate at my house right now, Eleanor?”

She rolls her lips together and winces, holding back a laugh. “Come on. She was so excited, and Lindy picked the cutest one. I mean, if I can’t spoil my baby sister, who can I spoil?”

“Eight of you have been spoiling this kid her entire life. It’s okay to tell her no every now and then,” I remind Lenny as Jules laughs at me.

“It was a *hell no* from me when Kenzie asked. She’s got a baby brother. She doesn’t need a puppy too,” Jules adds and taps her wine glass to ours. “Cheers to another Kings season.”

I tap my glass to theirs. “I’ll drink to that.”



Brandon

The rivalry between the Baltimore Sentinels and the Philadelphia Kings is decades old. It was there long before Coach Joe Sinclair took up the head coach position for the Kings. Long before Declan Sinclair became the most winning quarterback in NFL history. And long before his brother-in-law, Brady Ryan, became the Sentinels' quarterback, or his stepbrother, Aiden Murphy, joined the team on their defensive line.

Now, the rivalry has been taken to a whole new level.

Our fans hate each other.

Hate may be too nice a word.

People were tailgating in the parking lots for the one o'clock game before we all got here early this morning. The crowd is a shit show. The game is a bloodbath.

Sometimes I think Coach would rather win this game than the big game at the end of the season, just for bragging rights at Thanksgiving. And we usually win, but not last year. Last year, they beat us both times we went up against them. But we're better this year.

We knew this game would be a test of wills.

A back and forth.

The Sentinels are good.

But they're not as good as us, and we refuse to lose this fucking game.

The icy rain pelts our faces and makes everyone's moves sloppy.

Dangerous on turf.

And it's fucking freezing. But this is football weather. And it's fucking glorious.

"We ready, boys?" Dec yells into the huddle once he gets the go-ahead from Coach. "We got sixty seconds and a half a yard to go to victory. Who wants the W today? I know I fucking do."

The guys yell back, and I know we've fucking got this.

This is our war, and these are my brothers.

Nothing is stopping us from winning this game.

"Quarterback sneak. But line up in shotgun formation. They're not gonna

know what hits them. You got it in you, Dix?” He asks me because this play is won or lost on my fucking back.

“Fuck yeah, QB. We got this.”

“Ready? Break,” Dec yells and claps his hands before we all move into formation.

I check the Sentinels D line, looking for Murphy. Knowing he’s coming for me.

Reading the defense.

“Odd. Odd. Odd,” I call out to my offense.

Letting them know I’ve got a guy on top of me before I snap the ball, so they know where to adjust. And when I snap the football, I barrel through the Sentinels’ defense, fighting through Aiden Murphy and anyone else who gets in my way.

A battering ram, clearing the way for Dec behind me.

A shield for my QB before he launches himself into the end zone, and we score the final touchdown of the game. With just enough time, we line up for the final play, and our kicker gets us one point, putting us six points up on Baltimore.

Another win for the Kings.

BRANDON



“*Y*ou heading over to Nonna’s?” Declan asks as I grab my bag from my locker. “Sam shut the place down for the night.”

“First I’m hearing about it. Is the whole team going?” I haven’t had time to fill Declan in on everything that’s going on with Ashlyn, and I’m not about to discuss it here. I’m not so sure it’s a good idea to go to a big party right now, even if it *is* at a restaurant Sam owns.

“Nah, man. Pretty sure it’s just the Kingstons and my family. Amelia was excited to get everyone together for a change. Murphy and Brady got permission from the Sentinels management to stay here instead of flying home with the team. My sister and brother are both going with their families. Murphy and his wife will be there. All the kids. You know how Amelia gets. She lives for this stuff.”

“I’ll check with Ashlyn and probably see you there.” I slap his back and head out of the locker room, not expecting Ashlyn to be standing right there, next to Dean.

She throws herself in my arms as soon as I’m close enough, and I drop my bag and catch her. With one hand around her waist, I move until my other hand is flat against the wall and drink her in. Feeling her. Touching her. Fuck. This is what I wanted after that game. “Hey, baby.”

“Oh my God. You were fantastic out there today.” She plants her lips on mine, and it’s sunshine and goddamned roses. This woman . . . *My woman.*

“I’m glad you liked it.” I breathe her in for a minute, then another. “Where’s shortcake?”

“She already went over to Nonna’s with Easton and Kenzie and Marco. I told them we’d meet them there.” She scrunches her face up, probably

thinking I don't know about Nonna's. "Oh, by the way," she smiles a little extra cute. "Sam closed the restaurant down for the night, and they're throwing a dinner for everyone. I made Amelia promise this has nothing to do with our engagement, and she swears it doesn't. I think it's because Declan's family is in town. You know they're her other family. Bash's too. You don't mind, do you?"

I shake my head slowly.

Do I really want to spend the rest of the day in a room full of people?

Hell no.

But it's obvious she does, and I'll do anything to make her happy.

"Nah, I don't mind." I look over at Dean. "You coming to dinner, man?"

"Fuck yes, I am. Sam's place is probably the safest place in the city, and I'm starving," Dean admits. "But I'd really like to get the fuck out of here and get my gun, so could we please go? I feel fucking naked."

"I'm sorry," Ashlyn tells him, and I fucking glare.

"It's not your fault, Ashlyn. But I'll be happy when we leave."

I wrap an arm around Ashlyn and grab my bag from the floor. "Let's get out of here, baby."



It's actually a nice night. Sam closed the place to the public, and we're all scattered throughout the dining room. Ashlyn and Lindy have been smiling the entire time, and after yesterday, I'll take anything that can put those smiles on their faces.

I sit at the back of the room, nursing the same beer I've been drinking for an hour, just watching them. Feeling so fucking grateful.

"That was a good game today, Dix." Aiden Murphy sits down next to me and hands me a cold beer. Guess he's been paying attention. "You got lucky though."

"Luck had nothing to do with it, fucker." I tap my beer to his and sit back, catching my woman smile as she shows Carys Sinclair and Chloe Ryan her engagement ring.

Wonder if she's telling Chloe she was jealous of her the night of the blackout.

“I hear you’re engaged to Ashlyn Kingston. Congrats, man.”

“Thanks.” Two identical little boys run by, followed by a tiny girl, and I hear Carys yell. “They Carys and Cooper’s kids?”

“Yeah. All three.” Murph chuckles. “Lincoln and Lochlan are twins. Lexie was born the same day as the boys, and Coop and Carys adopted her.”

“I think I heard about that.” I vaguely remember.

“Yeah. Never a dull day in our family.” Then he grabs a slightly older boy as he walks by with a beer in his hand. “Where do you think you’re going with this?”

“Nowhere,” the kid mumbles, and holy shit, he looks just like Murphy.

Murph takes the bottle out of the kid’s hands and turns the little ginger my way. “Dix, have you ever met Jamison before?”

My heart lurches into my throat.

No shit.

How did I not know he named his kid after Jamie?

Well, damn.

“No, I haven’t.” I reach my hand out, and Jamieson shakes it like a little man. “That’s a special name you got there, kid.”

“Yeah. My dad said I’m named after a really great football player.”

I look from his dad back to him. “Yeah. He was a really great guy.”

“You knew him?” Jamison asks, and Murphy laughs.

“Dixon was Jamie’s roommate. He gave me Rocky,” Murph tells his kid, who already looks bored. “Go get yourself dessert, and tell your brother to stay out of trouble.”

“Kay, Dad. Nice to meet you, Dixon.”

“You too, Jamison.” I choke up again. “Kid’s got a good, strong grip there, Murph. He any good with a ball?”

Murph smiles proudly. “He’s not bad.”

Bash, Brady Ryan, and Declan pull out chairs and join us at the table. Brady’s holding a sleeping baby against his chest. “So what’s this we hear about you retiring, Dix?” Brady asks.

“Let’s hold that thought for a minute. When did you have another kid?” I ask. “I thought you had three.”

“June.” He smiles and kisses his son’s head. “Asher was a bit of a surprise. But we made sure we’re done this time. Four is kicking our asses.”

“Pussy,” Declan ribs him. “I’ve got five.”

Bash leans against Murph. “Glad I stopped at two.”

“Me too, man,” Murph agrees.

“Assholes,” Brady grumbles. “Fuck off. My wife’s given birth to two sets of twins and Dillan and Asher. We’ve had enough.”

I decide to reel the conversation back in and kick back. “You heard right, man. This is my last season. Scarlet and Coach already know.”

“I know,” Dec laughs, and I kick him. “Fucker,” he grumbles. “I still knew first.”

“Yeah. Dec knows. A few guys on the team have an idea. But I want to wait until after the season’s over to officially announce it. I’m old, guys,” I tell them, then sip my beer, watching realization dawn on their faces. Every one of them, except Declan. Fucker’s gonna play till he’s fifty. “I’ve had a good run, and I want to go out on top, while I’m still in my prime. Or at least while I’m still *playing* like I’m in my prime. Murphy here made sure I’m going to be hurting all fucking week after today’s game.”

“I’ve been thinking about it too,” Brady tells us quietly. “As soon as Ash was born, I started thinking about it. We were smart with our investments, and Natty does fantastic with her books. We’ve been talking about what retirement would look like and thinking about moving back up here permanently.”

Murphy looks like someone just took him out at the knees. “What the fuck, QB? You didn’t think you might want to talk to me about it?”

“I haven’t decided anything yet, Murph.” Brady adjusts the baby in his arms, and I catch Ashlyn watching me.

“Excuse me, guys, I’m being summoned. Good seeing you. Good game today.” I tip my beer to the guys and get the hell out of Dodge before this turns into something I don’t want to be in the middle of. Deciding to retire is an incredibly personal thing. It’s coming to terms with your own mortality after having spent a career convincing yourself you’re invincible. It’s not easy, and I get why Brady hasn’t talked to Murphy yet, especially if he hasn’t made a decision.

But none of that means I want to be there when he does.

I cross the room and slide my hand around Ashlyn’s hip while she talks to a few people, then skim my lips over her ear. “You almost ready to get out of here, baby?”

She turns and puts her palm flat on my chest, her eyes searching mine. “Sure. Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah,” I reassure her. “I’m just sore and tired and ready to go home.

Let's grab shortcake and get out of here."

"Kenzie and Brynlee are spending the night at the twins' house, so Easton took Lindy home. Marco went with them. She had some homework she still needed to finish. But I'm ready when you are."

I press my lips to her head. "Let's go home."

ASHLYN



*B*randon's quiet on the drive home. One of his hands rests on my thigh, the other on the steering wheel as he navigates the city streets.

"You okay over there, big guy?"

"Yeah, baby. Just thinkin'."

"What are you thinking about? You know you can talk to me." I lay my hand over his.

"Everything. The game. My future. *Our* future."

"That sounds ominous." I lace my fingers with his and squeeze. "What about the future? Are you thinking about not retiring? Because you playing for the Kings doesn't make a difference to me."

"No." He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "Retiring is still the plan. It feels more important now than before. I want to be able to be present for you and Lindy. I don't want to be traveling for half a year at a time unless you're by my side. Have you ever thought about more kids?" he asks me, pretty much blowing my mind.

"Like, having more kids?" I squeak.

"Yeah. Lindy mentioned it to me. So did Maddie. But you and I never talked about it. Do you want more kids?"

"I . . . I don't know. I haven't given a whole lot of thought to it either. I love our life. And I'm not going to lie, some days I miss Madeline being a baby and seeing the world through those big blue eyes. But she's at such an incredible place in her life, and the idea of starting all over again sounds exhausting. But that doesn't mean I don't want to do it. I just never thought about it before. I knew I never wanted to do it alone again. But if we decide to have kids, I wouldn't be alone. I'd have you. And you'd be an incredible

father.”

Seeing Brandon holding Sam and Amelia’s son Lucky a few weeks ago may have made my ovaries simultaneously explode, now that I think about it. “Do you want kids?”

He pulls into our driveway and shuts off the car, then turns and gathers my face in his hands, his eyes locking with mine. “I never did. I never wanted to repeat the cycle I grew up in. I never wanted to bring anyone else into that world. But it’s different with you and Lindy. You brought me into your world. I never lived that before. A good parent. A loving parent. A healthy relationship. And I love that kid so damn much, Ashlyn.”

I climb into his lap and wrap my arms around his neck. “She loves you too. We both do.”

“I’m just not sure about the whole idea of having a baby,” he says softly, sounding broken, and I hate it. “Do you still want to marry me?”

“More than anything in this world,” I tell him, then press my lips against his. “We’ll do what’s right for us, whatever that is, Brandon. But at the end of the day, it’s going to be you and me against the world. I’m your new team.”

“I love you so much, baby.”

“Always,” I whisper.

“Guess we better go inside before we give Dean a show.”

I smile and move off him, not missing his impressive erection. “With any luck, Lindy will go to bed early,” I tease.

Easton and Marco’s cars are already here.

They’re both going to need to go.

Brandon and I walk over to Dean, who lowers his window. “Listen, I’m out of here as soon as my relief gets here. I’ll see you in the morning, guys. Don’t forget to send me your schedule for the week, Ashlyn. I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

“Thanks, Dean. I’ll do it before I go to bed. Good night.”

“Yeah, thanks, man,” Brandon adds.

“Night, guys.” Dean raises the window and shuts off the car’s headlights as Brandon and I head up to the house.

“Why the hell is Easton still here? Can we kick him out? I just want to chill. I’ve had enough people for the day,” Brandon murmurs against my ear from behind me as I unlock the door.

“Oh yeah?” I look over my shoulder and bat my lashes, and he groans. *I love that groan.* I may push my ass back just enough to tease. “I can leave

you alone tonight if you're too sore from the game."

"Never," he promises and pushes the door open, then smacks my ass as he follows me through.

It clicks shut behind us, and Brandon has to catch me when I stumble over something in the dark room. "What the—" My words catch in my throat. Someone is lying on the floor.

A man.

Oh God, it's Marco.

I drop to my knees, and the metallic scent of blood invades my senses
His blood.

A small, single, gunshot wound sits in the center of Marco's head.

Blood trickles down his temple.

It doesn't make sense. I watched him smile at my daughter today.

He brought them home.

Oh, God. Where's Madeline? "Brandon . . ." I think my body goes into shock as a scream works its way up my throat. He pulls me back up against his chest.

"Not a sound, Ashlyn."

That voice.

I force my eyes away from Marco and finally see Lindy. She and Easton are sitting on the couch. Easton's arm is around her shaking shoulders as silent tears trail down her face. Both their eyes are glued on us as . . . "Madeline," I sob.

This doesn't makes sense. Nothing is in focus as my brain attempts to process what's in front of me. Henry, my friend, the manager of the hotel where we were the night of the blackout and who we just saw when we went to Speakeasy, is behind the couch with a gun in his hand. The barrel is pressed to Lindy's head.

"Henry, what are you doing?" I take a step forward, but Brandon pulls me back to him.

"Mom," Lindy cries, and I watch Easton's arm lock tight around her, holding her in place. He's trying to keep her still, so she doesn't get shot.

This can't be happening.

"What are *you* doing, Ashlyn? That's the better question. Why are you living a lie?" Henry asks, completely unbothered by all of this. He sounds calm, like he does during our meetings.

Brandon pulls me back against his chest, his mouth coming to my ear.

“Get him talking,” he whispers so softly I can barely hear him.

It takes me a minute for his words to register.

But when they do, I understand.

“What . . .” I try desperately to pull it together for my daughter. For my family. “What do you mean, what am I doing, Henry? What lie am I living? I don’t understand. I . . . I need your help.”

“Step away from *him*, and I’ll explain everything, my pet.” Henry motions to me with the gun, and Brandon’s hold tightens. “Let go of her.” The gun moves to Brandon, and I step to the side, getting in the way. “It’s his fault. He ruined everything.”

I peel Brandon’s hand off my body, then look at him, hoping he can see the pleading in my eyes before I take my first small step toward the couch. “What did he ruin, Henry? I’m so confused.”

“How are you confused?” He waves his gun at me, then Brandon pushes me behind him.

Henry doesn’t like that.

“No,” I cry out when he puts the gun back to Lindy’s head.

“What’s he doing here, Ashlyn? He shouldn’t be here.”

Jesus, take the wheel.

How do you talk to someone who’s criminally insane?

How do I do this?

“He lives here, Henry,” I whisper as calmly as I can, while inside, I’m raging with fear. Desperate to get my daughter out of here. Praying we all walk out of here alive. And petrified we won’t. “He’s supposed to be here.”

“I’m supposed to live here. Not him,” Henry yells at me. “You saw me. You finally saw me. After all these years. Do you have any idea how long I waited for you? Any idea the lengths I’ve gone to so we could be a family?”

Tears leak down my cheeks as I shake my head no.

“I’ve loved you for so long, Ashlyn. Since your very first Nationals when you were fifteen. And you never saw me. Do you remember the way the seats would fill when you practiced during public hours? Do you know how many hours I sat in those stands, waiting for you to notice me? All those hours on the top bleacher, watching your every move. Every routine. Always hoping that would be the day you’d see me. You were so pretty. So graceful. I was there when you won your very first Nationals. I was there at the Olympics when you were robbed of the gold and that spoiled little bitch, Nina, threw a temper tantrum on the ice.”

He waves his gun around the room, his calm cracking. “She ruined your chances, Ashlyn. She tainted you. It was all her fault that you were robbed of the gold. There was no way they were going to give it to you after the stunt she pulled. You’d worked so hard for the medal. It wasn’t fair. So she had to go.”

The room becomes eerily quiet until he pulls back on Lindy’s hair, and she cries out.

Easton looks past me at Brandon, and I’m scared to see what he sees.

But his eyes are calm.

Easton doesn’t look scared.

No, this boy I’ve watched grow into a man looks completely in control.

Like he’s communicating with Brandon behind me.

My heart beats faster, harder, like its clawing its way out of my chest while I try to figure out what to do. Keep him talking is all I can think of. “What do you mean, she had to go, Henry?” I force the words past my lips, terrified of the answer. “What . . . what did you do?”

My knees threaten to buckle from under me when he smiles.

It’s slow and sick and reminds me he’s already killed one person tonight.

“She was leaving anyway. She was running away and leaving you with that piece of shit coach. I just made sure when she left, it was permanent.”

“Permanent?” I question. “You killed Nina?” I claw at Brandon’s arm as it holds me back but don’t miss the way he inches us forward.

“She was in the way. Once she was gone, I just had to get you away from your coach. He wasn’t a good man. If I saved you from him, you’d have to see me. It was perfect. And it would have worked too. But then John Kingston came and ruined everything,” he says, yanking on Lindy’s hair. Her tears come harder as the gun presses tight to the back of her head, and a little piece of me dies inside.

This can’t be happening.

“He swept you away and locked you in that damn fortress. Then you had this one, and I thought I lost you forever. After all, no one wants spoiled goods. But old John was good for one thing. Do you know he made sure Coach Ron never coached again? I don’t know what strings that old fuck pulled, but he made sure that man never stepped foot on the ice. Guess the old bastard decided life without skating wasn’t worth living. I heard he killed himself a few years after the Olympics.”

Okay. I’ve got to think.

How are we getting out of this?

What does he want to hear?

“Why didn’t you ever say anything? I never knew you felt that way, Henry. I wish you’d have told me.” I force my way around Brandon and feel his hand go to the back of my pants, holding me there.

“Like you didn’t know,” he says caustically. He lowers his gun, then points it at Brandon and me. “*You* knew. You hugged me . The very first time we met. You told me it was wonderful to *finally meet* me and that you’d been looking forward to it. You didn’t even remember me from the ice rink. But you hugged me. You felt what was between us. I know you did.”

Oh my God, I know what he’s talking about.

It was our first meeting when he was hired at the hotel.

“You flirted with me for months when you’d come in with your low-cut shirts and tight dresses. But you threw out my roses. I waited and watched. I was patient. And then, you just threw them away.”

“I didn’t know . . . There wasn’t a card. I wouldn’t . . . I wouldn’t have thrown them out if I’d known. How can I fix this, Henry? I’ll do anything to fix it. Just tell me.”

“We’re supposed to have a life together, Ashlyn. I was even going to forgive you for *her*.” He roughly yanks Lindy’s hair again, and I break.

“We still can, Henry. You and me. Just let Madeline, Easton, and Brandon go, then I’ll go anywhere you want. As far away as you want.” I take a tentative step closer as his eyes grow greedy. “Anywhere, Henry. We can start our lives together anywhere. But you’ve got to let them go.”

Henry swings the gun toward Brandon. “He’ll never let you go.”

“Yes, he will.” I look at Brandon with my own wild eyes and mouth, *Please trust me* to him. “You don’t even have to let them go. You and me. We’ll walk out the front door and get in my car. Just leave the three of them here. They won’t come after us. I promise. Come with me. Please,” I beg.

“You must think I’m stupid,” Henry spits out, right before all hell breaks loose.



Brandon

I catch the nod from Easton and throw Ashlyn down on the floor at the same time as Easton pulls Lindy down in front of him and out of the line of fire.

In a lightning-fast move, Easton twists his body and grabs Henry's wrist with both hands, trying to control the gun.

They say, in movies, situations like this feel like slow-motion.

They fucking lie.

Everything happens all at once.

Easton yanks Henry forward.

He rips him off his feet as they fight for the gun.

This is it.

Our only chance.

The gun goes off, and a round ricochets off the table into the wall.

I immediately move.

I don't think.

I react as tunnel vision sets in.

Getting to Henry is my only focus.

I don't hear Ashlyn's screams.

I no longer register Lindy's sobs.

Thinking takes too long, and I don't have time.

I hurtle my body over Lindy and Easton. Using the couch as a launching pad, I tackle Henry to the floor behind it. Knocking over the fucking couch with Lindy and Easton still on it in the process. We all fall to the floor as momentum carries us over.

I don't wait. Don't think.

My fist flies into Henry's face with a satisfying crunch as his head snaps to the side.

But it's not enough.

I wrap my hands around his throat and slam his head against the floor over and over.

I don't care that he can't breathe.

I don't care if I'm killing him.

I don't care if I'm the last thing this motherfucker ever sees.

But before that happens, I'm pulled off, kicking and yelling. Clawing my way back to the man that tried to take my family from me.

Henry is motionless on the floor.

Easton wraps his arms around me from behind, and Dean Beneventi grabs

my face.

Suddenly, the volume is back on, and the rest of the world comes back into focus.

“You gotta stop,” Dean yells. “You’re gonna fucking kill him. And as much as you want to, you can’t. Your family needs you. Go to them. I’ll handle this.”

It’s those words that finally clear my head, and I pull out of Easton’s hold, and get in Dean’s face. “Where the hell were you?”

“I came as soon as I heard the gun shot,” Dean answers through clenched teeth.

Ashlyn’s cry breaks off the anger coursing through my veins, and I run to my girls, throwing my arms around them. “Are you hurt?” I ask and check them each, holding my fucking breath until I know they’re both fine.

“Marco,” Lindy sobs, and I turn her face into my chest. “He . . . he shot Marco.” Then she pushes away from me, frantic. “Where’s Easton?”

“Right here,” he answers her, and she climbs over me and throws her arms around him.

“I thought he was going to kill us,” she cries.

Ashlyn clings to me as I call the police.

The rest of the night passes in a blur.

Sam beats the first cop cars here and handles everything for us, which is probably good—because not one thing on this entire fucking planet could get me to move from Ashlyn, Lindy, and Easton.

Paramedics check us over, unhappy that none of us are willing to go to the hospital. We sit, wrapped in blankets in the back of an ambulance, as the police move in and out of the house.

Becket and a hysterical Juliette arrive in time to see Marco’s body being loaded onto an ambulance, and Juliette’s cry can more than likely be heard from miles away. She throws her arms around Easton and sobs, “Don’t you dare ever do that to me again.”

“I’ll try not to,” he tells her, and the rest of us groan.

Jules looks at the four of us and grabs Ashlyn. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know how I didn’t see it.”

“None of us did,” Ashlyn says as she wraps an arm around her. Only one, because Ashlyn hasn’t let go of Lindy since she got her hands on her earlier.

“Do you want to come home with us?” Becket offers.

“Thanks, man. But we’re crashing at Hud and Maddie’s as soon as we’re

cleared to leave.”

Becks nods. “I’m going to see if I can speed this up. If anyone asks, I’m your lawyer. I represent all four of you, and you do not speak to a fucking soul unless I’m present.”

“We already gave our statements,” Easton grumbles.

“I don’t care. Not another word. I want all of you to go to Hudson’s house now. You don’t need to be here for any of this.” He kisses Ashlyn and Lindy on their heads. “Go. I’ll be there soon.”

We don’t argue.

None of us do.

We walk over to Hudson’s in silence.

Processing a night that never should have happened.

A night I’m so fucking grateful we’re all walking away from.

Even if its scars are bound to follow us for years.

ASHLYN



“Should we be worried about that?” Brandon asks me and jerks his head toward the couch where Lindy has finally fallen asleep with her head on Easton’s shoulder. Jace sits next to her, watching her like a hawk, but it’s Easton she clings to.

Maddie splashes a shot of whiskey in my cup of tea, then adds a heavy pour to Brandon’s glass. “Don’t worry about it,” she tells him. “If Lindy’s getting the comfort she needs, let her stay there.”

“I agree.” I don’t think we’ve even begun to scratch the surface on all the effects we’re going to experience from tonight.

Sawyer’s wife, Wren, dipped into her medical bag for a light sedative and gave it to Lindy after she checked her out. She gave me one too, but I’m not ready to take it yet.

Not long after we got here, the family started arriving. Not everyone, thankfully, but Madeline’s siblings are all wrecked at what could have been lost tonight. Jace hasn’t left her side since. The two babies of the family have always had a special bond.

He eyes Easton every few minutes, but his sister is comfortable, and that’s all that matters to any of us.

When the door opens again, Becket and Juliette finally walk through the door, and I push out of Brandon’s lap. “What did the police say?”

Brandon moves behind me and slides his arm around my waist, not leaving any space between us. I wrap my arm around his, needing this comfort as much as he does. Maybe more.

“Henry Bolger is going to live. That means Brandon won’t be charged with anything. Considering your security cameras got the entire thing on tape,

there's very little question as to what happened."

Juliette laces her fingers with mine. "I'd recommend not watching it. I did, and it's brutal." She looks over at Easton, then back to Brandon. "You two are so stupid and so brave. We could have lost all of you."

"But we didn't. They're all okay, Jules." Lenny holds Juliette's other hand and squeezes.

Becket clears his throat. "They had a team go through Henry's apartment and have already confirmed he was obsessed with you, Ashlyn. He had skating memorabilia, among other things. An entire wall covered in your pictures. Who knows what else they'll find as they keep digging?"

I shiver and lay my hand over Brandon's racing heart.

He killed Nina and Marco.

Because of me.

"So what now?" Brandon asks, and everyone in the room holds their collective breaths.

Scarlet moves next to Becket, her years of PR experience kicking in. "Now you say nothing. Not to a soul outside this family. Now we lock down. We bring as little attention to Madeline as possible, so every nut job out there doesn't become interested in her. This story will be sensationalized. It's the kind of thing social media loves. You don't want that attention on her or any of you, for that matter. You need to get comfortable with 'No comment' because it's the only thing any of you will be saying for the foreseeable future."

Becks shrugs. "Pretty much what she said. We're a high-profile family. Dixon is the number one center in the NFL, and Easton is the goalie for one of the best teams in the NHL. This is going to get out, and people will want to know everything. We'll do our best to contain it, but it's not going to be easy. We'll need to figure out what the hell the next few weeks look like."

I laugh because I have no idea when this became my life and because the only other option is to cry. "We're going to live our lives. That's what the next few weeks look like. We do whatever we need to do to work through this hell. I'm thinking that's going to mean a lot of therapy. Probably means selling our house because I don't know how I'm supposed to ever relax in there again. But each of us has to decide how we're going to get through it. That's not something anyone else can do for us."

"Ashlyn," Scarlet reaches for me, but I shake my head, unbelievably exhausted.

I look from Becks to Scarlet, then back at Lindy, who's asleep on the couch, before I finish my tea in one long sip, then do the same to what's left of Brandon's whiskey. "In the meantime, we don't say anything. Works for me because I don't think I'm capable of talking about any of this. Not yet." Maybe not ever, which is why I'm already thinking I need to find us a therapist. "I think I'm going to put Lindy to bed and lie down with her." I look around the room at all the people we love, then kiss Brandon's cheek.

"I'll be up in a few minutes, okay?" he asks.

I nod and walk quietly into the other room, stopping in front of Easton, Lindy, and Jace. "I'm going to take Lindy to bed, guys."

Easton stands with her in his arms. "Just point me to the room."

"I can take her, E," Jace offers, but Easton steps away.

When Jace looks like he's ready to argue, I shake my head at him.

"What room, Ashlyn?" Maybe Easton needs her for comfort as much as she needed him.

"I'll show you," I tell him.

He follows me into the guest room and lays Lindy down on the bed with so much care, I choke on another sob. Myrtle whines from her crate in the corner until I put her on the bed with her human, where she snuggles in under Lindy's arm. "Thank you for what you did tonight, Easton. I'll never be able to repay you." I hug him to me and cry again, unsure how I have any tears left. "I'll owe you for the rest of my life."

He towers over me, an inch or so taller than Brandon, and tucks my head under his chin. "I'm just glad everyone's okay. I think I'm going to head home with Jules and Becks, but I'll call tomorrow before my game, after I've talked to my team's management."

I kiss his cheek, then close the bedroom door and kick off my shoes seconds before it opens again.

Brandon pushes through and wraps me in his arms. "How is she?"

"Still sleeping, thankfully. I was just going to lie down with her."

He kisses my head gently. "Sleep, baby. I'm not going anywhere."

"You saved us tonight, Brandon. I'm not sure we'd all be standing here if it weren't for you." I lean my cheek against his heart, just so I can listen to his heartbeat. "I was so scared I was going to lose you both."

He guides me to the bed, then waits until I lay down next to Lindy. "I was never going to let that happen. I promised you I'd always keep you safe. Both of you. I just wish we could have stopped it before it got that far."

“I love you, Brandon.”

He sits down in the oversized chair in the corner of the room and kicks his feet up on the ottoman. “Sleep, baby. You’re safe.”

I wrap my arm around Lindy and close my eyes, praying that when she wakes up, she’s still the same sweet girl she was before she watched a man die.



Brandon

*F*or hours, I don’t sleep.

I don’t close my eyes.

Because when I do, I see that gun against Lindy’s head.

I see it waving in Ashlyn’s face.

I still feel Henry’s life slipping through my fingers and know if they hadn’t stopped me, I’d have killed a man tonight and not regretted it. So I watch my girls sleep. The steady rhythm of their breathing is all the comfort I need or want until Lindy sits up.

She looks around, confused. “Brandon?”

“Yeah, shortcake. It’s okay. You’re okay. Your mom’s here. I’m here. We’re at Hudson and Maddie’s house.”

She looks over at her sleeping mother, then climbs out of bed, looking sad and scared—suddenly that same little girl I met years ago. She climbs into my lap and lays her head against my chest. I don’t move a muscle, unsure what I’m supposed to do.

“I told you before, you were all the father I’d ever need, Brandon.”

And with that, any remaining walls I still have up, protecting my heart, crumble to ash at her feet. “I love you, Madeline. You may not be biologically mine, but you’re mine in every way that counts, kid.”

BRANDON



One of our biggest fears in the aftermath of what happened that night with Henry was how Lindy was going to cope. Ashlyn has had all of us in therapy for weeks since then, both as a family and individually. Lindy has been quiet—too quiet. The light died in her eyes that night, but she’s been trying to fake it, insisting at some point it’ll feel real again.

I don’t know if that’s the right move, but it’s something we’re all working on together, so I don’t push it. At least she’s trying. She told Andrew she was taking the rest of the year off. She wanted a break. He understood, but we don’t know if he’ll still partner with her if and when she decides she’s ready to step back on the ice.

Today, the three of us, plus Myrtle, walk into a house being built on the other side of the lake. Everyone agreed, moving back into the old house wasn’t an option. We’ve been staying at my place, but that doesn’t feel right either.

“How’s the view?” Lindy asks as she carries Myrtle through the house and onto a covered back porch. “We’re next to the falls. I’m going down to the dock.”

“Okay,” Ashlyn calls back, then she turns to me. “Do you think it’s too soon? The move? The new house? Should we wait?”

“No, baby. We’ve got to keep moving or we’re going to get stuck.” I look around the wide-open space surrounding us. It’s still in the early stages of construction. We’d have time to make changes. Customizations. “I think it’s perfect. It gives us a chance to start our lives together in a space that’s ours.”

A slow smile spreads across Ashlyn’s face. “I like that. I want something that’s ours.”

“Me too, baby.”

She tugs me behind her to look around the first floor. High ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows bring the outside in, and a huge fireplace is the focal point of the room. We could do so much with it.

We turn into a big room with another fireplace. “Do you think that’s the primary bedroom?”

“Probably. I guess if we’re on the first floor and Lindy’s on the second, it would give us a little more privacy.”

“It would.” She spins to face me and runs her fingers down my cheek. “But here’s the thing. I don’t know that I’d want to be that far away from Lindy. And it would be a nightmare to have a newborn upstairs if we’re downstairs. We’d need at least one more room down here.”

“What?” I was looking at the high ceilings, thinking reclaimed crown molding would look great in here. What did I just miss? “Wait . . . what are you saying?”

She takes my hand and places it on her stomach. “I’m saying I saw Wren this morning, and she confirmed it for me. We’re pregnant. I know we didn’t plan this, but—”

I lift her off her feet and spin her around. “Seriously? We’re gonna have a baby?”

“We are.” Happy tears pool in Ashlyn’s pretty green eyes. “Are you happy?” she whispers.

“I’m so happy, baby. Do you know if it’s a boy or girl yet?” I ask in absolute awe of the woman in front of me.

“No. It’s too early. We’ll find that out together in a few weeks.” She looks out at Lindy, who’s walking Myrtle down by the falls. “Do you think she’ll be okay with this?”

“It might take a while at first, but I think she’ll be as excited as we are.” I cup her face in my hands and seal my mouth over hers. “Let’s get married, baby. Let’s not wait.”

“Okay,” she laughs. “Let’s do it.”

“Are you sure? I know you wanted to plan a big wedding.”

“Give me a week, and I’ll figure it out. I’ll need to look at your game schedule and Jace’s. Who do you want there besides us?” The gleam in her eyes is breathtaking.

“I just want our family and maybe Declan and Watty. But so long as it’s me and you and Lindy, I don’t really care. Just the people we love.”

“The people you love are so very, *very*, lucky, Brandon.”

“Pretty sure I’m the lucky one, Ashlyn.” I press my forehead to hers, and she closes her eyes.

“I love you, Brandon Dixon.”

“With every beat of my heart, Ashlyn. With every beat of my heart.”

EPILOGUE



Lenny

“*I* still remember the first time I met Ashlyn. It’s pretty hard to forget your father bringing home a new wife who could have gone to high school with you.” I look over at Ashlyn and Dixon and sniff away my tears. “I had no idea back then what you’d mean to me. I didn’t know how hard you love. How protective you are of those you love or what an incredible mother you’d be to my little sister. My mom used to say everything happens for a reason. And I believe with my whole heart you became a member of our family because it’s where you were always meant to be. So if everyone could please raise your glasses in honor of Ashlyn and Brandon. We are so lucky to be in your circle. And I just know you’re going to have a long and happy life together. *Salute.*”

I watch, teary-eyed, as the bride and groom kiss, then move out onto the dance floor, and a beautiful rendition of the Goo Goo Dolls’ “Iris” echoes throughout the room. They touch their foreheads together like I’ve seen them do so many times before, and I lose the battle with my tears.

Sebastian kisses the top of my head and pulls me down into his lap.

When Ashlyn announced they were getting married the Saturday after New Year’s because it was the only day that worked for the Kings and the Revolution, I thought she was crazy. That was only a month away. But she pulled it off.

They rented out an estate a few hours away and only invited our family and their closest friends. It’s gorgeous. A blanket of snow coats the grounds

outside, and an explosion of deep blues and white roses with beautiful dark greens line the tables and accent everywhere the eye can see. They got married in a candlelit ballroom in front of a gorgeous fifteen-foot evergreen tree, sparkling with tiny white twinkling lights. Maddie stood in front of them in a deep green velvet dress as she performed the ceremony. Everything down to the tiniest detail was perfect and so incredibly Ashlyn.

“You okay, Len?” Bash whispers in my ear.

Oh, this man . . . “I’ve loved you for so long, Sebastian. Thank you for loving me.”

“Only ever you, crazy girl.” He stands and offers me his hand as the song changes, and I’m led onto the dance floor. “I need to get in a dance before one of our boys kicks me out of the way.”

“Never, Bash. You’ll always be my number one guy,” I tease.

“Even when I announce my retirement at the end of the season? You still gonna love me when I go back to med school?”

I run my finger over his lips. “The only thing sexier than being a baller’s wife is being a surgeon’s wife. Your brain has always been hotter than your muscles.” I press my lips quickly to his. “Not that I’m complaining.”

I rest my head on his chest and soak in this moment.

What a year.



Amelia

*S*it down next to Ashlyn and hand her a glass of water and a piece of cake. “How are you feeling?”

“I wish she’d talk to me.” She motions to Lindy, who’s huddled on the other side of the ballroom with Scarlet. “Some days, everything is great. And others . . .” she trails off.

“She’ll come around. Don’t give up on her. Don’t stop pushing. That kid is stubborn like the rest of us. She’s going to talk to you, but it’ll be on her time.”

“Did you ever get over what happened with Annabelle Sinclair?”

I think back to that night and the way it led me to Sam, then I look over at

my babies. Well, three out of the four of them. Lucky is asleep upstairs with Nonna. “That night gave me my life. It brought me to Sam. The good things in life are always a fight. But they’re also always worth it. That was my fight. The first of many. And it stayed with me for a long time. But I did get over it.” I grab a fork from the table and steal a bite of the delicious lemon-raspberry cake. “Sam helped.”

Ashlyn digs her fork in too, then moans when she tastes it. “This is good.”

“Mine would have been better,” I tease.

“I wanted you to enjoy today, not to worry about having to make a cake.”

Maddox comes over and holds his hand out to me, looking so much like his father, it nearly takes my breath away. “May I have this dance?”

I look over to find Sam smiling. “Of course, you may.” I take his small hand in mine and stand, but not before I take one more piece of cake. “Mine is still better.”



Scarlet

“How are you doing, Madeline?” I run my fingers through her freshly cut short hair and twirl a lock of pink highlights around my finger as I worry about my youngest sister.

“I’d be better if everyone would stop asking me that,” she snaps. And I recognize her pain. Not because it’s the same I felt at her age but because I remember feeling broken and not being able to express it. Feeling like I needed to be strong and put on a good mask.

God, I did that for so damn long.

I look lovingly over at my husband across the room, dancing with Brynlee while my baby boy dances with his little sister next to them. One day, that man might understand the way he saved my life. But knowing Cade, he’ll never believe me.

“Listen, Lindy. One day, you’ll be ready to talk about it, and I’m going to be here, ready to listen. I won’t give you advice. I’ll keep my mouth shut and just be the person you can talk to whenever you need me. Whatever you say

stays between us. I swear.”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Scarlet.” She cocks a brow, and damn, she reminds me so much of our father. “Why?”

“Why what?” I ask, even though I know the answer. Hurt knows hurt.

“Why would you offer me that? To keep secrets from my mom.”

“It’s not keeping secrets, Linds. It’s offering you a safe place to fall. And I’m doing it because I love you. You’re my baby sister. You may be the same age as my daughter, but our bond is different. You’re special.”

Brynlee and Cade make their way over to us, and Madeline gives me a sad smile. “Thanks, Scar,” she says before she and Brynlee run off to do something else. Hopefully not sneak booze the way I’d have done at their age.

“She okay?” Cade asks, and I stand and circle my arms around his waist.

“She will be,” I whisper.

“How can you be so sure?” he asks, worried about my youngest sister, who we’ve all basically treated like our own kid.

“Because in some ways, I was her, and whether you believe it or not, you saved me.”

“You saved yourself, duchess. I was just the lucky guy you let come along for the ride.”



Max

“Get off the phone, Max.” Daphne finds me outside and glares.

“Sorry.” I end the call and hang up. “I just had to find out from Easton’s agent he’s not interested in being traded to the Revolution.”

She wraps her arms inside my tux coat and lays her beautiful face against my chest. “He’s not ready to come home. Do you blame him? He’s young, one of the best goalies in the league, and living the life in Las Vegas. He’ll be ready one day, but not yet.”

I rest my chin on top of her hair and sway us to the beat piping through from inside. “Becket and Jules really want him home.”

“I’m sure they do, but that’s not their decision. Now let’s go inside and

get a drink. I've had a lot of champagne. One more glass and I may turn into a sure thing tonight."

I lift her chin to me, and caress her lips with mine, coaxing them open and pressing myself against her until a beautiful moan slips free.

"How about we sneak upstairs now, siren?"

"Last one naked has to get the coffee in the morning." She reaches down and grabs a handful of snow to throw in my face before she takes off.

"Oh, it's on."



Hudson

"You doing okay, sunshine? You seem sad." I tug Maddie closer and rest a palm on her belly. "How's our boy treating you?"

"He's treating me like a girl, Hud. Just because you keep calling her a boy doesn't mean she's going to come out with a penis. You're starting to confuse Teagan and Aurora."

"I know. But I hope you enjoy my hair now while you can. Three girls, Mads . . . Three." I take her hands and pull her out onto the dance floor. "Three girls that all look like their gorgeous mother. It's cruel, Madison. Cruel, I tell you. How am I supposed to not beat the shit out of every guy who knocks on our door to take them out on a date?"

She laughs at me like she always does, then straightens my tie. "What if it's a girl who knocks on our door, Hud?"

I think about that for a second and smile. "I think that's perfect. I hope all our daughters are lesbians."

"Why?"

"Then we gain three more daughters instead of losing the ones we have to men." It made more sense when I thought it than it does when I actually voice it.

"They're always going to love you the most, Hud, because you're their first love."

"No, they won't. One day, some asshole, male or female, is going to come along, and for their sake, I hope they love our girls the way I love you,

Maddie. There's nothing in this world I love more than you."

"I know, Hud. I know."

A throat clears next to us, and I spin us around as Dixon holds out his hand. "I'm cutting in."

"You're supposed to ask, Dix," I joke, and he stands there for a long second before giving in. "May I cut in so I can dance with my sister?"

I look at Maddie and smile. "Don't forget you love me more than him."

She laughs and pushes me away.

She loves me more.



Sawyer

"*Y*our family are my best clients. You realize that, right?" Wren looks at me as she dips a few extra strawberries in the chocolate fountain.

"It's not like Ashlyn or Madison are going into labor here." I take a bite of the strawberry she holds in front of me, then kiss her with my chocolatey lips.

"No, they're not. But they're not the only ones pregnant either."

"What? Who?" I ask. My family isn't usually good at keeping this stuff quiet.

She shakes her head. "You know I can't tell you that."

"Doc, how the hell can you tease me like that? That's not cool." I run the tip of my finger through the chocolate on her plate, then press my finger to her lips.

"Oh my God, Uncle Sawyer. Eww." Brynlee's face pinches tight, and she turns on her heels without even getting anything from the chocolate fountain

station.

“I think you may have just scarred her for life,” my wife teases, and I shake my head.

“You’re not getting out of this so easily. You’ve got to give me something here.” I look around the room, wondering who else is pregnant.

Then I catch the way Jace’s hand rests on India’s stomach. “Holy shit, Jace and Indy are pregnant again?”

“I didn’t say that,” she smiles though, giving herself away. “But I will tell you that we may be welcoming our first set of twins into the family. You’re not getting anything else out of me.”

“We’ll see if you’re singing the same tune later if I withhold your orgasm.”

“Sawyer Kingston, if you so much as bring up another person’s name while you’re fucking me, I’ll be the one choking you tonight.”

I drag my lips over the shell of her ear. “That sounds like it could be fun.”

Her mouth forms a perfect O. “How much longer do we have to stay down here?”

“We don’t,” I answer and tug her behind me out of the ballroom.



Jace

“Are you sure the kids are okay?” I ask as Indy and I sway to the music.

Her head pops up from my chest as she worries her bottom lip. “I checked with the nanny twice. They’re fine. She said they’re fine. Do you think we need to go upstairs and check?”

“Shit, pretty girl. You’re the one who’s supposed to be telling me to chill out. I think our whole dynamic gets thrown off if we fuck with that now.”

“Don’t tease me. My hormones are already going crazy. You and your stupid sperm couldn’t be satisfied with just knocking me up. They had to go for extra credit with twins,” she squeaks, and I can’t help the proud smile that pulls at my lips.

“Well, Mrs. Kingston, I’m all about the extra credit.” I look over and see Easton leaning against the wall out of the corner of my eye. “Would you

mind if I go talk to Easton? I'm worried about him."

She kisses me and pulls my bottom lip between hers. "You do what you need to do, Jace. I'm going upstairs and getting in bed."

"You tired, pretty girl?" I run a hand over her hair and tug.

She shakes her head. "No. I'm going to be in bed, naked and waiting. Don't be long."

I watch her walk out of the ballroom and debate following her for a hot fucking second, then make my way over to Easton. "Hey, man."

"Hey." He never looks my way as he sips his beer.

"You celebrate a twenty-first birthday I didn't know about, kid?" I push. Pretty fucking sure he's still twenty.

"Like you weren't drinking at my age. I've heard the stories."

"I was out of control at your age. Doesn't mean you should follow in my footsteps."

Easton finishes his beer slowly, looking right at me, then pushes the empty away and leans back in his chair. "You come over here to lecture me, Jace?"

"I came over here because I'm worried about you," I tell him honestly. "I wanted to see how you're doing."

"I'm fine. Ask the shrink the team forced me to see." A muscle ticks in his jaw.

"Yeah. You sound fine," I mock like an asshole. I'm screwing this up. "You've been getting into a lot of fights on the ice lately, E."

"It's hockey, Jace. We fight. You know that."

Fuck. I've got to remind myself he's gone through hell, so I soften my tone. "You're the goalie. The stats on goalies fighting are pretty low."

"Did Becket send you over here to lecture me?"

"No. I came because I give a shit." I get a little more in his face. "I came because you saved my sister's life, and this is the first time I've seen you since. I'm worried about you, and I want to make sure you know I'm here if you need to talk."

Easton pushes his seat back and looks at me. "Yeah well, you've done your good deed. I'll see you on the ice."

I watch him leave and sit there wondering how I just fucked that up when Becket takes Jace's seat.



Becket

“Did you get anywhere with him?” I ask as I watch Easton leave the damn ballroom. “Fuck if he’ll talk to me or Jules about anything.”

“Nah, man. He’s angry. I remember what that was like, and it’s not like any of us knew what to do with our anger at his age.”

“I’m worried it’s more than that. He’s stopped calling. He used to make sure he talked to Jules at least once a week.” I look at my little brother and know if there’s anyone who’ll get through to Easton, it’ll be Jace. But I’m not sure how much I can put on his shoulders.

“Don’t give up on him, Becks. I don’t know where I’d be if you assholes hadn’t been there to keep me in check. Look at me now. I turned out pretty good.” Jace stands from the table, a stupid smile on his face. “Oh, and by the way, you want to be the first to start a rumor for a change?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I ask because you never really know with Jace.

“Indy’s pregnant.”

When I stand to congratulate him, he adds, “With twins.”

I clap his back. “I’m so fucking happy for you, brother.”

“Me too.” He smirks. “Now I’m going to go upstairs and take care of my very pregnant, very horny wife. I’ll see you at brunch tomorrow before we head back home.”

I stand there, looking out at the dance floor, trying to find Juliette when she pops up next to me with a glass of champagne in her hand. “Hey, cupcake.” I drop a kiss on her lips.

“Hey, Charming.” She sips her drink as the DJ announces the final song of the night, and Ashlyn and Brandon take the floor. “Look at them out there. They look so happy.”

“They do.” I dip my head so my lips skim up my wife’s neck and thoroughly enjoy the way she shivers in my arms. “You guys planned a great wedding, but I liked ours better.”

She sighs a pretty sigh. “It was a pretty great night.”

“One I’ll never forget.” My fingers skim over the cool skin of her bare

back. “We’ve had a lot of great nights since.”

She turns in my arms and skims her lips over mine. “We really have. I love our life, Becks. I just hope Easton’s okay. I—”

I press a finger to her lips. “I know. But there’s nothing we can do right now. I know you want to fix this for him, but he’s a grown man, Juliette. We’ve got to give him space to work through this, and we need to make sure he knows we’re here for him.”

“What if it’s not enough?”

“It will be.” I take her hand and tug her out onto the dance floor, next to Ashlyn and Brandon and Lenny and Bash. “Come on. Let’s celebrate.”

My woman raises her hands above her head and jumps with Lenny and Ashlyn. The three of them sing completely off-key as the song winds down, and the DJ throws one more on for good measure.

“We Are Family” plays through the speakers, and this time everyone sings.

Somewhere, I hope my dad is looking down on this, seeing his legacy live on in this room.

EPILOGUE



Ashlyn

I wake up to aching, leaking boobs and realize Raven slept through her feeding. That's not like my baby girl. At a month old, this little girl hasn't missed a meal yet. I reach over to Brandon, but he's not there.

What the . . . ?

I throw on my robe and pad down the hall to Raven's room.

We moved into this house about a month before our girl decided she was tired of waiting to make her entrance. I thought I'd have another month, but Raven had other ideas. She was born at thirty-six weeks, blessedly healthy. A little jaundiced, but that was it. It took forever for my milk to come in, but once it did, I could feed a small village with the amount I'm producing.

When I get to her room, the door is cracked open, and the little butterfly nightlight is the only light in the room. Her daddy insisted on a pink room with butterflies. He loved the idea that we can all become something beautiful.

But there's not many things as beautiful as the sight before me.

Brandon sits in the gray glider rocker, his feet resting on the ottoman in front of him. He's bare-chested because there's nothing this man loves more than feeling his baby girl's tiny body against his chest. Pretty sure it's her happy place too. Raven is curled in a ball, her little diapered bottom tucked into Brandon's big hand as her head rests on his chest.

And he's singing to her.

I wait until he's done before I sneak in. "Hey, big guy."

“Hey, baby.” He runs a hand down Raven’s back, and her little fist grabs at his chest hair. “Raven wanted to party, but I thought you could use a little more sleep.”

I open my robe and show Brandon my engorged breasts as they spill over the top of my nursing tank. “I appreciate it, but if I don’t feed her right now, I might explode.”

He stands so I can sit, then kisses Raven’s head before handing her to me, and my girl might have been happily sleeping on her daddy, but the minute she smells my milk, she starts rooting for my nipple and latches on like a little champ.

“I never knew I could be this happy, Ashlyn.” His words are like an answered prayer, whispered into the universe.

“I know,” I whisper back. “We have a lot to be grateful for.”

He drops his lips to the top of my head. “I’m going to go start the coffee.”

“Brandon . . .”

He stops and turns back. “I love you.”

“With every beat of my heart.”

The End

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Not ready to say goodbye to Brandon and Ashlyn yet?

Enjoy this free Bonus epilogue!

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/2brcvdiist>



Did you fall in love with Easton Hayes the way that I did?

Easton and Madeline Kingston are going to be kicking off a brand new second generation series this December with *The Keeper*, Book 1 in The Fighting To Win series.

Make sure to preorder *The Keeper* to find out what kind of man Easton is ten years from now.

Preorder [The Keeper](#) Now



If you haven't read the first book in the Defiant Kings series, you can start with Caged today!

Read [Caged](#) for FREE on KU

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank my sensitivity reader, who'd like to not be named, for taking the time to read this book and work with me. Abuse can take on many forms. Thank you for helping me handle this topic with grace and strength.

M. ~ John Kingston's legacy doesn't hold a candle to yours.

My dream team, Brianna and Heather ~ I am forever grateful.

Dena ~ We did it! One of these days I will get back on schedule.

Sarah ~ I will follow you anywhere.

Shannon ~ This cover is everything. Thank you for making Ashlyn and Dixon perfect.

Vicki, Jen & Kelly ~ I am so lucky to have you in my corner and to count you as my friends.

For all of my Jersey Girls ~ Thank you for giving me a safe space and showing me so much grace over the last year.

To all of the Indie authors out there who have helped me along the way ~ you are amazing! This community is so incredibly supportive, and I am so lucky to be a part of it.

Thank you to all of the bloggers who took the time to read, review, and promote Haven.

And finally, the biggest thank you to you, the reader. I hope you enjoyed

reading Dixon and Ashlyn as much as I loved being lost in their world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bella Matthews is a USA Today & Amazon Top 50 Bestselling author. She is married to her very own Alpha Male and raising three little ones. You can typically find her running from one sporting event to another. When she is home, she is usually hiding in her home office with the only other female in her house, her rescue dog Tinker Bell by her side. She likes to write swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, smart heroines. Sarcasm is her love language and big family dynamics are her favorite thing to add to each story.

Stay Connected

Amazon Author Page: <https://amzn.to/2UWU7Xs>

Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/bella.matthews.3511>

Reader Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/599671387345008/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/bella.matthews.author/>

Bookbub: <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/bella-matthews>

Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/.../show/20795160,Bella_Matthews

TikTok: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMdfNfbQD/>

Newsletter: <https://bit.ly/BMNLsingups>

Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/BellaMatthews>

ALSO BY BELLA MATTHEWS

Kings of Kroydon Hills

All In

More Than A Game

Always Earned, Never Given

Under Pressure

Restless Kings

Rise of the King

Broken King

Fallen King

The Risks We Take Duet

Worth The Risk

Worth The Fight

Defiant Kings

Caged

Shaken

Iced

Overruled

Haven

Playing To Win

The Keeper (coming soon)

The Wildcat (coming soon)

The Knockout (coming soon)

The Sweet Spot (coming soon)