

*USA Today* Bestselling Author  
CHARLOTTE BYRD

Puck

It



RAPTORS HOCKEY WHY CHOOSE BOOK 4

**PUCK IT**

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**A WHY CHOOSE  
HOCKEY ROMANCE**

**CHARLOTTE BYRD**

CHARLOTTE BYRD

*dangerously addictive*

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# PRAISE FOR CHARLOTTE BYRD

“Twisted, gripping story full of heat, tension and action. Once again we are caught up in this phenomenal , dark passionate love story that is full of mystery, secrets, suspense and intrigue that continues to keep you on edge!” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

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“Charlotte Byrd is one of the best authors I have had the pleasure of reading, she spins her storylines around believable characters, and keeps you on the edge of your seat. Five star rating does not do this book/series justice.” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

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“Amazing. Scintillating. Drama times 10. Love and heartbreak. They say what you don’t know can’t hurt you, but that’s not true in this book.” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

“I loved this book, it is fast paced on the crime plot, and super-hot on the drama, I would say the perfect mix. This suspense will have your heart racing and your blood pumping. I am happy to recommend this thrilling and exciting book, that I just could not stop reading once I started. This story will keep you glued to the pages and you will find yourself cheering this couple on to finding their happiness. This book is filled with energy, intensity and heat. I loved this book so much. It was super easy to get swept up into and once there, I was very happy to stay.” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

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“LOVE!!! I loved this book and the whole series!!! I just wish it didn't have to end. I am definitely a fan for life!!!

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“What a magnificent story from the 1st book through book 6 it never slowed down always surprising the reader in one way or the other. Nicholas and Olive's paths crossed in a most unorthodox way and that's how their story begins it's exhilarating with that nail biting suspense that keeps you riding on the edge the whole series. You'll love it!”

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“What is Love Worth. This is a great epic ending to this series. Nicholas and Olive have a deep connection and the mystery surrounding the deaths of the people he is accused of murdering is to be read. Olive is one strong woman with deep convictions. The twists, angst, confusion is all put together to make this worthwhile read.” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Fast-paced romantic suspense filled with twists and turns, danger, betrayal, and so much more.” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Decadent, delicious, & dangerously addictive!” (*Goodreads*)  
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“Titillation so masterfully woven, no reader can resist its pull. A MUST-BUY!” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

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“Sexy, secretive, pulsating chemistry...” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Charlotte Byrd is a brilliant writer. I've read loads and I've laughed and cried. She writes a balanced book with brilliant characters. Well done!” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Hot, steamy, and a great storyline.” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

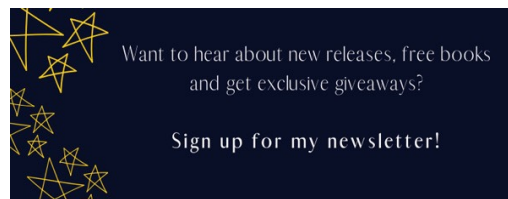
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# ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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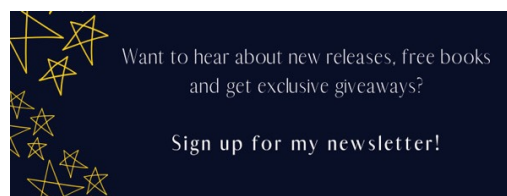
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# ABOUT PUCK IT

I found love with Ash, Soren and Ryder, three professional hockey players, at the same time. We never expected it to be this way.

There isn't just one person for me. There are three.

Casual surfer dude. Distant Swedish playboy. Broken foster kid.

All arrogant asses on the outside and kind and loving on the inside.

But it's all crashing down.

I'm their team's psychologist and this is beyond inappropriate.

To save our careers, we needed to stop before it was too late.

Now everyone knows and nothing is the same.

But things are about to get even more complicated.

I'm pregnant...

## **tropes:**

- hockey romance

- why choose
- MFM
- new adult
- angsty/steamy
- workplace romance



## HARLOW

Isn't it funny how life can turn at the drop of a hat? One minute you can be on top of the world, with everything falling into place. I just watched Ash complete his first practice session with the team after an injury that could easily have ended his career—if not his life, if things had gone differently. I was practically floating on a cloud made of hope and promise and anticipation of what's to come later tonight, when I get together with my guys and to make up for lost time.

We're together again, and I can't remember a time when I felt happier. At least, I was happy around thirty seconds ago. It could easily have been another lifetime ago.

Because that's all over now. All it took was finding Coach Kozak in my office and facing his... what is it? Is it disgust or disappointment or a combination of the two that's twisted his normally friendly face into a stony mask?

And now I remember every reason I ever told myself to give up my relationship with the guys. Ethics. Professionalism. My future, my license, my reputation. All of it is lined up in front of me like bowling pins, and the coach just rolled a strike. All I can do is stand here and watch the pins fall.

I have to do something. He likes me, we have a bond. If I can get through to him, if I can wear him down enough that he'll be willing to listen to me instead of making judgments, I might be able to explain it in a way he'll understand. I have to try, at least. I can't stand back and let everything crumble without trying to hold it together.

“Coach...” my voice falters, probably because I can barely breathe. My throat has tightened to a pinpoint and I’m practically wheezing. My heart thuds painfully, my body is trembling and I know this is an adrenaline spike. My fight or flight response has kicked in and it’s running on overdrive.

All he does is snort, and the derision in the sound—along with the disdain that twists his mouth into a sneer—makes me want to crawl into a hole and hide forever. He liked me, he really did. He respected me. And I’ve betrayed him. I’ve let him down. He’s too disgusted with me to give me a chance to speak.

Suddenly he’s on his feet, brushing past me without another word. His heavy tread echoes down the hall before fading to silence punctuated only by the rush of blood in my ears and the rapid drum beat of my pulse.

It’s over. It’s all over. Everything that ever mattered is gone.

Somehow, I manage to drop into one of the chairs in front of my desk before the world starts spinning too fast for me to keep my balance. My chest hurts. It’s so tight. I press a hand to it and close my eyes and force my way through one shallow, shuddering breath after another in a desperate attempt to stave off a panic attack. I need to think now. I can’t afford to give in to panic.

I’ve never felt so alone in my life. I’m on an island populated by one, in the middle of a stormy sea. I have no idea what’s out there. I only know I’m on my own. The guys will keep their jobs—I’m the one who broke the rules. Maybe they’ll get a slap on the wrist, if that. The onus was on me to maintain our professional relationship, not on them.

All that work. All the money spent on tuition. The sacrifices I made. It was all for nothing. I threw it away. It’s nice that my parents seemed proud of me when I graduated with my doctorate, since that’s the last proud moment they’ll ever have when it comes to their daughter. Like it wasn’t bad enough I was never athletic. I had to go and break every ethical rule in the book.

What happens if news gets out and rumors start swirling? Oh my God, this could get so much worse. I can see it all now, spread out in front of me like a living nightmare. Articles, social media posts. My picture will probably circulate, along with the players involved. All sorts of sordid stories will be born from perverted minds with nothing better to do than create clickbait.

It isn't only my career that's over. It's my whole life.

My gaze falls on the wastebasket next to the desk and I make a grab for it when my stomach lurches. I'm going to be sick. I prop the can on my lap and fold my arms over the rim, letting my head hang down inside. Nothing comes out, though. It's like my body just wants to punish me for the terrible thing I did. And I deserve it. I even deserve the coach's cold, hard attitude. I deserve that most of all. He thought the world of me, and I let him down. When I look at it that way, I'm surprised he didn't curse me out. If I were in his shoes, I might still be yelling.

What am I going to do? Do I pack up my things? Do I go home and give him a day or two to cool off? Maybe I should send the guys in to talk to him? No, that's the worst thing I could do. I shove that idea as far away from me as possible as I raise my head. I'm not bringing them into this. Let him hate me and fire me and ruin my name if he wants to, but I won't make things worse by dragging them in front of him. It's bad enough word is going to spread as it is. I don't need to hasten the process.

Here I am, surrounded by all the symbols of my hard work paying off. My diploma on the wall. My desk, my plants, my books. This is the office of a doctor, an expert, and what did I do with it? I used it as a place where I could hook up with three of the players I'm supposed to be treating. I let my body's needs destroy the trust I've earned.

And there I was, so happy when I walked in here. Ready to go home and get naked. I'm disgusted with myself, maybe even more than the coach is. I let myself down along with everybody else.

And I'm probably going to have to get a job flipping burgers or waiting tables, since that's all I'm qualified to do once my license is stripped away. Hot, desperate tears fill my eyes, but I blink them back. I don't deserve the luxury of wallowing in my misery. That can come later. Right now, I need to figure out what to do next. And I'm not talking about the future, either. I'm talking about right now, this minute. What do I do? How do I handle this?

One thing is for sure, I can't walk out of this building without speaking to the coach. When my head hits the pillow tonight, I need to be able to tell myself I tried. Something tells me that's the best I'll be able to do, since he is good and furious. I might be lucky if he lets me get a single word out before he tears my head off.

Or worse. He could very easily ignore me and act like I'm worth less than the gum stuck to the bottom of his shoe. Somehow, I think that would be even more painful than the loudest tirade he could go on.

Either way, I have to try. I have to at least put up a fight if I want to save my future. And that's why even though my legs are jelly and I'm shaking so hard my teeth chatter, I set the wastebasket on the floor and rise slowly, a little shaky. I have to do it. Otherwise, I might never get the chance to face him again. Somehow, I know I need to speak to him just once. Just in case there's a chance of getting through.

And that's why I set out for his office, forcing myself every step of the way when what I really want to do is run and hide.

## HARLOW

**H**is door is open. My apprehension grows with every step. Dread is a lead weight that makes my feet so heavy, I can barely lift them. My stomach is full of ice and my palms are slick with sweat that I rub onto my jeans. I should have brought the wastebasket with me, because I'm afraid I won't get through this without puking all over the place. But it's too late to turn back now—and I'm afraid I won't work up the courage to come back.

He's never been what you would call a quiet typist. It's more like he's attacking the keyboard, pounding the keys with his fingers even when he's in a good mood.

And he is not in a good mood right now, making the keystrokes sound more like gunshots. Who is he typing to? The team's owners? The rest of the coaching staff? The possibilities loom ahead of me but I push my way through them and knock on his door, inching my way into the room a little at a time.

He doesn't so much as glance up from his screen. He does stop typing, though, instead using his mouse to scroll through something. But his eyes don't move. He stares straight ahead like he doesn't see what's in front of him.

And he still won't acknowledge me.

I start to count off the seconds in my head. Five. Ten. The silence stretches on and on until I wonder how long it will be before one of us blinks. It's like playing chicken with another

car, driving toward it, seeing which driver will swerve first before disaster strikes. The stakes feel just as high.

For lack of anything to say, I clear my throat. His gaze snaps my way. We might as well be strangers—no, scratch that, it's worse. If he were looking at a stranger, there wouldn't be that cold, steely look in his eyes. And still he doesn't speak. Neither do I, because I don't know where to start.

He is not about to make it any easier on me. Not that I deserve it. But in his kinder moments, he might open up the dialogue, offer a comment, maybe ask me to sit down. He is not feeling kind now.

Here goes nothing. "I know I owe you an explanation." My voice is so raspy and weak. I clear my throat again and take a deep breath. "I really don't have one to give you right now."

He makes the softest, most derisive noise imaginable. I can practically hear his thoughts. *What a surprise. She can't be bothered to defend herself.* Even imagining such things makes my skin crawl, and the pressure behind my eyes is almost too much to fight. It would seem cheesy and lazy if I burst into tears on the spot. I won't do it. I won't have him thinking I'm trying to manipulate him somehow.

I open my mouth, scrambling around in my head for something to say, when an idea hits me. How does he know? Does he have proof? I can't imagine how he would. We've taken chances, for sure, but we've been discreet for the most part. Especially lately. The only time we were together since Ash's accident was after his party. There's no flirting at work. No sneaky looks or double entendres. And as far as I know, the guys have been on their best behavior. No more fighting, no bragging in the locker room.

So how does he know? I'm practically itching to ask him if only to satisfy my curiosity. But that would look like I'm guilty, and I have to be careful. I don't want to admit anything yet.

*Think, think.* It's amazing how much can go through a person's head in the blink of an eye. All of a sudden, I'm back in the public relations course that I took when I was an undergrad.

Any public relations professional worth their fee would offer just two words of advice in a situation like this, deny everything. They would tell me to keep my mouth shut and not offer any information that hasn't already been presented.

As far as I know, he's going purely on instinct here. Instinct told him the guys were fighting over a girl. Maybe he caught a look at me getting emotional when Ash stepped out on the ice earlier. Maybe he remembers how distraught I was at the hospital, how I was the first person there. Maybe he's been mulling it over and finally came to that conclusion.

But it's not the same as having proof.

If I deny everything, the responsibility falls on him. He would need to provide proof if he wants to accuse me publicly and come out victorious. And I know in the bottom of my heart if I ask them to, Ryder, Soren, and Ash would lie until their faces turned blue to protect me. There's not a question in my mind.

And for roughly the time it takes my heart to beat, it seems like a good idea. This is the way to go. Deny, deflect, demand he provide proof of these terrible allegations. I can see it all, and at a moment like this when I'm being driven by desperation, it looks pretty darn good.

But I can't do it. I can't tell any more lies. I'm so tired of it. And I'm not going to ask the three of them to compromise their principles and jeopardize their relationship with their coach for me. I couldn't live with myself. I can barely live with myself now as it is.

That's why I take another deep breath and brace myself. "I'm sorry. I know it sounds hollow and meaningless, but I need you to know more than anything how sorry I am. What happened is unacceptable. I let you down, and I can't forgive myself for that. I have really come to look up to you and admire you."

He scoffs softly, and I would swear my heart is breaking. "I mean that. You have to know I mean that. Up until today, there's never been anything but mutual respect between us. I admire your dedication to the team. I admire how hard you work. And the way you care about them... they're so, so lucky

to have you. I'm not saying these things so you'll stop being mad at me. I just wanted you to know how I feel in case this is the last time I ever get the chance to speak to you."

I really wish he would say something. Anything, so long as I know he cares enough to say it. That might be the most difficult thing to deal with, come to think of it. It's not being screamed at. It's being ignored. Knowing somebody doesn't care enough to come up with a response. Is that what's happening here? Have I shocked him beyond the point of anger?

"I really am so sorry," I whisper. It's a shaky sound, choked with emotion. I still don't want to cry. I don't want him to think I'm using that as a weapon. "And I do love the team. I've loved watching their progress. I'm proud of how far they've come. And if this is the end, I know you'll let them use the tools they've developed to play up to their potential. They would do anything to make you proud. They just need the chance to do it."

His only response is a deep breath which he releases slowly. The few times I've gotten up the courage to let my gaze brush his face, there hasn't been a change. Not so much as a muscle twitch. Almost like he's fighting as hard as I am to shove all of his emotions deep down inside. Do I hang around until he can't control them any longer? Or do I get out while there's still time to escape unscathed?

It seems like this might be a situation where one of us has to have the grace to make the next move, and I guess that will be me. There's nothing more to say, anyway. "I'm not sure where to go from here," I confess, "but I guess I'll get my things together and leave."

This is his chance. This is where he could tell me it won't be necessary for me to leave. That is, if that's what he wants. If he wanted me to stay, now would be the time for us to sit together and work it out.

*Any time now, Coach.* My throat's closing up again as a sense of desperation begins seeping into my awareness like a drop of ink in a glass of water. It's starting to spread, and it's



threatening to color everything I do. I'm holding on by a thread here, struggling to maintain my dignity. If I have any dignity left.

His silence is enough of a response for me to know where I stand. I really did it. I destroyed everything. "Thank you so much for this opportunity." The words come out rushed, breathless, and I turn away just before the first teardrop overflows.

Something tells me it's the first of many to come.

## HARLOW

**S**hell shock. It's the term medical professionals once used to describe soldiers who returned from war deeply affected by what they'd witnessed. Nobody who goes to war comes home the same person, but in some cases, the returning soldiers were nothing like they used to be. They had retreated deep into their minds to protect themselves. Some never recovered.

I'm not deluded. I know my experience is nothing like theirs. But somehow, as I force my body to move down the hall and away from Coach Kozak's office, I can't shake the comparison bouncing around in the part of my brain that's still functional. I'm in shock. I'm moving, I'm breathing, but there's still part of me that can't catch up. This is all too much, too big, too heavy.

Isn't it funny how you can know something is possible, how you can even spend hours of your life imagining it in almost painful detail, yet it's still a shock when it finally happens? This was always a possibility. I knew the risks. I went ahead with this crazy relationship anyway. It's time to pay the piper.

Now that I'm not facing the coach, the tears can fall freely. I'd be in trouble if I didn't know the way back to my office by heart. All I can make out are vague shapes in front of me as I almost stagger down the hall, breathing in sharp, hitching gasps that hint at the panic attack that hasn't given up yet. It wants to overtake me. I'm thinking it just might do that because, let's face it, I don't have it in me to hold it together.

I hear their voices before I see them, but my overwhelmed brain won't let me process the presence of visitors in my office until I round the doorway.

It's Ash who speaks first. "There you are. We saw your car—"

I stop dead in the doorway, both relieved and horrified to find them waiting for me. They weren't supposed to wait for me. Nobody can see us together like this.

Who am I kidding? What difference does it make now? A high-pitched laugh stirs in my throat but turns into a broken whimper. Ash stops dead in the middle of his statement, probably because I must look like I witnessed a bloody massacre or something similar. I'm a complete mess, in other words, and not what they expected to find.

"What happened?" A hand closes around my upper arm and pulls me into the room, while another hand starts rubbing my back after shutting the door. *Close. They're too close to me.* I can't breathe. I shake my head and wave my hands and stumble against the desk, reaching blindly for the tissue box.

They are both the only people I want to see and the last people I need hanging around here. My wounded heart needs their comfort, but the rest of me knows damn well they shouldn't be in here. I can't bring myself to tell them that. I can barely get enough air in my lungs to speak in the first place.

"Tell us what happened." Now that I can see a little better, I know it's Soren who's demanding answers.

It's so strange. Everything is so sharp and clear. The tiny crack in the ceiling, right above my desk. A slight chip in the tile floor, close to the door. The humming of fluorescent lights—I don't normally turn them on in here, since they're so harsh and the sound can be distracting, and now the sound fills my ears like the humming of bees. The soft woosh of air coming through the vents. The faint shimmer of my red nail polish.

It's amazing, the things you pay attention to when you're on the verge of losing it.

One fact about my training, it allows me to stand outside of myself and diagnose the problem. Not that it would take any

sort of medical professional to get to the bottom of why my thoughts are racing and my awareness keeps drilling down on the most mundane, inconsequential things. It's easier than facing the elephant in the room. An elephant I can't bear to look in the eye and accept. I was building a life here. I was building something I was proud of. I have to start from square one and I don't know where to go.

And Coach Kozak hates me. I'm going to have to live with that for the rest of my life, knowing I broke the trust between us. He's a good, kind man who went out of his way to make me feel welcome and appreciated. How did I repay him? By flinging all of it in his face. I know I'm going to lose sleep for years to come, staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night and replaying every ugly moment.

"I think she's in shock." Ryder doesn't bother being gentle or careful with me, taking me by the shoulders and forcing me to sit on the sofa. He drops down next to me, taking one of my shaking hands between both of his and craning his neck until we are eye to eye. I can't even look at him. I can't look at any of them.

"You can talk to us." Ash crouches in front of me, his hands on my knees. I wish I could accept the comfort he wants so much to give me. I know they all do, and I sense their growing frustration when I can't give them the answers they're looking for. I can barely breathe, much less speak.

"If somebody hurt you, you have to tell us who." For once, Soren's the one who looks like he is about to lose his shit. He's always the calm one. The guy with a handle on his emotions. He's the one pacing like a caged tiger, clenching and unclenching his fists in a steady rhythm. "Was it somebody on the team? Tell us. We'll make them regret being born."

"Damn right," Ash growls. All I can do is cry harder, so hard my body shakes, so hard my shoulders and my ribs ache from it. So hard I can't breathe, can't speak, can't think. It all hurts. It hurts so much.

And they are the last people who could ever help me through it.

They still think somebody hurt me, like I was attacked or something. Like that's the worst thing that could happen. As they poke and prod, trying to get information—which only leaves them angrier, since I can't find the words—I know these are the last moments we'll have together. When everything comes to light, that's it. Nothing will ever be the same. As miserable as this is, and as angry as they're getting thanks to my silence, it's still better than what I know is coming next.

I don't want to lose this. I'm already losing my job and everything that mattered before I met them. That is more than enough to deal with. But I have to lose them, too. I mean, there's no way we can be together now. I'll be the fallen woman, the disgrace, the temptress who used her position of power over them to fulfill my carnal desires or something like that. I have no doubt that's what the story will be. That's who I'm going to become. I could just die from embarrassment, not to mention disappointment in myself. There's plenty of that, for sure.

I can't keep them waiting forever. They're either going to find out from me, or directly from the coach. All things considered, it will be easier to hear it from me. It will give them time to prepare themselves for when he inevitably confronts them.

I only wish it didn't feel so much like I'm being marched to the electric chair and there's nothing I can do about it.

*Here goes nothing.*

## ASH

I am not the guy who sits back and lets things happen. I am not somebody who waits with his thumb up his ass. That's probably why the past several weeks during my recovery were so tough. I get shit done. I command my destiny.

In other words, I'm pretty sure my nerves are about to shred while we wait for Harlow to tell us what happened. Seeing her like this and not being able to help her or even comfort her is torment. Whatever happened, it wrecked her. She's practically inconsolable.

Now I understand what it means to want to burn down the world for the woman you love. I want to crack some skulls. I want somebody to hurt the way she's hurting. How dare they, whoever they are? Of all people, she doesn't deserve whatever that asshole put her through. Whoever he is.

"Come on. Calm yourself down." Ryder leans closer to her, touching his forehead to her shoulder. "Do you want me to go get you some water?"

For some reason, the idea freaks her out. She sits up straight, shaking her head hard while her eyes bulge. Bloodshot, tear-filled eyes. What I wouldn't give to take that pain away, but first I need to know where the pain is coming from. Why won't she say anything? Ryder's right, she needs to calm down. She's as close to hyperventilating as anyone I've ever seen and in the few minutes since she came stumbling into her office, the intensity hasn't lessened. She's just as upset as she was before. Maybe even more.

“It’s okay,” I murmur, settling in on her left while Ryder sits on the right. “We won’t leave you alone. We’ll stay here with you.”

She only lets out a choked sob before shaking her head. “It’s... not... that.” I’m surprised she managed to get that much out before another sob tears its way out of her. I’ve never heard anything as heartbroken. It’s enough to tighten my throat and send dread skittering up and down my spine. At first, we assumed somebody hurt her physically. At least, I know I did. I’m starting to think it’s deeper than that. Something a lot more emotional.

Did she lose somebody in her family? Someone she cares about? That would explain how overwhelmed she is.

Or maybe it’s something else. Because no matter how we try, all three of us together, she won’t look at any of us for very long. Almost like she’s guilty of something.

And now, the room feels very cold.

A glance at Soren tells me he’s still brooding, ready to hurt somebody for hurting her. Ryder keeps rubbing her back and squeezing her shoulders—like that’s helping anything. He obviously feels as helpless as I do now, so I can’t judge him too harshly. We are all in the dark.

Though I think there’s light starting to glimmer at the end of the tunnel... but it doesn’t bring me any relief.

Why would she be so adamant that Ryder not leave the room? I can only think of one reason, and it makes me sick to my stomach. She doesn’t want him running into anybody out there in the hall. She might even be afraid to let anybody see Ryder leave or return to the room.

Which can only mean one thing... *somebody knows*.

And as hard as I try to avoid the obvious, it keeps hammering at the back of my head. The hammering gets harder and louder with every breath I take. The more I think about it, the more obvious it is. There’s only one reason she would be this upset for this long, but not want to say anything about how she ended up like this.

With a sigh, I reach over and catch her tears on my fingers, wiping them away as gently as I can. She shudders and whimpers softly, and the sound is like a blade to my heart. “I think I know what it is.”

“Well goddamn it.” Soren throws his hands into the air before letting them fall to his sides. “If you know, clue us in, because I am lost. What the hell is really going on?”

“Look at me.” When she won’t, I take her by the chin and tilt her head until our eyes meet. Oh, yes, I’m right. I feel it. I see it—she’s devastated and lost and confused. I don’t want to say it out loud, just like she doesn’t, but there’s no point in pretending. Not when we’ll have so much to figure out.

“What is it?” Ryder is perplexed, worried.

I answer him, while speaking to her. “Someone knows about us, don’t they?” I whisper, stroking her cheek with my thumb. “Someone who should not know.”

Like magic, her eyes well up again, and now her chin starts to tremble. A fresh sob makes her shudder before her head bobs up and down.

“Who?” I ask. The room has gone completely silent except for her sniffles. I can feel my friends holding their breath.

“Coach... Kozak...”

Oh, fuck.

I didn’t think of him. I don’t know why. I assumed it was one of the players. Maybe somebody saw something they shouldn’t have. But the coach?

Ryder falls back against the arm of the sofa, his eyes wide. All the air leaves his lungs in one big gust, like somebody just hit him in the stomach and knocked the wind out of him. Soren perches on the edge of Harlow’s desk, clasping his hands over the top of his head like he’s trying to make sure it doesn’t come flying off. I know the feeling.

“You’re sure?” I ask, and I know it’s a stupid question but I feel like I have to put it out there. Just in case. It’s not like it



would be the first time she jumped to the worst possible conclusion out of nowhere.

Her head bobs up and down while she gulps for air. “Yes. He was in here after practice. Waiting for me in the dark. I don’t know how he knows, but he does. He won’t even talk to me. He hates me. I don’t blame him. I hate me, too.”

I put an arm around her and draw her close, letting her shake and shudder against me while the whole world falls away. That’s how life works sometimes. You can feel like you overcame the most insurmountable challenge you ever faced. You can be proud of yourself, you can feel sure that life is finally settling back into place. Like you’re exactly where you need to be after wandering in the dark and wondering if your life is over.

You can get through all of that and come out smiling on the other side, but then the bottom can drop out from out of nowhere all over again.

How many times did she warn us that her career would end if anyone ever found out? And we were willing to turn a blind eye. We had to pretend she was overreacting if we had any hope of being with her. I guess it’s easy to look past the risks when it’s not your life that will be destroyed.

There was one thing we overlooked.

The way our lives would be destroyed, too. Because even if we keep our jobs, things will never be the same. For any of us.

**RYDER**

**W**hen did the world start spinning? Around the time I heard the coach's name. It took a second for me to understand what she was saying—she's still too close to hysteria to calm down and speak clearly. Maybe I didn't want to understand. Maybe there's part of me that wanted to protect itself from what I heard. And what it means.

Soren looks like he just got hit by a bomb, and Ash is practically shaking with... what? Anger? Helplessness? I understand both of those feelings. I'm going through them now, myself.

But that's not going to help anybody. It's sure as hell not going to help her. The pitiful, pained whimpers make me want to take her in my arms and promise nothing will ever hurt her again. I'll find a way to make this right. Even if I don't know what it is, I'll figure it out.

Isn't it strange how old habits and instincts can come up at a time like this? I'm a professional athlete with a home of my own and a good, solid life, but all it took was this disaster to bring all my old habits back to the forefront. I'm sixteen again, and trouble is knocking at the door. There's only one answer.

“Deny it.”

Ash's eyes go wide when they meet mine over the top of Harlow's head. I don't know why he looks so surprised. Soren does, too. What, they never got in trouble when they were kids? They never had to figure out how to get out of a shitty

situation? Probably not. At least, not the kind of trouble me and my friends got in.

Let them be surprised. I need to get through to her. That's all that matters. "Does he have proof? I'm talking photographic evidence here. Or a video, something?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. He came out and accused me, but he never explained where the accusation was coming from. He..." She looks down at her clasped hands and her chin quivers. "He wouldn't even talk to me after that. He didn't say a word. Because he hates me and he's disgusted with me. How did I ruin everything like this?"

My heart's aching for her, but that's not what matters most right now. "If he had proof, and I can't imagine how he would unless there's a hidden camera in somebody's bedroom, he would have shown it to you. Right?" I glance around the room, hoping somebody will back me up. I mean, to me, it's common sense.

"I really don't know." She drags the back of her hand under her nose, sniffing, and Soren hands her the tissue box without a word. I practically have to bite off my tongue to keep from hurrying her through blowing her nose.

"No. I have to be right. I know I am." The more I speak, the clearer it all gets. When I look to my friends for support, they still seem too confused and skeptical, so I guess I have to do this on my own. "He can't have proof. There's no way. It's your word against his."

"What are you saying?" Soren murmurs. He arches an eyebrow when I look his way.

"I'm saying, deny it and we'll stand behind you. It'll be the four of us denying it together. There's no way this hurts you so long as we're careful and stick together."

I would at least expect her to think it over. To look at it from all sides. I mean, she's usually pretty level headed that way... then again, this is not a normal situation no matter how I look at it. I can't expect her to do what she would normally do when she's obviously heartbroken.

“No,” she replies, and I recognize the determination in that single word. She’s damn stubborn when she feels like it, and she’s feeling like it now. “I can’t do that.”

“Sure, you can.” It’s so obvious. Why am I the only one who sees it?

“Ryder.” There is so much hopelessness on her face when she looks at me. So much sadness. She’s already been defeated. “You think I didn’t already consider that? It’s one of the first things that came into my head. I know you would stand behind me and say whatever it took to protect me. I can’t tell you how much that means. But it wouldn’t be right.”

“Fuck right and wrong at a time like this.” There’s panic in my voice, and I try my damndest to push it aside before I embarrass myself.

This might be a lot easier if somebody would back me the fuck up. Ash is staring out the window. He might as well be miles away. Is he thinking over what I just said? “Come on. You know this is the only way out. It’s like the way cops always back each other up, you know?”

“Cops?” Soren snorts before frowning at me like I’m some foreign species. I should be used to that by now.

“Yeah, cops. They have each other’s backs no matter what. Somebody fucks up, they stay quiet. Right or wrong, it doesn’t matter.”

“Right,” Ash murmurs. “Because that’s a great example. That makes me feel really good about myself.”

“And about the state of our law enforcement agencies,” Soren adds. “Maybe those aren’t the people we need to emulate right now, you know?”

“Maybe stop being smart asses for a minute and really think about it. We form a wall around her. We protect her. It’s the least we can do since we are the ones who got her into this.”

“That’s not fair—”

I squeeze Harlow’s shoulder and shake my head. “Yes, it is. Because it’s the truth. We are the reason this is happening.”

This time when I look around, I see guilt written on Ash's and Soren's faces. "You know I'm right. You kept telling us it was a bad idea, that we couldn't do this, and we kept finding a way to make you change your mind."

"I should have been stronger. I risked everything, and I knew it was a risk. No, this is all on me."

"Fine, then. That's something we can all work out together. But when it comes to the rest of the world, everybody else who isn't in this room at this second, we are an undivided front. The less you say, the better. Nobody ever has to know the truth."

"It's too late for that." She uses her sleeves to wipe her cheeks, then releases a deep breath. "He already knows for sure. I already apologized."

It's like she stuck a pin in a balloon. I'm watching my last hope deflate in front of my eyes.

"Damn it." Ash rubs his temples while Soren's head falls back so he can stare at the ceiling.

"What was I supposed to do? All this time, I've been lying. I lied right to his face. Like when he suspected you guys were fighting over a girl. That girl was me, and I stood there and pretended I didn't have the first clue what was going on. That's just one example of how I've betrayed his trust. He wanted so much for me to be here, and I spat in his face. I wasn't going to do it again. I wasn't going to insult his intelligence. I'm not going to do it now, either. It's time for me to show a little bit of character. I'm sorry if you don't understand."

"So, what? You're going to sacrifice yourself?"

"You're making it sound like I'm doing this because I want to. Do you think I want this? Do you think this isn't my worst nightmare come true?"

No. I'm not giving up. I'm not losing her. Us. I'm not about to stand on the sidelines and let her take the bullet for all of us when we were all in this together. My brain flails around,

searching for another way out. “Were there any witnesses when you apologized?”

“Oh, come on...” Ash murmurs.

Ignore him, focusing on her. “Were there witnesses?”

“No, it was just the two of us.”

“There you go. It’s still your word against his.”

When she rolls her eyes, there’s a familiar heat that rushes through me. Something hotter and deeper than anger. I don’t like when I’m not taken seriously—who does? But it’s especially hard when I know I’m right. I’m only trying to help her. Why doesn’t she see that?

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“Since when are you this—” I bite my tongue. I bite it hard. I need to get a hold of myself, because I almost called her stupid. She’s anything but stupid. Stubborn, determined to drive me out of my skull, but she’s not stupid.

“Enough. That’s enough.” Soren stands upright and folds his arms, planting his feet at shoulder width. Like he’s about to give an inspirational speech in the locker room or some shit.

“This is a waste of time. Nobody wants to see this happen, but it’s too late to do anything about it. What’s done is done. Instead of wasting our time fighting over what can’t be changed, we need to figure out how to move forward.”

But that’s just it. As far as she is concerned, there is no way forward.

And I don’t know if we’ll be able to find one no matter how we try.

**SOREN**

This was always going to happen.

I mean, I always knew that. We've been skating on thin ice all this time. Only a child closes their eyes and sticks their fingers in their ears and pretends not to know there will be consequences to their actions. If there's one thing I believe in, it's honesty. If you can't be honest with yourself, who can you be honest with?

It's just a damn shame it had to happen this way.

And it's crushing me to see her like this. Eyes swollen and bloodshot, her nose red, her expression one of total helplessness. She's distraught. She's scared out of her wits. When I try to put myself in her shoes, I understand why. The future is one big question mark.

And she cares too much about what other people think about her to brush this off. I can't look down on her for that. In some ways, she's a lot like me. She's had to bear the weight of her parents' disappointment. She's not the star athlete her father hoped for. But she managed to carve a path for herself, one any parent would be proud of. She built something of her own. A career. A life.

And all of that is probably over now. I expect Coach Kozak to come in here any second, ordering her to get out of the building. Maybe it will be worse than that. Maybe he'll send someone from the security team. Talk about an insult. No way would she take that well. I think that might break her.

Yet there she is. Facing it as best she can. Refusing to lie.

I can't pretend not to admire that. And that's why Ryder's stubborn insistence is working its way under my skin and making it impossible not to snap at him. "Why don't you let her handle this how she feels most comfortable?"

His scowl makes the hair lift on the back of my neck. I don't want to fight with him, but he's testing me. He's damn determined to push my buttons. "What's so wrong with letting her know we have her back?"

"There's having her back, and there's breaking your neck trying to get her to go against her principles."

"Could you not make me sound like the bad guy in all of this?"

"Could you not make it sound like she's an idiot for wanting to tell the truth?"

"Did I call her that? When did I ever use that word?" He scoffs and rolls his eyes. "You're a real fucking pain in the ass, you know that?"

I shouldn't scoff, but some things can't be helped. "Careful. Your Boston is coming out."

His eyes harden along with the set of his jaw. "My Boston is about to come out on you, if you're not careful."

"Guys." She sounds so tired. Sad. Instantly, I'm ashamed of myself for starting shit in front of her. We've already ruined her life. We don't need to make things worse.

"You know, really, we're the only ones who'd have to know the truth. And we would never judge you for doing what you have to do to get through this. Whatever that is."

I can't hide my surprise when I turn to Ash, who chose now to finally put his two cents in. "Seriously?"

"What? She has options. It's important to keep that in mind. Just think about it, that's all I'm saying."

"I have thought about it. I already told you that."

Ryder's eyes light up. Now he has an ally. "See? What I'm saying isn't crazy."



“Nobody said it was crazy. Only that it’s not what she wants to do.”

“Why don’t you let her decide what she wants to do?”

“She’s already decided,” I remind him, fighting to keep my voice low. This isn’t the place where we should discuss things, but it’s where we happen to be. “All you want is to change her mind.”

“That’s not what’s happening. For fuck’s sake.” Ryder springs up from the sofa and goes to the window, staring out with his hands in his back pockets. His shoulders rise and fall in a quick, sharp rhythm. Yes, it’s better for him to cool off. The last thing we need is Coach coming in here not to throw Harlow out, but to break up a fight. That wouldn’t exactly do her any favors. I can already imagine what he must think of her. She doesn’t need him blaming her for more fights between the players.

Ash slides a little closer to her and puts an arm around her shoulders. “All anybody wants is for you to come out of this with your job and your life in one piece. If we can help you do that, we’ll do it.”

“That’s all I want,” Ryder agrees, still staring out the window.

“I know. And I love you guys for that, I really do. But this is about more than just my job and my license. I see that now. I need to be able to look myself in the eye every day. What’s the point of keeping my job if I can’t respect myself?” She shakes her head, looking miserable. “Not only that, but he’ll know I’m lying. I’ll have to face him every day knowing he knows. How could I ever work with somebody while that’s hanging over my head?”

She runs her hands through her hair, smoothing it down until she looks more like herself. “It’s been hard enough this whole time when he didn’t know. I already had to wrestle with my conscience when I knew I was lying to him every day. I literally can’t imagine it getting worse than that.”

“Okay.” Ryder heaves a sigh before turning around, and my heart sinks when I see the look in his eyes. He is not letting

this go. The man is damned determined to have his way. “So he knows about us. And you already apologized, so he knows it’s true. What if...”

“Just let it go, man,” I warn in a soft voice. Doesn’t he see what this is doing to her? He’s only making it worse.

“Hear me out before you shut me down, would you? I think this might work. It’s just... I don’t know how you guys are gonna feel about it. But it might be the last shot.”

“Let’s hear it, then.” Ash sighs, sounding about as hopeful as I feel.

“You could always say you were drunk and weren’t in control of yourself.”

Now I understand why he thought we wouldn’t be a fan of the idea. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“Why don’t you think about it for a minute before you treat me like some piece of shit off the street?”

“That sort of makes us look like assholes, doesn’t it?” I point out.

“Assholes? It makes us look a hell of a lot worse than that.” Ash snickers and shakes his head. “No offense, but that’s insane.”

“I understand you only want what’s best for me.” Her voice is soft, a little shaky, yet she manages a weak smile when she looks at Ryder. “But I can’t do that, either. Because it’s true. That makes you guys look pretty bad. Like you would all have sex with me while I was under the influence. We’d only open up a whole other kettle of fish. I don’t want that. I’m not going to sacrifice you to save myself. And I’m not going to pretend like the coach is making things up. I’ve spent a lot of time lying since I got here. From the first day. It’s time to stop. I need to accept the consequences of what I’ve done. I always knew this could happen. It didn’t stop me. I have to face what happens next.”

Ryder’s shoulders slump like he finally sees how pointless it is to fight. “You mean that? Really? You’re going to give up?”

“It’s not giving up. It’s being an adult. It’s paying my dues.”

“Even if we could make it easier for you?”

“I don’t need you to. I love that you want to, but it’s not necessary.” Her eyes move around the room, landing on the three of us one at a time. “Besides, you have your careers to think about, too. You have lives of your own. I’m not going to get in the way of your futures when you’ve worked so hard. You don’t need any more tension or drama. And if you face any, I don’t want to be the reason for it. Do you know what I mean? Does that make sense?”

Now that there’s really nothing more to say, an unhappy silence fills the room. So this is it. I can’t imagine coming here every day without being able to look forward to seeing her. I can hardly remember a time when she wasn’t part of my life. How did she manage to burrow so deep into my heart without me knowing about it?

“Can we help you get your things together?” It’s surreal, having to ask that. Being in this situation. Knowing this is the end.

“I don’t know if I have it in me right now to go through all of that. I might go home, get myself together, then come back early in the morning when nobody else is here.”

She stands, looking mournful as she takes in her surroundings. “Besides, there’s not all that much to pack up. It won’t take long.” She sounds like she’s on the verge of tears again, like she’s all alone and doesn’t know which way to go. I don’t like the idea of her being alone at a time like this. I open my mouth, prepared to offer to meet her at her place, but she beats me to it. “I think it would be best for me to be alone for a while.”

“You can’t punish yourself.” Ash tucks a strand of hair behind her ear before stroking her cheek. “You don’t need to be alone. We want to be with you.”

“I know. That’s not what I want right now. No offense or anything. I just need to be on my own and do some thinking.”

“Fair enough.” I make it a point to look at both of them and hold their gazes until they look away. I’m not fucking around. She’s doing what she feels is best, and I’m not going to let them talk her out of it.

Even if I sort of wish I could.

## HARLOW

I 'll say one thing for being in the deepest, most all-consuming depression of my life, I've gotten a hell of a lot done around the house.

After all, once the team's owners make it official and kick me out of town, I won't be here anymore. I even jeopardized my home by fooling around when I knew it was wrong. The team set me up with this place. No way I'll be able to keep it after I've been fired.

Though I haven't been fired yet. I'm sure somebody is waiting for the perfect time. Maybe the team owners don't want to make it a public situation just yet. The team is doing so well, after all. The negative PR wouldn't help anybody. As far as I know, I'm still on the payroll.

If only I could step foot in the building without feeling like I might burst into flames at any second. Like a sinner walking into church. At the end of the day, I'm too chicken to risk showing up. I wouldn't want to goad the coach into going on a tirade in front of the team.

He obviously doesn't think there's anything out of the ordinary about me staying home this past week, since he hasn't reached out. Neither has anybody else aside from my guys, who've made it a point to text every day and check in on me. I appreciate it. I love them for it. And I try to pull it together and sound positive, or at least like I'm not falling apart.

Whether I'm successful or not, I don't know. But nobody has shown up at my door to, like, stage an intervention or

anything. So I'm guessing I have them somewhat convinced, at least.

The aroma of sugar and cinnamon fills the air, and I'm humming to myself while scrubbing the sink. How many times have I scrubbed it this week? I've lost track. There's something satisfying about it, about coming downstairs in the morning and seeing it gleam in all its stainless steel glory while sunshine streams in through the sliding doors. Besides, I've always found cleaning to be meditative. I can turn my brain off for a little while and focus on nothing but scrubbing out every last stain, every spot, every imperfection.

I'm even humming to myself when there's an unexpected chime from the doorbell.

And right away, I freeze like a deer in headlights. My heart decides to take off at a sickening rate and my stomach... let's just say I'm glad I don't have much of an appetite, or else I would end up filling the sink I just finished cleaning.

Immediately, the image of Coach Kozak standing on the other side of the door makes my insides go all hot and shaky. Is this what he was waiting for? To lull me into relaxing before bringing the death blow?

Joke's on him. I haven't been relaxed all week.

"Harlow? Are you home?" The bell rings again, followed by an insistent knock. It's Corey. I don't think I've ever been so relieved.

My relief doesn't last long. By the time I reach the door, all the texts she sent me that I haven't bothered to answer come rushing back. I've missed skating sessions, too. I didn't have it in me to respond, especially when I knew she'd ask questions. There was no way I could go through that, not at first. I'm not even sure I can do it now.

But it's too late to go back, because the door is unlocked and I'm already opening it. She throws her hands into the air and heaves a sigh. "Thank God. I thought you were dead. What did I do to end up on the pay no mind list?"

"You didn't do anything. Come on in."

She blows out a whistle on entering. “This is not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“An episode of *Hoarders*,” she admits. “You don’t avoid the rest of the world for a week and come out of it with a sparkling clean house. Did you have a cleaning crew come in here? I could eat off the floor. And it smells like pine cleaner and... apple pie?”

As if on cue, the timer on the oven goes off. “There’s nothing wrong with your sense of smell,” I tell her on my way to the kitchen, where I grab a pair of pot holders to lift the pie from the rack and place it on the stove to cool. I wasn’t feeling ambitious enough to try a lattice crust, but it’s still beautiful thanks to a brush of cream and a sprinkle of sugar during the last ten minutes of baking.

“Looks like I got here right in time.” Corey joins me, giving me a nudge that means business. “Spill. Where have you been? Why didn’t you answer any of my texts or calls? I was worried sick.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. I was just a mess.”

“Over what?”

I can’t tell at first if she’s serious. “You mean you haven’t heard? Not a word? You work there in the arena, and nobody told you?” Well, now I feel like a real smacked ass. I figured she’d hear the news and understand why I’ve gone MIA.

The look of innocence she wears tells another story. “Told me what? Stop beating around the bush and get to the point, woman.”

If the pie weren’t molten hot, I would offer her a slice before we sit down. Instead, I jerk my thumb toward the coffee maker. “Do you want some coffee?”

“So it’s that kind of story?”

“Well, I haven’t been to work all week and I just baked an apple pie from scratch after I bookmarked a YouTube video

two years ago, if that tells you anything. And it's too early in the day for alcohol." Though I've certainly considered it.

I head over to the pot and pour two cups, one of which I slide her way before adding milk and sugar to my own. "I've never lived anywhere this clean. My closet looks like something from a Pinterest board, and my cabinets?" I open one to show her my beautifully organized plates and glasses.

"So what's up? You took a week off to clean your house and make apple pie?"

"No. I stayed home this week because Coach Kozak confronted me after Ash's first practice and told me he knows."

It's a good thing she just swallowed her coffee, or else I get the feeling it would have ended up all over the island. "What?" she screeches. "How did you not tell me? Holy shit! What happened? Are you okay? What can I do?"

I love her for asking that, but it's not like she can change anything. "You can tell me there hasn't been any gossip around the arena."

"Obviously not, or I would have heard something about this. Shit, I'm so sorry. So he fired you? Exactly what happened?"

I give her the Cliffs Notes version, leaving out the part where I seriously considered lying. I'm not exactly proud of that, even if I'm sure it was a natural reaction anybody would have had in my shoes.

By the time I'm finished, her jaw is practically on the floor. "I am so sorry. And here I was, pissed off that you ghosted me for a week. No wonder."

"I really am sorry for not getting back to you."

"It's okay. Really. I should have stopped by before now to check up on you, anyway."

She looks around again, eyes narrowing. "And you did all this? All the cleaning and the baking and organizing? I would still be in bed under a pile of used tissues. I doubt I would have changed my pajamas all week."



‘When you wake up every morning wondering if this is the day you’re going to officially be fired and kicked out of your house, you need to channel your anxiety somehow. Hey, at least the house is spotless.’

“You think they would kick you out?”

“They arranged it for me.”

“But you’re the one paying rent. They can’t leave you homeless.” She winces, then bites her lip, and I have a feeling I know what’s coming. “Are you sure he’s going to fire you?”

That’s the thing. I’m not sure of anything anymore. And the longer this goes on, the worse it gets.

## HARLOW

“This is really bizarre.”

Corey looks up from her pie, and her frown gets my pulse racing erratically. “What? Did I do something wrong?” I haven’t taken a bite yet. I was sort of waiting for her to give me a clue whether I screwed it up or not.

“I wasn’t talking about this. This is freaking fantastic. You need to do more baking.” She spears a slice of apple which she drags through the melting vanilla bean ice cream before popping it in her mouth. “I was talking about how I haven’t heard anything about this yet.”

“That does seem kind of strange.” Putting it mildly. “I was sure everybody would be talking about it.”

“Well, this is a good thing. I know if I were in your shoes, I would rather find out nobody knew.”

She makes a good point. “So long as nobody is, like, burning me in effigy down there.”

“What about the guys? You’ve talked to them, right?”

I don’t know why my defenses immediately come up, but they do. “To be honest with you, I haven’t wanted to talk to anybody. I figured if there was anything I needed to know, they would come out or text me instead of just trying to call or send messages asking if I’m doing okay. You know?”

“Sure. But there hasn’t been any of that?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Maybe the coach just hasn’t told anybody else yet.”

“But that’s weird. Isn’t that weird? He was so upset. I figured the whole world would know by now.”

I’ll give her one thing, she’s good at trying to see the positive side of things. “Maybe he just needed a little time to calm down and think it through. As far as I know, there hasn’t been any announcement about you not working there anymore.”

“I guess the guys would tell me if that happened.”

“Right. I’ve been there every day this week, and it doesn’t even seem like there’s any tension. I mean, I showed up at your door convinced you were dead. Obviously, I didn’t have the first clue about any of this.”

I can’t make any sense of it. The man looked like he wanted to forget I ever existed, didn’t he? He was like a disappointed parent, but a hundred times worse. I can’t even think about it without my insides clenching and going cold the way they were that night.

“I’m sure he doesn’t want to fire you.” She reaches across the island and squeezes my hand before picking up her fork again. “God, this is good. I might need another slice.”

“Help yourself. I’m not going to eat the whole thing by myself.” As much as I want to. And I definitely want to. Half the reason I’ve spent so much time cleaning and organizing was to distract myself from the stress eating my brain craved. “So what are you saying? He’s still trying to make up his mind, you think?”

“All I know is, I stopped in to watch practice yesterday, and nothing seemed different. You would literally never know. You could just as easily be on vacation right now—that’s how normal everything seemed. He wasn’t flipping out, and he did a lot of that last season, by the way. Sometimes I could hear him yelling without even being in the rink. That’s how loud he would get. But everything was moving smoothly. No fighting,” she adds.

I prop my chin on my palm, mulling it over. “At least he didn’t, like, make a rash decision and throw my stuff out in the

parking lot.”

“I’m sure he wants to keep things as normal as possible for the team’s sake. They’ve all really come to love you.”

“Oh, please, don’t say things like that.” My hands are shaking when I cover my face with them. “I know you’re being my friend, but it hurts to hear it.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you upset.” No, I’m sure she didn’t, but now all I can think about is how those guys have come to depend on me. If they’re doing better, it’s thanks in part to the tools I gave them. There’s no room for modesty right now. It’s just a fact.

What happens if they find out that was basically a fraud all this time? I don’t have any answers. Who am I to tell them what to do?

“And the coach has never tried to reach out to you since that night? Not even once?”

My head swings back and forth. “No way. I’m telling you, he hates me.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t actually hate you. He’s probably disappointed, yeah. But maybe having some time to think it over has softened things up. He probably is glad he didn’t fire you. He would probably have to come back and apologize for it now that he’s regretting the way things happened.”

“You have a lot more faith in him than I do. He’s a good man, but rules are rules. And I broke pretty much all of them. Repeatedly.”

“Well, he doesn’t need to know about that part.” She takes the last piece of apple and swirls it around her plate to catch as much of the melted ice cream as possible. I’ve never had a reason to do a lot of cooking for anybody—I used to cook for Kyle, but usually his schedule was so busy, we would only eat together at home maybe once a week. Now I understand what he was probably busy doing all those times... and it’s better for me not to think about that when I’m already a wreck.

I never understood until now how nice it is to watch somebody enjoy something I made. And she is not holding back. “I swear

to God, I want to marry this pie. You're going to have to give me the recipe. And then I'm going to have to learn to bake."

"If I could manage it, anybody can." I nudge the plate her way, silently encouraging her to take more. She doesn't keep me waiting, either. I guess when you're as physically active as she is on a daily basis, you can afford an extra piece of pie.

She takes a huge bite, closing her eyes as she chews. Then her eyes pop open and she turns to me. "How does he know? He never said?"

"No. I'm completely clueless."

"And you didn't give up any details?"

"I apologized for letting him down and everything, and I let him know I understand his feelings. But no. I didn't, like, go into graphic detail or anything like that."

"Do you think anybody else could have known, and they just never said anything?"

I'm a little embarrassed, and I doubt I'm going to earn myself any extra points by admitting this. "Let's just say if anybody knows, they would have seen it up in Seattle during training camp." Through Soren's hotel window. "You were right, things did happen up there."

"I knew it," she mutters, smirking.

"But that was so long ago. Why would he have waited until now to say something?"

"Maybe he just found out."

"I can't imagine anybody on the team going straight to him. You know? Like, why not go to one of the guys? Why not come to me?"

Her face falls. "That makes sense. I wish I had the answers for you."

"So do I."

"It could be he was only going on a hunch..."

She's almost as bad as Ryder. "Oh, come on. You're killing me," I groan as I touch my forehead to the counter.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm only making it worse."

"It's not like I haven't been asking myself the same thing. What if he was only guessing, and I confirmed it? What if I'd denied it from the beginning?"

"That would suck."

"Just a little, yeah." I lift my head, sighing. "No matter how I look at it, the result is the same. I'm screwed."

"I wonder what would happen if you went in tomorrow."

"I wonder what would happen if I stick a knife in a wall socket."

"Come on, be serious."

"I am being serious. I know exactly what would happen. He would throw me out. Everybody would know by the time I left."

"You don't know that for sure. You could go in there, and things could be weird and awkward, but they could eventually calm down."

No way. He'd always remember, and so would I. I'd never get over the awkwardness."

"Sometimes, work is awkward and uncomfortable. People can work together really well, but that doesn't necessarily mean they have to respect or even like each other very much. Believe me, I know. You should have seen some of the characters I had to skate with back in the day."

I see her point, but I still can't imagine facing him every day, knowing how he feels. Maybe it makes me a coward, running and hiding the way I have. Here I am, telling myself I've removed myself from the equation because it's what people with character and principles do when they know they're wrong. Now I'm starting to wonder if I should have stuck around and tried to fight for my job. There's just no telling the right way to go. "I feel like I'm wandering around in the dark, flailing desperately."

“I can only imagine. But you’re not alone. And believe me,” she adds, leaning in and hitting me with a stern look. “I understand the impulse to shut the door and close out the world. But you aren’t alone. There are people who care about you and want to help you through this.”

“You’re only saying that because you love my apple pie.”

She picks up her fork, shrugging. “Listen, I’m not saying that’s the entire reason... but it doesn’t hurt.”

## HARLOW

Sometimes, you hit a wall without realizing you did. That's usually how it is for me. I'll never know until it's too late that I've pushed too hard or that I've run out of steam. It can come as a complete shock, out of the blue.

Other times, I can feel every single brick of that wall as I smash my face against it.

I would say this situation falls under the latter category.

My first week was all about coping. Avoidance, to be precise. If I kept working hard enough, I could outrun my anxiety. At least, that's what I thought. You would think a doctor would know better. Like I would be able to diagnose myself in the moment rather than looking back days later and shaking my head at the manic fit I went through. Let's face it, though. I wasn't exactly in the mood to dissect my motivation. I'm still not.

But there's really not much else to do, since I can't muster up the energy to do more than get out of bed and walk down the hall to the bathroom, then come back. Occasionally I have to go downstairs to get something to eat or drink, but I find it helpful to grab more than what I need so those trips are few and far between. Instead of bringing up a handful of crackers or a small bowl of chips, I'll bring the entire bag. Instead of a single cup of tea, I'll bring the whole teapot.

Needless to say, after days of living like a feral animal, my bedroom is no longer gleaming and organized. It looks more like a dorm room now. Food packages line the dresser and the



night stand. The few times I've managed to muster up the energy to change my clothes, they haven't made it to the hamper. I don't even bother opening the blinds. I don't need the reminder of a bright, sunshiny world beyond my window. It's like Mother Nature herself wants to rub it in.

When my phone buzzes, I have to work my way out from under the cocoon I've wrapped myself in. At Corey's insistence, I've stopped ignoring the messages that come in, but that doesn't mean I have to be super receptive toward them. I am not feeling social, let's just put it that way.

Doesn't matter. The message that just came through leaves no room for argument.

**Ash: I'm coming over and I'm bringing soup. Either the door is unlocked, or I kick it in. Your choice.**

If only I thought he were joking, but I know better. That's why I haul myself out of bed, grumbling, but also gathering trash from around the room and taking it downstairs to be thrown out. He clearly knows I'm a total wreck. I don't need him staging an intervention once he sees the disaster I have become. After unlocking the door so he doesn't do anything rash, I head back upstairs and drag a brush through my hair before putting it back in a messy bun. At least it's not tangled. I then wash my face and brush my teeth and even change my shirt before gathering the clothes from around the floor and shoving them in the hamper. That's as human as it's going to get today. I hope he doesn't mind.

Then again, I didn't ask him to come over, did I?

I've settled in with a new documentary by the time I hear the front door open and close. "Harlow?" I can't pretend hearing his voice isn't comforting. The fact that he went out of his way to come over threatens to make me teary eyed, but then a lot of things have made me teary eyed lately.

"Bedroom!" I call out. Moments later I hear his footsteps on the stairs, and soon he's standing in the doorway holding a plastic shopping bag in one hand and a bouquet of colorful gerbera daisies in the other.

“I thought you might need a little cheering up.” His sheepish grin makes me smile. I’ve missed him.

“Come on in. Thank you for coming over. I appreciate you checking on me.”

I mean every word of it, but that doesn’t stop him from frowning as he approaches the bed. “Do you want your soup now?” I nod, holding out my hands, and I’m glad to find a plastic spoon and fork included.

“When did I ever tell you how much I love pho?”

“You didn’t. But it always makes me feel better.” He frowns again. “I should have asked if you like it or not, I guess.”

“I love it.” There’s a Styrofoam container included along with the fragrant broth, and I get to work adding the chicken and noodles, sliced jalapeno and basil inside.

“What are you watching?” He takes off his jacket, then sits on the other side of the bed.

“A documentary about a serial killer from back in the eighties.”

“Glad to see you’re trying to stay cheerful.”

“I’ve been alternating true crime with Hallmark movies. Would you rather I put one of them on for you?”

“No, thanks. I’m good with serial killers. So I have to ask.” He looks around the room, frowning like he’s concerned, and part of me wants to describe the way it looked just fifteen minutes ago. He thinks this is bad? He has no idea. “How long are you going to shut yourself up like this? It’s not healthy.”

And he’s the one to talk to me about what is and isn’t healthy? I’m sure he couldn’t have been Mr. Personality when he was working his way through recovering from his injury. He’s barely Mr. Personality now. “I don’t know what you want from me. My life is ruined. I don’t know what to do next.”

“You haven’t even come back to clean out your office.”

“I know that.”

“It’s not like I blame you or anything. I wouldn’t want to make that move, either. That would mean everything is actually over.”

“See? You get it.”

“But you can’t live in limbo for the rest of your life.”

“What do you suggest, Doctor?”

I have to give him credit. He’s doing a lot better with staying calm instead of lashing out right away. “For starters, you can try to talk to the coach.”

“Sure, and when I’m finished with that, I’ll try pulling my own teeth instead of going to a dentist.”

He lowers his brow, scowling. “Harlow.”

“Ash. It’s easy for you to say.”

“Hello? This hasn’t exactly been easy for me or the others. Do you know how stressful it is to go through the motions, when you know there’s an unspoken secret hanging in the air? The three of us have had to pretend for days that there’s nothing wrong. I’m always waiting for the bomb to drop, do you know what I mean?”

I have to set the soup aside, leaving it on the nightstand so I don’t spill it all over the bed. “What are you saying? He still hasn’t said a word?”

“It’s like living in bizarro world. He hasn’t given a clue what he’s thinking or how he’s feeling. I’m talking nothing. Business as usual.”

“He hasn’t sat down and talked with you guys at all?”

“No! There I was, expecting him to ask for a meeting the next day. But it’s never happened.”

“So I just don’t exist anymore? It’s as easy as that?” I honestly don’t know how to feel about this.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. Everybody’s noticed you’re not around. I even heard Danny asking yesterday if there was something wrong, like if you were sick or something.” He

shrugs, scoffing. “All Kozak said was you’re taking a brief leave of absence for personal reasons.”

Interesting. It answers none of my questions but gives me a little bit of hope. What if there’s still a way for me to get out of this without losing everything? Why else would he hesitate like this? He’s had plenty of time to make his move, but he hasn’t done a thing. Could it mean he doesn’t want to fire me? Maybe Corey was right and he needed time to think things over. Maybe he can’t find it in himself to be the first one to reach out.

Does that mean I want to be the one to do it? Not exactly. Not when I remember the cold shoulder he gave me. Why would I want to put myself through that again if I could avoid it?

“Honestly, it’s pissing me off,” he adds, his back thumping the headboard when he falls against it with a grunt.

“Why?”

“Because you’re not the only one who was involved here. We all played a part in this. We’re grown men. And yeah, you’re the team’s therapist. Fine. But we’re in positions of power, too. We’re not some naive kids who don’t know their asses from a hole in the ground. You didn’t take advantage of us. Hell, we make probably twice what you do.”

Maybe not exactly twice, but they do make more than me. “I should have known better. I’m the professional—”

“Enough. You made a bad decision. But so did we. Now, I’m not saying I’ve got a hard on for punishment. I’m not looking forward to him tearing me a new one. But damn it, it’s not fair for us to get out of this unscathed. Eventually, something’s got to give. I can’t face him like this much longer.”

“Don’t go starting trouble, please. You don’t need it, and you don’t deserve it.”

“I love you.” He reaches over and cups my cheek, and my heart softens as I lean into his touch. I’ve missed this. Especially now, when I’m feeling more lost than I ever have. “That hasn’t changed. It’s bad enough seeing you suffer, but when I know I fucked up, too? And nothing’s happening to

me? I can't live with that. Just like you couldn't live with the idea of lying."

"If I were you, I would just be glad you have your job and everything is going well with the team."

"Right, but how am I supposed to be glad when I'm always waiting for shit to turn bad? Like I never know when he's going to announce in front of the whole team that we were screwing the therapist."

Good point. "I'm sorry this is happening."

"I'm sorry, too." When he gets up my heart sinks in preparation for him leaving. I was sort of annoyed that he invited himself over, and now I don't want him to go.

As it turns out, I don't have anything to worry about. "I'll go downstairs and find a vase for the flowers. Eat that soup. Something tells me you haven't had many wholesome meals lately."

"How did you know?"

He barely looks over his shoulder as he steps into the hall. "The orange Cheeto dust on the sheets was the first clue."

**ASH**

**N**obody tells you when you've suffered a big injury that there's more than one hurdle to get over before you can consider yourself fully healed. It's the kind of thing you have to find out on your own.

At first, it was something as simple as taking care of myself. Getting through the exercises the therapist gave me. Then it was walking around the block. Once I had that under control, I added an extra lap. I worked my way up to running, then working out. Finally, after weeks, I felt strong enough and confident enough to attend practice. I'll never forget how it felt to be cheered on by the team for something as simple as lacing up my skates and joining them on the ice.

That wasn't the end of the road, though. I have yet to play an actual game.

That changes today. It's a home game, which helps, but my nerves are still shot. What if I can't hack it? What if I get hurt again? I close my eyes and take a deep, centering breath. That kind of thinking is what gets guys hurt. I can't allow those thoughts any room in my consciousness. Hard work got me this far, but so did mentality. I'm not going to let myself down by letting those doubts win.

"You ready for this?" Max pats my shoulder in passing. "It'll be good having you back out there, man."

"It'll be good to be out there." And it will. I've been looking forward to this moment for weeks. It used to seem so far away, even impossible. At my lowest moments, I was sure I would

never be here again. Fully dressed, ready to get out there and win one.

If only I wasn't so unsure of what the hell is going on with the coach.

If only Harlow were here. In those fantasies of mine, Harlow is always cheering me on from the seats behind the bench. Never once did I imagine her not being here. Now, she's at home, probably watching some gruesome serial killer documentary and demolishing a bag of Doritos or something.

While the three of us get to skate around like nothing happened.

If only he would say something. Anything. If only he would acknowledge what happened and why Harlow isn't here. We know he knows. He has to know we know he knows. It's damn confusing, downright baffling. Never knowing where we stand with him. Or if today is the day he's going to go public with what he knows.

So yeah, I'm not exactly feeling confident by the time everybody's dressed in the final minutes before we head out of the locker room.

"Hey, Coach." The crowd of excited, maybe nervous players parts as Coach Kozak enters the room. Nobody would ever know he's carrying a secret. I can't believe it takes conscious effort to smile the way everybody else is, when what I want to do is call him out. Not that I want to start trouble or anything, but I would like some answers.

When I exchange a glance with Soren, it's obvious I'm not the only one. He looks puzzled, almost angry. And Ryder? I hope he realizes he looks like he wants to start a fight. He needs to fix his face if he doesn't want shit to blow up a couple of minutes before the game starts.

"Here we are." Coach sets down his clipboard, then removes his ball cap and runs a hand over his thinning hair. "I have to tell you, I wondered for a while there if I'd ever see all of us together again. It takes an injury like the one Ash sustained to

put things in perspective and remind a coach how fragile our lives are. We can't afford to take anything for granted."

I glance to my left, then to my right, and I see nothing but plain adoration. I'm not saying the man doesn't make a good point, but there's still an elephant in the room he doesn't have the balls to address.

"I've watched you men work harder than I've ever seen a team work. These past several months have been some of the most challenging and rewarding of my career. I have had the privilege and the pleasure of watching you as you begin living up to your potential. That has to be the toughest thing for a coach, when you know your players have it in them to be winners, only they're not working up to their potential. But you finally are. I don't want you to forget that when you go out there today. You have it in you to win. You know what it takes. Each game is its own battle, but when you walk out of a locker room knowing you have what it takes to win that battle, you're already halfway there. And I know you have it in you to put another win in the books today. You're going to show this entire league what you're made of by the time this season's over. And damn it, I am so proud to be your coach, I can hardly stand it. Now get out there and prove me right by believing in yourselves and believing in each other. Can you do that for me?"

Two dozen voices answer in unison. "Yes, Coach."

I was one of those voices. How could I not be? But my response wasn't quite as loud as the others.

Does he really believe his own bullshit? I have no doubt he means it when he says he's proud of us. But for fuck's sake, the one person most responsible for the way we've turned things around isn't here, and he hasn't said a word about her. It's like she never existed. Like now that he has the team he's always wanted, he can leave her living in limbo for the rest of her life.

As much as I want to see us win—and I do, that will never change—I would hate to think the coach is covering up what went down for the sake of keeping things moving smoothly



around here. I don't want to succeed by sacrificing Harlow. Is this why they tell you to be careful what you wish for? Because I want a championship, but it'll feel pretty damn hollow if Harlow is the price required.

*Snap out of it.* I have a responsibility not only to myself but to the team. All of that needs to be set aside right now, especially if I'm going to keep myself healthy out there. No more letting my demons get in the way.

It takes all of three seconds for my nerves to dissipate. Muscle memory is no joke, and it carries me through even when I'm feeling awkward and slow. But once the game gets moving and there's no time to overthink anything, I fall right back into my old groove. The less I think about what I'm doing, the better I play.

Is that what I needed to learn? To stop overthinking? There had to be an easier way for me to arrive at that conclusion, but we don't get to decide how life lessons will show up.

By the time the final buzzer sounds, we're up two goals to one. It's a rush, especially considering I didn't think I'd ever play again. As my teammates huddle together and celebrate while the crowd roars its approval, only one thought repeats in my head. *I'm never going to take this for granted again.*

But damn it, she's not here. I wanted her to see me win this game, but she won't step foot in the building. And there's the coach, beaming, laughing, clapping us on the back as we head to the locker room. He's on top of the world. He has what he wanted; a winning team that plays cohesively, a team where we back each other up and balance each other out. A team that believes it can win.

Right now, I feel like it's all built on a lie.

It's clear to me by the time we're showered and dressed that I need to have a talk with Ryder and Soren. This has gone on long enough. It's time to put everything on the table and find out what the coach is thinking.

Not just for Harlow's sake, either, but for all of us.

**RYDER**

I wish I could share in the excitement all around me. The sort of goodwill that spreads through a locker room after a win. It's like I'm here, but I'm also far away, observing everything around me while I finish getting dressed after my shower. I'm sore from head to toe and worn the hell out, but that's nothing new. I'd rather be worn out after a win than after a loss. It always feels worse, for obvious reasons.

But my cheerful grin is empty. It takes effort to force it onto my face. I don't want the rest of the team knowing something's going on, hence the reason I'm working so hard to hide my feelings. It's freaking exhausting. Like living a double life, almost. There are people in this world who do that kind of thing for a living, like spies and whatnot. I don't know how they manage it.

My heart might as well be dragging on the floor. That's how it feels to walk around with all of this weighing on me. The sight of Ash or Soren still makes me grind my teeth—it would have been nice, having a little solidarity among us when Harlow was suffering. She still is, too. The little bit of information I get from her is always edged with sadness. Ash said she's basically living in bed.

And here we are, celebrating a win. She might not have been out there with us, but she was just as responsible as anybody else on the team. We can't even thank her. Pretty soon, there's going to be questions—there already are, but everybody's accepted the coach's excuse so far. She's on a leave of absence.

How much longer will that be a good enough excuse?

She shouldn't have said a word. Every time I think of it, my blood pressure goes up. Everybody knows you stay quiet in a situation like that. Never, ever open your mouth to offer information. Well, I guess not everybody knows that, after all. Growing up, it was practically part of our code. Silence. If they don't have you on camera, they don't have anything. They're waiting for you to say something stupid and make their job easier. Okay, so we're not dealing with law enforcement now, but the idea is the same.

I can't even count the number of guys I knew who went down not because of proof or eyewitnesses or anything like that. They ended up getting booked all because they couldn't keep their mouths shut. All the cops had were suspicions. But they're trained to make a person feel like they're cornered. To take away all their hope. They make it seem like they're your friend and they're only trying to help you out. They want you to see how hopeless everything looks so they can offer to help. *Just tell us what we want to know, and this can all be over.* I guess if you catch a kid and scare the hell out of them for long enough, confessing starts to look like a good idea.

"Hey! Great job out there today." Max slaps me on my back as he passes my locker.

"Yeah, man. You too."

"Heading out to the bar?" he asks.

"I don't know. Maybe not." Definitely not. I won't shut the idea down, though. He will only want to know why.

He grimaces and shakes his head. "Come on, man. I'm trying to live vicariously here."

"Sorry about that. But hey, there's plenty of guys around here ready to go and party. Live through them."

"I will, while I'm changing diapers later on." But he's grinning when he continues through the locker room, waving his goodbyes before heading out to his family. Strange. This isn't the first time we've had a discussion like that. Usually, by the time he walks away, I'm glad I don't have a family to report

to. This is around the time I normally thank whoever's up there keeping an eye on me for not tying me down to a wife and kids. I'm usually more grateful than ever to have my freedom.

Now, I almost envy the son of a bitch. He can pretend all he wants like he's sorry he can't go out and party, but I see through it now. I see how glad he is. Even eager to get home to the people who matter. And if things hadn't fallen apart like they did, I'd have something to look forward to tonight, too. Someone to hurry home to.

She shouldn't have said a word. Damn it. Why didn't she know better?

Because she didn't have to know better. Not everybody grew up the way I did. She's a good girl, a girl who's always followed the rules and done the right thing. We are probably the first time she's ever gone against the so-called right thing to do. No wonder she didn't know any better.

I could have told her what to do if I'd had the chance. I could have coached her through it.

I mean, I've been there. More than once. One experience in particular is burned into my memory, and it plays in my mind's eye as I tie my shoes. The scariest night of my life, even though I did everything I could to play it off like it meant nothing. I've never fought so hard in my life—not on the ice or off it.

I took a lot of chances back in the day. Chances that now make me cringe and wonder what I was thinking. I was a different person back then. My friends think I've got rough edges now? They don't have the first clue. The shit I got into would make even the worst things Pete's ever done look like recess at the local preschool. We took a lot of risks—selling powder and pills, stealing from other dealers. That was true danger. I was risking my life every time I left the house, walking around with a target on my back. I did what I had to do to survive on the streets and make a little money for myself. I wasn't the only one, either.

But that night, that terrible night, I didn't do anything wrong. Alright, so I was rolling around in a car without a license plate like a smacked ass and I knew I was risking getting pulled over, but I went out with my buddy Joey anyway to grab a six pack. We didn't have any plans, really. We were only going to cruise around and drink a little.

Unfortunately, according to the cops who later pulled us over, we happened to pick up the beer from a store that was robbed shortly afterward. I was driving a similar car, and we still had the empty cans to deepen the suspicion and give the cops a reason to bring us in for questioning. That was all they needed. A car with a similar make and the fact that we were drinking beer that had to be purchased somewhere, right? I guess if I were doing their job, it would seem open and shut.

For once, I hadn't done anything wrong. Well, I wasn't old enough to legally drink and shouldn't have been behind the wheel with beer in my system, but I didn't rob anybody.

And twenty-four hours later, that was still my story. Twenty-four hours without water. Without food. Without a trip to the bathroom. They were that dead set on getting a confession.

They didn't get it from me. They had nothing on me. I could barely keep my head up and thought my bladder was going to explode, but I never said a word.

Joey, on the other hand? Joey got seven years in prison. Because he couldn't stay quiet.

Looking back, I could say he paid his debt to society for the things we did and things he did when I wasn't even around, but he didn't have to go to prison for that. And if I had buckled like he did, I wouldn't be here now, pulling on my jacket and preparing to go home for the night.

I could be going to Harlow's, instead. Why wouldn't she at least listen to me? Because she's a decent person. She's honest. Why should she have to pay this way? Was our crime that unforgivable?

I'm still mulling it over as I leave, scanning the parking lot. When my heart sinks I know it's because I was hoping to see

her out here. I should know better.

What I do find, though, grabs my attention. Soren is wandering over to Ash's car, where Ash waits for him. Neither of them look like they're feeling as happy or positive as the rest of the team after the game. When Ash spots me, he lifts a hand and waves me over. I don't waste any time, crossing the lot quickly, reaching them before Ash clears his throat and looks around to make sure nobody's listening in.

“We've got to do something.”

There's no need to ask who he's talking about. Why waste time asking questions like that when there are much more important questions to ask.

Such as exactly what we're supposed to do to help her.

**SOREN**

“I know what I want to do.” There are only a handful of cars left in the lot, and one of them is the SUV driven by Coach Kozak. I look toward it and for some reason, the sight of it makes me grind my teeth. I can’t help it. I’m more than a little frustrated with him.

“I agree.” Ash looks like he’s ready to rip somebody’s head off. He doesn’t sound much better.

“We’re not going to kill the guy.” It’s habit, making a joke out of things. I don’t think about it, I don’t plan it. It’s a coping mechanism. I always want to break the tension, since that’s the only way a real conversation can happen. When everybody’s relaxed or at least not quite so uptight.

“We need to talk to him.” Ryder folds his arms, shifting his weight from the balls of his feet to his heels and back again. Like he’s so worked up, he can’t stand still. “We’ve got to try.”

“I agree. We need to get all of this out in the open. I don’t know about you, but it’s driving me nuts, pretending nothing’s happening.”

“And it’s ridiculous,” Ash adds. “There he is, making these big speeches about rallying together or whatever, and there’s this huge secret he’s pretending doesn’t exist.”

“Like we can just forget she was ever here,” I muse.

“Right. I swear, I had to fight not to call him out before the game.”

I'm glad he didn't. Things might have gone a lot differently if there were that sort of excitement minutes before we took the ice. "No, the team has to be united," I murmur, shaking my head. "That's the one thing Harlow would want. It's bad enough she lost her job."

"It would kill her to think she ruined the team's chances. She's struggling enough as it is."

"That's right. She's struggling." The thought tightens my chest and makes blood rush in my ears. "She shouldn't be the only one going down for this. We were in on it, too. All the way."

"Is she really going down, though?"

Ryder's question leaves both Ash and me staring at him in shock. "Are you serious?" Ash finally asks.

"Think about it. She hasn't been fired, or we would have heard it by now. From her, at least, if not the coach. To hear him tell it, she's on a leave of absence. So there hasn't been a decision yet. She's acting like she lost her job, but she hasn't yet."

"We can still help her." If only that were true. For the first time in nearly two weeks, there's a spark of hope in the darkness.

Ryder only frowns. "That's not what I was thinking. I was wondering if we should even bother saying anything."

"This again?" Ash looks up at the dark sky, shaking his head. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Spare me," Ryder mutters, rolling his eyes. "Try thinking for a second before you come up with some smart-ass response, okay? Do me that one, small favor."

"Enough, girls," I mutter. "Stop bickering. It's not getting us anywhere."

"Forgive me." Ash levels what could only be described as a sarcastic look at Ryder. "Please. Explain what you mean."

Ryder grits his teeth and growls but manages not to blow his top. "I'm thinking we might end up making things worse than they already are. What if he's thinking it through and, you know, getting used to the idea. What if he's ready to forgive and forget? Harlow's the one who assumed she was losing her



job over this. Think back,” he urges, almost pleading with us both. “She explained to us what happened. He hates her, all that. Her words. I can’t imagine him ever saying anything like that, and we’ve all heard some pretty messed up shit from him when he was pissed.”

I nod in agreement, and so does Ash.

“But she never said he fired her. She assumed that was what he wanted. Now, listen. I wouldn’t want to face him after that. I get it. And I get why she would want to, like, stay away from here. For all she knows, he could see her and blow up in front of everybody. So I get it.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Ash murmurs.

“For all we know, he could call her tomorrow and tell her to come back to work.”

How can I put this gently? “No offense, but I think that’s a fantasy.”

“Whatever,” he snaps. “You get my point. Is it better to keep our mouths shut and let him process this? And I’m not talking about keeping our mouths shut to save our asses, either. Really, I’m not. I’m just saying, are we stirring shit up if we pursue this? That’s it. I think it’s worth considering.”

If we were in the middle of some courtroom drama, this is the time when he would take a seat and let the jury process his statement. I almost want to applaud but know it would come off sarcastic. This isn’t the time for that. We need to stick together.

“What do you think?” I turn to Ash, whose face is pinched like he’s in pain. I know he’s got a lot on his mind. I can see the wheels turning and I’m surprised there isn’t smoke coming out of his ears.

“I see your point.” He nods to Ryder. “And you’re right. It could be like stirring a bunch of embers back to life. Like a campfire, you know? This is something that could burn out soon if we leave it alone. The problem is, we just don’t know.”

My head bobs up and down when his words echo my thoughts. “We don’t know what’s going on in his head.”

“So, we’d be taking a chance.” His gaze swings slowly from me to Ryder, who looks as troubled as I feel. “But let’s look at it this way. We can’t stay at a standstill forever. And every practice she misses, every game she doesn’t attend, every week she’s not in that office to have sessions with the other players, we are one step closer to all this blowing up. Somebody is going to start asking for the truth, and once they do, everybody else is going to join in. We might love her for real, but they all love her, too, just in a different way. And they’re not going to accept her vanishing into thin air for much longer. Wouldn’t it be better to at least get on the same page as far as Coach is concerned, if nothing else? So, we all know what story to tell when the time comes?”

This is making my head pound. I have never wanted so much to shut my eyes and ignore everything going on around me. Not the most mature response, and it’s nothing I would ever admit to either of them, but there’s no shaking it. There is too much room for people to get hurt. Too many opportunities to make the wrong move. What if we end up regretting it? What if we only make things worse for her?

I don’t have to ask those questions. I see them written across the faces of my friends. We all understand what’s at stake without any of us needing to come out and say the words.

“Here’s my bottom line.” Ryder slides his hands into the pockets of his jacket and blows out a sigh. “I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to take pretending there’s nothing happening. Around here, I mean. I’m gonna lose it.”

“Agreed.” Ash looks grim as he turns to me. “I say we talk to him. Now. She doesn’t need to be here. It’s better that she isn’t.”

I can’t pretend he doesn’t make sense. “All right,” I agree. “Let’s do it now before we lose our nerve.”

As we walk together back to the building, Ryder asks, “How the hell did he ever find out?” It has to be a rhetorical question, since there aren’t any obvious answers.

It could be we’ll get that answer soon enough, though.

**RYDER**

I still think this is a shit idea, but I can't spend my whole life wasting my breath. They don't understand any better than Harlow does. They've never been in a situation like this before. I can't expect them to relate.

And there is part of me that can't stand the hypocrisy around here. That's how it feels. Like we're all going through the motions and pretending everything's fine, and the team is united and we're all doing great, when really there's a fundamental issue we need to address. Watching my teammates head out of here smiling and congratulating each other and feeling great about our chances still has me feeling sour and irritable.

So yeah, it could be the right thing to talk to him and get everything out in the open. That doesn't mean I have to feel good about it.

Soren steps out in front of us, taking the lead as we head to the coach's office. My stomach is in knots, making me wonder how much worse Harlow must have felt when she was in this position. I don't really have to wonder too hard, though. The memory of how hysterical she got is as clear as ever.

Coach is in there, watching film, taking notes for our session in the morning when we go over what worked tonight and what didn't. He's even smiling to himself when Soren knocks against the doorframe before we enter the room without being invited. That smile falls away once he looks up from his work to find us in front of him.

None of us has to say a word for him to know what this is about. It's almost like a wall goes up in front of him. I can practically see it. "No. I don't want to talk about this. We are not talking about this."

Yeah, no kidding, we're not talking about it. He's made that abundantly clear.

"We have to," Soren insists while Ash's head bobs up and down in agreement. "We've been quiet long enough. It's crazy, pretending nothing ever happened when it obviously did."

"Harlow can't be the only one suffering the consequences here," Ash adds. "It's absurd. We're still living our lives and playing out there like nothing changed. It isn't fair to her."

He settles back in his chair, studying the three of us in turn. I haven't said a word yet, but I lift my chin in solidarity. He's not going to find a weak link to take advantage of. We are a united front.

"Okay." He shrugs and almost smiles. "What did you have in mind?"

It's like he stuck a pin in a balloon. His sudden question sort of takes the wind out of us in a hurry. "What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, the three of you come barging in here talking about consequences and how unfair it is for Harlow to be the only one going through it. I agree. So, what do you think? Do you want me to kick you off the team? Would that be a suitable consequence?"

Damn. If I didn't know better, I would think he's been waiting for this. It's like he doesn't miss a beat.

"No, we'd rather stay on the team." Soren looks our way like he's hoping for backup.

"We want to make one thing clear." I step up closer to the desk, since neither of them can come up with anything to say. It's always like this. Somebody gets it in their head that they're going to be the big shot, the hero, and somehow I end up fixing things. "She didn't take advantage of us. She wasn't

using her position on the team to manipulate us or anything like that. It's important you know that."

"That's right." So Ash finally found his voice. Good for him. "We're the ones with the power. We make more than she does. Some of us are older than her. She's brand new to the team, not like us. We are the ones who should have stayed away from her. She wasn't preying on us."

"It just happened," Soren concludes.

"Oh? Is that the explanation you're going with? It just happened?"

I don't know what I expected. I knew better than to think he'd come around right away. There was never going to be a moment where the music swelled, and his eyes filled with tears, and we all agreed to go to Harlow's house to make things right.

Still, I expected a little more than this. A little bit of empathy, maybe. Instead, his gaze hardens. "Some things just happen. But you chose again and again to turn your back on what you knew you needed to do. And that goes for all of you, not only Harlow. So I'm sorry if I'm not a fan of any of this."

"With all due respect," Ash counters in a low voice, "nobody asked you to be a fan of it."

Well, damn. I didn't expect that one. He isn't wrong, but I doubt that's going to earn us any points.

Rather than wait for the coach to recover, he keeps talking. "It's nobody's business what happens in our personal lives. We're all consenting adults. This was what we all wanted. And for what it's worth, we went through a lot together. We tried to end it more than once, but it was no use. We've always known there weren't many people who would understand what we're doing, or what led us to this place. And that's fine. Because it's nobody else's business. But that's why we kept it quiet. Because people wouldn't understand."

"Nobody else's business?" That gets the coach out of his chair. It's what makes him place his palms on the desk and lean in. We've all seen him like this before, and that's usually after a

bad loss or a string of them. We certainly went through enough of that last season. “Let’s get one thing straight, it is absolutely my business what my players do in their free time. You know why? Because you are supposed to be role models. You’re supposed to be shining examples to the kids who come to these games. Kids who dream every single night about being in your position. Do you remember how that felt when you were a kid? Didn’t you idolize players? You wanted to make your entire life just like theirs, didn’t you? I know I did. And I’m betting you did, too.”

There’s no denying it, so why bother? The three of us nod, though it’s grudging.

“Exactly. Thank you for not insulting my intelligence further by pretending otherwise.” He slams his palms against the desk hard enough to make us wince. “And even without that, let me remind you of the morals clause in your contracts. The contracts you signed when you agreed to be part of this team. That’s not the kind of thing you get to pretend doesn’t exist.”

“We’ve been discreet,” Soren insists. “It’s not like we’re parading around town, having public gangbangs.”

Oh, I wish he hadn’t said that. Coach’s stricken look quickly turns to one of disgust. “Don’t ever say that to me again.”

“I’m sorry,” Soren mumbles, “but it’s true. You get my point, right? We’re not broadcasting this.”

“What happens if it gets out in the public?” the coach counters. “What then? And what happens when it gets out that I knew about it and I allowed it to happen? Do any of you understand exactly what’s at stake? Or are you all too busy thinking with your johnsons to see clearly? I have to think about an entire team, not to mention the organization that supports it and the fans who love it. I’ve got all of that on my shoulders. And all I ask is for my guys to behave themselves and not make my job any harder than it needs to be.”

He drops back into his chair, grunting in disgust. “And you come storming in here like three white knights ready to fight for your lady. It’s all I can do to look at you.”

He waves a hand, turning back to his computer. “You need to leave. Now.”

I think it’s safe to say that didn’t go the way any of us had hoped. We exchange a silent look before doing the only thing we can. We leave in single file and don’t stop walking until we’re outside the building again. It’s only once we’re in the parking lot that my chest loosens enough for me to take a deep breath.

“Did anybody get the plate of the truck that just ran me over?” Ash rolls his head from side to side and shakes out his hands. “Damn. He’s been in such a good mood all season, I forgot how bad he can get.”

I didn’t forget. I can barely keep my thoughts to myself as we walk back to his car.

“At least we had our say.” Soren doesn’t sound as confident as he’s trying to, but at least he is trying. I can’t give him shit about that.

What I could throw in his face—in both of their faces, in fact—is that I was right. We didn’t need to do that. It solved nothing and only confirmed everything the coach already knew. There’s no talking our way out of it now. What a waste of time.

We say our brief goodbyes, then go our separate ways. On a night like this, I wish I had an excuse to go out and get wasted and forget about everything for a little while, but I can’t. Not when Pete’s waiting for me at home. I might not have a family in the traditional sense, like Max does, but I do have responsibilities.

Responsibilities that couldn’t have come at a worse time. The entire way home, one question plays on repeat in my mind, and I’m no closer to an answer by the time I arrive.

Who told him? How did he know?

**RYDER**

**T**here's something nice about going home and knowing someone will be there waiting for you. Okay, so it's not exactly the way I've imagined it. It's not Harlow waiting for me at the door wearing something short and see-through. But it's better than the empty house I'm used to returning to.

Funny, but there was a time not so long ago that I valued solitude. I liked having all the extra space and nobody to fill it. Because it was mine. For once, I didn't have to cram myself and my stuff into somebody else's tiny room. For once, I had all the space I could ever want.

Still, there's something to be said for calling out once I'm inside. "Yo! Where are you?"

There's no response, but I hear clicking and tapping coming from somewhere downstairs. I follow the noise and as I come closer, I can identify it as a video game controller being used aggressively. I find Pete in the living room near the back of the house, separated from the kitchen by a breakfast bar I've never used. He's wearing a big pair of headphones hooked up to the TV. I can see what's going on in front of him — he's being ambushed by about a million zombies, and he's fighting like hell to mow them down.

One look around the room tells me how he has spent his day: there's a pizza box, two empty soda bottles, and a couple of boneless wings at the bottom of a cardboard container. I left him playing this same game earlier. On one hand, it's nice to know he's not getting into trouble around town.



On the other hand, I'm glad there's a folder of paperwork in my gym bag. I pull it out now, then step up behind him and tap his shoulder.

"Holy shit!" He just about jumps out of his skin, then pulls off his headphones and drops them on the floor. "Jesus! Are you trying to kill me?"

"Sorry. I guess you were pretty deep in the game."

"Yeah, a little bit." He runs a hand through his hair, and again, I tell myself he needs to get it cut. He needs to do a lot of things. He just doesn't seem very interested in any of it.

That's going to have to change now. "Listen. I stopped by the high school before going to the arena. I picked up paperwork to get you enrolled."

He looks at the folder I'm holding out to him like it's a snake about to strike. "What? Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" I drop the folder on the couch.

"Because you need to go to school. There's still a year left. Don't you care about graduating? Meeting some people?"

"Honestly? No."

The way he says it shouldn't surprise me. I remember feeling the way he did. But things aren't the same as they were. That's what I need him to understand. "This isn't going to be like before. You're going to be here for the rest of the year. You won't be bouncing back to Boston or any place else. You might actually be able to put down roots. You could even —"

He cuts a hand across his throat. "Do yourself a favor and quit all this now. Otherwise, you're just gonna be disappointed."

He wanders to the kitchen without picking up any of his trash. He's too busy heading for the fridge to care about cleaning up after himself.

"How would I be disappointed? What is this all about? You're not out here to screw around all day playing games."

"Are you sure about that?" He's actually laughing when he pulls yet another bottle of soda from the fridge.

“Yeah, I’m sure about that. And why did you order so much soda, for fuck’s sake?” I sound like a pissed-off parent scrambling to keep up with their ignorant kid. When did that happen?

“What’s the big deal? I’m not trying to have, like, the high school experience.” He rolls his eyes and makes air quotes with his fingers. “I don’t care about making new friends. I’d rather hang out alone, anyway. I’m just gonna get my GED.”

“I’m really glad you made these decisions without talking with me about it.”

“Why do I need to talk to you about it? You’re not my dad.”

Yeah, and thank fuck for that. “No, I’m not your dad, but I’m somebody who cares what you do with the rest of your life. I’m not gonna stand by and watch you throw it down the drain.”

“So, what?” He leans against the counter and folds his arms and please, God, tell me I wasn’t like him when I was his age. It’s amazing I didn’t get my teeth knocked out. “You think I’m gonna graduate and go to college? Have you met me? I barely pass as it is. I’m not exactly college material, and we both know it. Why should we waste time lying to ourselves?”

I’m still trying to wrap my head around this when he grabs the soda and heads back to the living room. He is already sitting down again, controller in hand, when I stand in front of the TV.

“What are you gonna do with the rest of your life, then? Tell me that. Do you have anything in mind?”

“I don’t know. I figured maybe I could be your assistant or something?”

“I don’t need an assistant.”

“That’s what you think. But I could help keep you on schedule. I could, you know, handle the house and stuff.”

“Yeah, you’re doing a really great job of that so far.” All he does is scoff and roll his eyes. “I’m sorry, dude, but I won’t let

you throw your life away. Don't you have any dreams of your own? Goals? Something you want to do for yourself?"

"No." That's it. One word. And he says it like it's the answer to the stupidest thing he ever heard.

"I don't get it. I took you in to see where I play. You met the team, you met the coaches. Those aren't guys who floated around and did whatever they had to do to get by. The bare minimum. They're people who worked hard, and that includes me. That didn't... I don't know, inspire you?"

"That's what that visit was about? Yeah, I hate to tell you, but no."

Don't let him do this. My blood pressure is about to go through the roof thanks to this ignorant kid and how easy it is for him to throw my generosity in my face. He doesn't care at all. How is that possible?

"Real talk. This isn't Boston. There's nobody here who even knows you besides me. You don't have to put on the front."

"I'm not. Do you want to know what I wanna do with my life? You're looking at it." He spreads his arms, leaning back against the cushions.

"Well, that's pretty freaking sad."

His mouth twists in a smirk. "Look who's talking about sad."

When he cranes his neck like he's trying to look around me, I turn and touch the button on the back of the TV to turn it off.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I demand through gritted teeth.

"Nothing. Turn the TV back on."

"Don't bullshit me. What are you talking about? What's sad?"

He purses his lips before opening the pizza box and pulling out a slice of pepperoni. He takes his time raising it to his lips, then chews slowly. I have nowhere else to be at the moment, so I wait, tapping my foot.

Finally, he swallows. "I'm just saying, if I want to date a woman, I want it to be one-on-one. Otherwise, I'm only

second-best.” He cocks an eyebrow my way. “Or is it the third best?”

I once had a bucket of ice water dumped over my head as a prank. I’ll never forget the sudden shock of mind-numbing cold washing over me. It feels a lot like that now, only there’s not a drop of water in sight. “Excuse me?”

“I just want to know how you face those guys all the time. Like, you watch each other have sex with the same girl, right? That’s what your text messages said, the ones you guys were sharing back-and-forth in your group chat.” Every word widens his smirk until he’s grinning from ear to ear.

“You son of a bitch.” Forget being kind. Forget patience. I’m going to rip this kid’s head off. “You went through my text messages?”

“You leave your phone sitting around all the time. And yeah, a message came through one night when you were in the shower, and I picked it up to look. Big deal.”

“When was this?”

“I don’t know. Right after I got here. That was some pretty spicy stuff.” He snickers at the sight of my shock, then shakes his head. “You’re a freak. So don’t stand there and lecture me about my life when yours is a goddamn mess. You don’t even have enough self-respect to want a woman all for yourself.”

“You don’t know the first thing about me or that relationship.”

“Oh, relationship? That’s a funny word for it. Seems more like a gangbang to me.”

“Yeah, it would, because you’re a stupid fucking kid who doesn’t know any better. And now you’re sitting there, in my home, insulting me? No way. You’re out of here.”

“I’m what?” At least he’s shocked. That snide, know it all attitude is gone.

“You heard me. I want you out. You think you can sit there and disrespect me after going through my personal messages, and I’m going to let you stay here? Think again.”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

“I thought you had it all figured out. I want you out of my house, and out of my life. Starting now.” I knock the pizza box off the coffee table in passing. “And pick this shit up.”

## HARLOW

I enjoy swimming during the day. I'm sure that doesn't make me unique – lots of people like swimming during the day, escaping the heat. But night swims are quickly becoming my favorite. I don't know what it is. A way of relaxing and connecting with my body after a long day, I guess. Letting the water carry me after I've spent hours carrying myself.

Granted, my life isn't exactly physically exhausting right now. I'm not going to the office, I'm not running from class to class like I used to back in the day. There's no tight schedule to adhere to. I used to collapse out of sheer exhaustion at night when I was in school. Kyle was not a fan, but then Kyle wasn't a fan of a lot of things. Like being a faithful boyfriend, for starters.

Now, my time is my own, and I can let the water support me as I float on my back while using the motion from my hands and arms to keep me more or less in the center of the pool. The sky is so full of stars, it's enough to make my heart ache. It's times like this when I have to wonder if we are really alone in the universe. How can we be? What are the odds of there not being a single intelligent life form out there when every single one of those stars could represent a sun like ours?

In other words, I've been doing a lot of deep, but not necessarily important thinking. It's actually been kind of nice. After years spent struggling to balance my studies and a part-time job and what passes for a personal life, I could use the break. No, it hasn't shown up the way I'd like it to. Nobody

wants to be forced into staying home and getting some rest. But it's still nice, and I've managed to unwind.

I just wish unwinding paid the bills. I'm still in good shape, though – growing up a teacher's kid, I learned the value of a dollar and how to budget like my life depends on it. It does, really. Once my paychecks stop coming in, I'll have to lean on my skills.

If only there were an answer somewhere up there to the concerns still weighing heavily on me. What if I called the coach and surprised him into talking with me? Like, maybe I could startle him into a conversation, catch him off-guard. I looked up the results of tonight's game and was happy to see the Raptors came out on top. He's bound to be in a good mood after that. Maybe...

There's noise at the gate. Noise that makes my heart forget to beat. I freeze, uncertain, before it sounds like somebody's trying to open the latch I made sure was locked before I got in the water.

"Harlow? Are you out here?"

It's Ryder. My heart unclenches, but only for a second before another, bigger concern looms in front of me, he sounds terrible. The word upset doesn't begin to describe it. Distraught is more like it.

"I'll be right there." I hurry out of the pool and over to the gate, my bare feet slapping the concrete, water dripping from me. Once the gate is open, he steps through.

Right away, I assume the worst. "Who got hurt? Ash? He wasn't ready, was he?"

"What? No, no, that's fine. He's fine. We won."

"I know, but I was thinking, maybe something happened. You look..." *Like hell. Like you lost your best friend. Like somebody ran over your dog.*

He shakes his head and waves his hands before stumbling toward one of the chairs on the patio. "No, it's nothing like that. It's worse. It's so much worse."

“What is it?”

When he won't look at me, I crouch in front of him. “Hey. It's me, remember? You can tell me anything. I'm here.”

“It's my fault. It's all my fault.”

I thought we were past this point. “Ryder, you didn't do anything wrong.”

“No, you don't understand. I know it's my fault. This all happened because of me.” He covers his face with his hands and lets out a groan. “I know who told the coach.”

“I don't understand.” I take him by the wrists and pull his hands away from his face. “Talk to me.”

“It was Pete! My own brother. He found our group chat on my phone and read all the things we were talking about, going way back.”

“Oh, no,” I groan. “But... that doesn't mean he told—”

“I had it out with him before I came here. I actually threw him out but cooled off a little and told him he can stay, but he had to tell me exactly what he did.” His shoulders rise and fall slowly with every measured breath he takes. “A few days after he got here, I took him over to the arena to meet everybody – I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe that he'd be, like, inspired to do something with his life when he saw how far I've come. And what did he do? He made a smart ass comment to the coach while I was practicing with the guys. Something about teamwork, and how nice it is that we're a team on and off the ice. He even named Soren and Ash.”

I'm going to be sick.

“I don't even think he meant to hurt me, or us. Hell, I don't know. Maybe he did. I don't know anything about that kid anymore. I thought so, but now...”

“So that's how he knows.”

“I am sorry. I am so sorry. I didn't think he would take my phone! He never said anything to me about it. I would've explained if he had.”



What was there to explain? I don't bother asking the question, since I know there isn't an answer. Not one that could possibly make any of this easier, anyway.

"It's alright." I lean in, taking the back of his neck in one hand and pulling him closer before pressing my lips to his forehead. "It's all going to be fine. At least we know now. That's one mystery solved."

"But what do we do now?"

"I really don't know. It might be easier to move forward when I don't have to question everybody around the team, wondering how they found out. Right? That's a little bit of peace of mind, anyway."

"I can't believe how well you're taking this."

"Yeah, well, it's been an interesting couple of weeks. I've already gone through just about every emotion there is, A-to-Z, and back again."

"I just feel so guilty. I'm trying to do the right thing by this kid, and he blows up everything."

"You have a good heart." Somehow, I manage to smile as I stroke his cheek. It's scruffy, but I like the roughness. "And I don't blame you. I'm sure none of the guys will. Just one of those things."

"How do you do it?" When I raise an eyebrow, he says, "You're so understanding. You're so generous and kind. I've never known anybody like you. You almost make me feel like everything is going to work out."

"Because it is. One step at a time, right? We'll find our way through this."

I should pull back when he takes my face in his hands, but I can't bring myself to do it. I don't want to, either. Oh, I need his touch so badly.

"I love you. I don't feel worthy of you, but I love you." There's no chance to tell him I love him, too, before he captures my mouth with his own.

We shouldn't do this. Not when we're by ourselves. Sure, everything's a little up in the air right now and I don't know which rules apply anymore, but it's not an excuse.

So I'll stop him. Eventually. Once the heart-racing thrill of his kiss dies down a little and I can think. Until then, I'm going to soak in every moment of this. When he probes my lips with his tongue, I part them eagerly, letting him inside, and we both groan when the kiss deepens and intensifies.

Soon we're breathing heavy, running our hands over each other, consumed by passion that's been ignored for too long already. His touch is the sweetest fire, and I moan helplessly into his mouth as his hands move lower, finally, cupping my butt and hauling me close until I'm almost in his lap. And that's where I want to be. There's no question of where this is leading. Not if our overheated bodies have anything to do with it.

But again, something stops me. I hate more than anything to break the kiss, but somehow I manage to do it, pulling my head back when he leans in like he's chasing me. "No. You know this isn't right."

"Dammit," he growls before letting his head drop. "I know."

Gosh, he smells so good. It would be easy to lean in and let go of everything that's supposed to matter. "I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am right now. You have a way of making a guy forget his principles."

"Should I take that as a compliment?" We share a soft laugh that eases some of the burning tension. It helps clear my head a little, too, and puts everything in perspective. Now isn't the time for this. I have to figure out what, if anything, to do now that we know for sure how Coach Kozak found out about us. I don't have to tiptoe around the team, wondering if we have spies watching us.

Not that it matters if I don't have a job – but then I'm not sure about that, yet, either.

Maybe it's time to find out for sure.

## HARLOW

This could either be the bravest thing I've ever done, or the biggest mistake I've ever made. Really, the situation could go either way. All I know is sitting in the car in my usual spot, staring at the arena, I'm trembling so hard I don't know if I'd be able to get the door open if I tried.

I'm not even sure I want to try. It was one thing to drive out here, giving myself endless pep talks and playing loud, upbeat music to grant me a little extra courage. By the time I pulled into the lot, my heart was thumping, and adrenaline was flowing, and I was pretty sure I could conquer the world.

What a sharp left turn my courage took once I parked the car, leaving me with nothing to do but actually step out and make this happen. My courage ran away from me. I wouldn't know where to begin to look for it now.

At the end of the day, no matter how I look at it, one answer rings out. I need to talk to Coach Kozak. Face-to-face. I need to know where I stand with the organization. I can't live in this gray, in-between place anymore. Day after day, I wake up, not knowing if this will be the day, I get the call telling me my career is over. Surely, no matter what his personal feelings are, he must understand that. He's still human, he still has feelings. And he is, at heart, a decent man – that couldn't possibly have changed.

It's just I don't know how I'd move forward if his answer involves handing me a box and telling me to pack my things, and never show my face around here again. At least I could try

to move on from that, even if the concept seems unfathomable right now. I could do it. But waiting around and leaving my future in his hands when I don't have the first clue what he's thinking? I can't do that anymore.

It was a matter of deciding which would be worse, being told off, or spending the rest of my life in limbo. Considering I'm here for the first time in weeks, it's clear I need to get this over with.

*Please, let him be in a good mood. Please, if he's not, let him keep his voice down.* How far my expectations have fallen, but I'm guessing that's as good as I can hope for. Right now, with everything up in the air, that's how low my hopes are.

There's a game tonight, and warm-ups are due to start within the hour. Soon, the players will arrive, and I would like to get this over with by the time they do. That's what finally gets me out of the car and sends me on my way, walking in short, quick strides that may or may not have to do with the fact that my bladder suddenly feels very heavy.

I am not going to let my fear rule me. I am going to handle this like an adult who does not wet her pants out of fear like a toddler.

Still... I hope he doesn't yell at me.

It's no surprise to find him in his office after passing my closed door. This is where I left him, only now he looks considerably more positive, taking notes as he goes over film at his desk. *Please, don't let me regret this.* My knock is tentative, but loud enough to get his attention.

There's a silent beat as he sits up straighter, pausing the video and giving me his full attention. "Doc. It's been a while."

Talk about an understatement. "That it has." Okay, he didn't call me a harlot and order me out. So far, so good.

"How have you been?"

"Do you want the polite answer or the truth?"

He offers an understanding little chuckle that brings me no closer to understanding what the heck he's thinking.

“Everybody around here sure has missed you.”

“And I’ve missed everybody. I’ve missed being here.” And here I stand, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, wishing he would give me a clue how to proceed. He seems friendly, and that can only be a good thing. But there are limits, too.

“Come on in, sit down.” I can’t pretend it doesn’t make me glad, being invited like that. This could be a good thing. It might turn out much better than I hoped. Still, I tense as I settle into a chair, hands folded on my lap. I’m ready to spring at any moment. I only hope it doesn’t turn out that way.

“You’ve got me in the dark here, Coach. I don’t know what to think. I assumed I lost my job, but there hasn’t been any evidence of that. Where do I stand? What are we doing?”

“Hitting me with the heavy questions, eh?”

“You should hear the questions I’ve asked myself if you think that’s bad.”

He runs a hand over his jaw before sighing. “I know I’ve left you hanging.”

“A little bit.”

“I don’t like making rash decisions, and I especially don’t like to make them when it comes to somebody as popular with the team as you are.” The words are barely out of his mouth before his face goes beat red. “I didn’t mean it —”

“Don’t worry about it. I know what you meant.” Even if my cheeks are a little pink, too.

“I guess you know things are going well.”

“Of course, I’ve been following along. I can’t help it. I need to know how everybody’s doing.”

“It’s all thanks to you, and we both know that. And I also know that if I were to tell the boys I let you go, there’d be a riot.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” His gaze is steady, unblinking beneath the bill of his ball cap. “They would miss you too much. They depend on you. We both know it. They keep asking about you, too. Wondering where you are. It would be chaos if I told them. I don’t want to do that to them when they’re finally on the right track – and especially when it’s, in part, thanks to you. Everybody knows it.”

“So, you want to keep me hanging in-between to avoid a blowup?”

“You know that’s not what I want – at least, I hope you know.” His shoulders hunch and he blows out a deep breath. “I don’t want to see you go.”

Relief so potent I can practically taste it washes over me and loosens muscles locked up by tension. He has no idea the gift he just handed me. Or maybe he does. “That is a very good thing to hear.”

“What about you? How do you feel about it?”

I don’t have to think hard. “I love my job.”

“And yet you put it, and your whole career, into serious jeopardy, didn’t you? What were you thinking?”

Why not get it all out on the table? He did ask, after all.

“Honestly? This might sound bizarre, but it’s the truth; I love them, all three of them.”

It’s clear the thought makes him uncomfortable as he fights to maintain a neutral expression. “I hope you understand. I can’t condone that. It’s... too much.”

“I understand. It took me a long time to get used to the idea, myself. But the harder I tried to fight my feelings, the more impossible it was. Pretty soon, you ask yourself whether or not it’s a waste of time to even try.”

He pulls off his cap and scratches his head, grimacing. “This is a real mess, Doc.”

“I know. And I mean it when I say I’m sorry. I didn’t want any of this to happen, and I would rather cut off my arm than hurt the team. I want you to know that.”

“Well...” He heaves a sigh and shakes his head. “I would hate to see you lose an arm. Let’s leave them where they are, yeah?”

“Okay.”

“I’m not going to tell you to end the relationship, because I’m sure that would be a waste of time. If not on your end, then on theirs. I’ve been dealing with these jokers for too long to fool myself into thinking they’ll fall in line just because I asked them to.”

“They would do anything for you.”

“Yeah. Except staying away from the team therapist. I never came out and told them to do that, but I didn’t think I needed to.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“Are you honestly asking for my opinion?”

I wince, squinting. “Maybe? It depends what your answer is.”

His shoulders shake with laughter he can’t hold back, and now I see a light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe this isn’t the end of me. Maybe I can still come out of this with my life intact. “I know better than to tell you to stop, like I said. And really, at the end of the day, it’s not my business what you do in your off hours.” He narrows his eyes, tipping his head to the side.

“Maybe we can meet in the middle.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think the four of you would be willing to put a pause on your relationship during the season? I’m not saying you have to end it. I’m only saying hit the brakes until the season is over, keep it professional until then. What do you think?”

“Yes,” I blurt out without thinking. I don’t need to think. This means keeping my job, and I know they meant it when they said they wanted to help. This is the only way. They won’t necessarily have to like it, but neither will I. Sometimes, there are more important things.

“Okay, Doc.” He extends a hand across the desk, and I take it gratefully, with tears in my eyes. “Welcome back.”

## HARLOW

**B**y the time we finish catching up, with the coach briefing me on a few minor issues that have come up since I left, there's already noise coming from the practice rink. The guys are down there now, warming up for tonight's game against a team from Texas. After paying a quick visit to my office – I missed it even more than I thought I had, so much that stepping through the door gets me all teary-eyed again – I head straight for the rink. I bite my lip, but it's no use trying to hide my glee.

I'm back. Things might still be a little awkward with the coach, but I'm back. Emotion swells in my chest when I enter the rink and gaze down at the guys running drills. I didn't think I'd ever get this chance again. I will never take it for granted, not for a single minute.

For a while, it's enough just to stand and watch. They don't know I'm here, giving me the chance to hang back a little and observe. The coach was telling the truth when he said Ash is back to his old self – he's like a ghost out there, weaving in and out, flying over the ice and making even the skilled skaters around him look slow.

When I think about it, it's clear we have something else in common now. We both know what it means to get a second chance after we thought all hope was lost. Now, he's working harder than ever. I intend to do the same.

It's Danny who sees me first. He comes to a stop, then nudges Max before gesturing my way with his stick. "Hey!" Max calls



out, which brings the rest of the team to a stop. “Look who it is!”

I didn’t expect this. It was one thing to hear they missed me, but another to see it. I can’t help but flash a cheesy grin as I walk down the steps, waving to everybody as I do.

“I can’t believe I’m so happy to see your faces,” I joke on reaching the players bench. A couple of the guys skate over and even hug me, and I am more than happy to hug them back.

“Do you maybe have a minute before the game starts?” Danny murmurs before backing away. “I’m kind of stuck in my head, and I tried all the exercises we went over, but...”

“Would you give the woman a minute to breathe?” Max demands, but he winks at me to show he’s joking. “She just walked in for the first time in weeks, and you’re practically on top of her.”

“Where have you been?” I don’t know who asks it from somewhere across the ice, but the question echoes my way. It’s clear from the keen interest in so many pairs of eyes that they want an answer.

“I had some personal stuff come up, but it’s all ironed out now. I’m just glad to be back here.”

“A couple of minutes before the game?” Danny whispers, and I nod before he joins the team at the request of one of the assistant coaches.

Three players in particular have not yet approached. I can understand why, even if they’re the three I want most to see. We have to be careful, now more than ever. It can’t look like I’m singling them out or like they mean anything special to me.

Right now, I’m happy to sit on the bench and watch. I’m just so happy. I want to run and jump and scream, to fill the arena with my joy. I’m back where I belong. Nothing is going to get in the way of my goals. I can have everything I want, including my guys.

Just not on my schedule, is all. But life is full of compromises.

It's Soren who skates past first, giving me a confused look. "It's okay," I mouth, but he still looks puzzled as he continues past.

It's not another minute before Ash follows the route Soren just took, and this time he pauses and pretends to fix something with his skates. "What the hell is happening?" he murmurs loud enough for only me to hear.

"It's all good," I whisper. "I talked it out with him. He's going to keep it quiet since everything is going so well with the team."

"It's that simple?" There's hope in his eyes when he straightens up to look at me... along with a healthy dose of skepticism. "It's all over? Bygones?"

"Not exactly." I glance around, careful not to be overheard. "We have to cool things off during the season. That's his request. We keep it professional until the season ends."

"But that's it?"

"That's it."

"And you agreed?"

"Would I be here if I hadn't?"

"Hey! Care to join us, Ash? We're all happy Dr. Jacobs is back, but we have a game tonight." A few of the players tease Ash after he's scolded because at heart, they're all a bunch of little boys who like to get under each other's skin whenever possible.

"We'll talk later," I promise before he skates away. There I was, thinking he'd be happy everything worked out, but he sure doesn't seem too enthused. Troubled, more like. I wish I knew why – I hope he's not going to cause a bunch of drama over us having to keep things quiet. I need to know I can count on him, on all of them.

But I guess we can talk about it later, after the game. For now, it's enough to be here, to be part of things again. Not to mention being able to watch the team work together after spending so long getting them to this place.

For the first time in weeks, it feels like everything is going to work out.

**ASH**

**A**nd there I was, thinking having Harlow back in the arena would help. I thought knowing she was here, watching, cheering us on, would make victory inevitable. Like she's our good luck charm—after all, she helped us turn things around from the miserable season we had last year. Her presence is bound to elevate us. Right?

I should know better by now.

“Son of a bitch!” Nobody can hear me over the deafening buzzer announcing Texas' latest goal. That would make three for them, and a big fat zero for us. We can't win them all, and we all know that. But dammit, do we have to fall apart like this?

“Come on, head in the game!” Soren skates past, shouting, and his frustration rings out loud and clear. Everything is moving fast. There're so many faces that blur together as I cut across the ice, faces full of disappointment. We're losing. Why wouldn't they be disappointed?

And she's out there somewhere. I didn't get a chance to see where she's seated, but I know she's here.

I'm glad. I am. She has her job back. She's happy. Later on, when we're together, I'm sure she'll explain more. Like how Kozak did an about-face out of nowhere. I'm very interested in hearing about that.

For now, though, it's enough for her to be back with us. Not that we're giving her such a great welcome back party.

“Change up!” Coach Kozak bellows. It’s a relief to head back to the bench to get my head together. The first line heads out there to hopefully undo some of the damage while we take our seats.

Coach is... unhappy. That’s putting it mildly. “What’s the deal tonight? You decided you were going to let them skate all over you?” There’s no defense. He’s right. I exchange a glance with Ryder, who looks away.

We’re distracted. End of story. We’re supposed to be leading the team, yet we’re out there playing like amateurs. You would think the time I spent with Harlow would help me focus on my mindset during the game. It’s definitely something we’ve talked about, and I can’t be the only one.

Tonight, all I can think about is the conversation we had with Ryder earlier. When he told us who gave Coach the heads up. How could he have been so damn thoughtless? Okay, so Pete’s not a child who needs his house kid-proofed, but still. You don’t leave things laying around, especially when there’s some pretty incriminating shit in those messages. I guess he didn’t figure on his foster brother sabotaging him like that. It was a pretty shitty thing to do — the kid better hope we never cross paths again. As far as I’m concerned, if you want to screw around like you’re a big boy, you better be prepared for what comes next.

*Sure, and land yourself in jail for beating the shit out of a minor.* I’m not exactly thinking clearly. Right now, what I want is vengeance. I’m not proud of myself for wanting it, but I can at least admit it would be nice. Since it’s not going to happen, all that’s left is finding a way to move forward. And I have to do that while playing alongside the idiot who left his phone lying around, unlocked, for anybody to take a look and see our private business.

Danny and Max and the rest of the first line are out there giving it their all, but the clock is ticking. We’re running out of time. A missed pass makes me grind my teeth and growl, and a weak shot on the Texas net leaves me rolling my eyes and groaning. I’m not the only one feeling distracted and sloppy tonight.

“And there I was,” Soren mutters low enough for only me to hear. “Thinking we’d play our best tonight since she’s back.”

“Don’t blame this on her.”

“Who said I was blaming it on her?” He swings his head around, scanning the ice. “I didn’t blame anybody. I’m just saying.”

And here I am, wanting to blame Ryder. Because it’s easier to put the responsibility on somebody else. The fact is, we were all to blame. We shouldn’t have sent those messages.

Nowadays, anybody can hack a phone or a cloud account, and that’s it. Game over. I guess in the grand scheme of things, there are worse ways to learn a lesson. We’ll have to be more careful this time.

Especially when we’re supposed to keep things professional during the season.

The second period ends with the score still three to nothing. “I know you’re better than this! Let’s get back to basics,” Coach urges, clapping his hands and raising his voice over so many other voices fighting for attention in my overwhelmed brain. They didn’t heckle us like this last season when we played like shit half the time.

It’s different now. We got their hopes up. They know we can do better.

So do I. Which is why I understand where they’re coming from when they scream.

“What the hell is wrong with you guys?”

“Put some pads on me, and I’ll show you how hockey is played.”

“You get paid to play like losers?”

“Ignore it,” Soren warns. All that does is make me irritated with him, because of course I’m going to ignore it. At least, I’m not going to say anything to the assholes running their stupid mouths. Gotta love people who probably never laced up a pair of skates or done anything athletic in their entire lives acting like they have the first clue what it’s like to be out here.

Everybody's got an opinion. Everybody thinks they could do better.

Right now, maybe they could.

I'm back out on the ice at the start of the third, feeling like I'm fighting for my life. It's not easy to come back from a deficit like this, especially when the team in the lead starts getting cocky. They think they have the game wrapped up and maybe they do, and all it does is make them more aggressive, while we struggle to get on the board at all.

When Ryder gets an assist two minutes into the period, it's a cause for celebration – though it's muted, and our hearts aren't in it. There's nothing more pathetic than a team down by two goals acting like they just won the cup because they managed to score a point. The crowd seems to appreciate it, at least – some of the heckling going on behind the bench has quieted down by the time we return.

“That's what I like to see!” Coach Kozak gives Ryder a discreet thumbs up before going back to managing the players on the ice.

“Yeah, good work,” I add.

Ryder's not fooled. “Hey, man, I really am sorry.”

“This isn't the time.” At least the coach didn't notice. That's all we need, him accusing us of letting our personal shit distract us during a game. I mean, that's exactly what's happening. But he doesn't need to know it. We might finally be in a good place, even if that good place means having to keep our hands off Harlow during the season. There is a very big part of me that wants to know exactly how the coach could keep tabs on us...

But I know better than to ask questions like that anymore. I used to ask myself how he could ever possibly find out if we were seeing each other in the first place, but here we are. It happened.

“We'll talk later?” I almost feel bad for him, really. He's pretty screwed up over what went down. He feels guilty, and right

now, I want him to feel guilty. It's petty, yes, but it's how I feel. His carelessness screwed us all over.

"Yeah." When I turn away from him, I'm not trying to start shit. One of us has to remember there's a time and place. The fact that he's as distracted as I am but managed to assist a goal isn't helping things, either.

I hate to say it even to myself, but it's a relief when the final buzzer sounds to signal the end of the game. Sometimes, it's clear early on that things aren't clicking. And no matter how hard you try, there's no falling into the rhythm you need to put points on the board.

The atmosphere is pretty damn grim as we head to the locker room. There I was, telling myself I was going to come out of my injury a new player. Somebody who doesn't let outside drama interfere with my play. What did I do when I was out there, though? I let myself get distracted. I let my frustration with Ryder get in the way. My head wasn't anywhere near where it was supposed to be, and even though I wasn't the only one, I can only take responsibility for myself.

When am I going to learn? How many opportunities do I have to blow before I start playing up to my potential? This can't keep happening.

And it won't. It's as simple as that. I'm not letting my personal shit get in the way of my game again.



**RYDER**

I'm not exactly looking forward to stopping at the house before heading to Ash's. That's where we agreed to meet tonight, along with Harlow. It would've been nice to go out and celebrate – not that there is much to celebrate when it comes to the game tonight, but we still have plenty to be happy about.

Stopping at the house means seeing Pete, and of course, that's the whole point. I won't announce I'm checking in on him, but that's definitely what I'm doing. It was naïve to think I could trust him to, like, turn over a new leaf out here. I should know from personal experience. Nobody turns over a leaf unless they want to. They can be surrounded by people begging, urging, pleading, but it won't make a damn bit of difference unless they themselves want to make a change. Pete is completely uninterested in that. I'm irritated with myself for trying.

But I do my best not to show it as I enter the house and call out for him. It's not really a mystery where I'll find him – I'm surprised the couch doesn't have a permanent indent in the shape of his ass by now. Only when I head back to the living room, the TV is off, the room is dark. Just like the rest of the house.

There's a prickly sensation on the back of my neck. "Pete? Where are you?" I jog up the stairs, listening for the sound of the shower, something that would explain why he isn't downstairs or answering when I call for him. But it's dark up

here, too, and the door to the guest bedroom is wide open. He even made the bed for once.

And then, he left.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” His duffel bag is gone. The dresser and closet are empty. His clothes, including the things I bought for him when he first got here, his toiletries. It’s all gone.

This time when I go through the house, I’m not searching for him. I’m looking for a note, something, anything to give me a clue where he would’ve gone. He’s seventeen years old and as far as I know, he doesn’t have any money except for what I give him to order food. How far could he possibly get? No, I don’t want to think too much on that one. Anything is possible.

After ten minutes of searching with nothing to show for it, I try his cell. No use there. “Dude. Where are you?” I bark into his voicemail. “This isn’t funny. Call me back.” I’m not going to hold my breath.

The next step is obvious. That doesn’t mean I’m looking forward to it.

“No, I haven’t heard anything from him.” Erin’s voice is sharp, because of course there’s only one reason I would ask a question like that. She’s not a stupid woman. “What did he do? Where is he this time?”

“That’s just it. I have no idea. I got home from the game, and he was gone. All his stuff is gone with him.”

“Goddammit, Ryder! What did you do?”

“Me? I didn’t do a damn thing. No, I take that back,” I add with a growl. “I tried to get him to enroll in a high school nearby. God forbid he should make something of his life.” She doesn’t need to know the rest. About the texts and how his bullshit almost ruined a stranger’s life. I’m not sure I could handle it right now.

She snorts. “Well, it’s no wonder he left.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s obvious. You should know by now, Pete doesn’t like having to follow the rules.”

“Well, that’s too damn bad, isn’t it?”

“It’s just... There are certain ways to handle him. I thought you knew that by now. That’s the entire reason I sent him out there with you, because you always knew how to handle him. If you want him around, you have to do what he wants.”

I swear, I feel like I’m living in some weird fever dream right now. “Yeah, things have changed. He doesn’t get to sit around my house like a bum. And I thought you would be on my side.”

“Sure, I’m on your side,” she mutters. “You made him run away. Congratulations. Way to go.”

That’s it. I have to end the call before I say something I can’t take back.

He’s gone, and I don’t have the first clue how to find him. I don’t want to see him turn out like one more statistic. But there’s only so much I can do, too. He made it pretty damn clear he didn’t see any use in meeting me halfway. I love the kid, but now I understand that old saying about leading a horse to water. I couldn’t make him drink.

At least I have the rest of the night to look forward to... even if the idea of getting physical is out of the question.

Life just keeps getting better.

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“WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?” Harlow looks and sounds as sweet and concerned as she always is when one of us has a problem. I should know better by now than to think she would ever react any other way, but it still surprises me a little.

And I’m not the only one. “No offense to Ryder, but what the hell do you care what that little shit does?” It’s pretty clear how Ash feels about the situation, sitting there with his arms folded, glaring at me from across his kitchen table where our takeout containers are spread out.

“He’s still a kid,” she reminds him. “Hell, his brain is still developing at his age. People that age make snap decisions based on how they feel right then in the moment.” When he rolls his eyes, she smirks. “What? You never made a split second decision when you were a kid that you regretted later on?”

“I would like to hear this one.” Somehow, Soren still manages to crack a joke.

“No comment,” Ash mutters before picking up a dumpling with his chopsticks. “I’m not in the mood to go through my history.”

“Thanks for being supportive,” I tell her, “but there’s only so much I can defend him for. I love the kid, I do. But I can’t defend somebody who wouldn’t even apologize for what he did. I’m seeing him through new eyes now, and I don’t like it.”

“He’s at a weird age,” Soren muses as he fishes through a container of lo mein. “When you think you’re hot shit, even though you have no proof of it. And it’s a whole other world out here. He must feel overwhelmed.”

“I just hope he comes to his senses before he gets into real trouble.”

There’s something else, something I’m ashamed to say aloud. Part of me is glad he’s gone. It makes me a terrible person to think something like that, but I can’t pretend there’s not relief in knowing I don’t have to look at him right now. I’m still too pissed off, not to mention confused. What did I ever do to him but try to be a good brother?

“Let’s talk about you.” Because I would always rather talk about Harlow than just about anything else. “So you’re back. And that means we have to walk around with blue balls for the rest of the season.”

“Wow. What a sweet way of putting it.”

“I have no intention of suffering from blue balls.” Soren winks at Harlow, moving his eyebrows up and down. “Not when I’ve got a good imagination and a strong right hand.”

“Charming. So charming. I sure did miss hanging out with you guys.” Her laughter dies quickly and she looks around at the three of us. “I really did, you know. No joke. I’ve missed this. And I’m sorry I was so absent.”

“You had your reasons.”

“And no offense,” Ash adds with a smirk, “but you weren’t, like, super fun to hang out with.”

“I didn’t ask you to stop by.”

“I didn’t know I was going to be ruining the murder marathon you had going on.”

“True crime documentaries,” she reminds him, shaking her head. “Sometimes I wonder why I put myself through this.”

“Hey, if you ever need an answer to that question, look no further. I’ll remind you.” Soren is grinning as he lifts a soup dumpling to his lips. He makes a face after sipping some of the broth. “Don’t you love it when they squirt at you?”

“Oh, smooth.” Harlow rolls her eyes but giggles, too. “Did you sit around this past couple of weeks and make a list of all the dirty things you wanted to say to me?”

“And if I did?” He’s not joking anymore as he lowers the spoon.

“Don’t be unfair, please. I’m serious.”

“To be fair, nobody needs to know.” Soren looks at me like he’s hoping for an assist – and while I see what he’s saying, I’m not trying to make this any harder on any of us. Ash remains silent, too, chewing on an egg roll while his gaze bounces back-and-forth like he’s watching a tennis match.

“All I’m saying is, every time we have a setback like this, we learn how to be more careful next time.” In other words, the guy is horny as hell, and looking for any excuse. I’m not going to sit here and pretend I can’t relate to the feeling.

Harlow sets down her chopsticks and folds her hands on the table. “Look. I’m only going to say this once. I love you guys – that hasn’t changed, and it won’t. But I want to do this the right way. I got a second chance, and I’m not going to waste it.

That means no more lying. No more going behind anybody's back. I want to be honest. I want to be able to look my reflection in the eye every day. And let's be honest: isn't it nice when there isn't, like, guilt hanging over you? Everything's out in the open now, and I feel much better about it. I made a promise. I'm going to keep it. No sex. No kissing, no fooling around."

She's stern when she looks at Soren. "And if we can't hang out without it turning into flirting, then we can't hang out. Maybe it would be for the best if we didn't. Understood? Do you see how much this means to me?"

"Yes, yes, of course I do." He's still wearing a lopsided grin when he shrugs. "Hey. You can't blame a guy for trying."

## HARLOW

“It’s not like this is easy for me, you know.”

Although I mean that with all my heart, I can imagine my words coming off a little empty and meaningless. It’s easy to say something like that, isn’t it? Like a parent punishing their kid. This hurts me more than it hurts you. What kid in the history of time has ever actually believed that was true?

And that’s the look they’re giving me now, all three of them. Like I can’t possibly relate to their frustration.

Sometimes I think they forget I’m human, too. And if I weren’t human, with all the needs and wants they have, I wouldn’t be with them in the first place.

But I am with them — at least, I was, and I want to be again. This wasn’t some no-strings-attached good time. It’s not like I got them out of my system while I was at home, stewing in misery and wondering what the rest of my life was going to look like. If anything, I needed them more than ever.

I need them now. It’s frustrating enough, knowing we shouldn’t be together if we want life to go smoothly for all of us. It’s another thing to have to be the strong one. The voice of reason. It gets a little boring after a while.

Especially when I want more than anything to forget my promise. When the three of them are around, I want to forget everything I know to be true about principles and character and promises. Ethics, too. I want more than anything to abandon all of it.

I can't.

"So, things looked a little rocky out there tonight." Like magic, the three of them groan in unison. At least I got them off the subject of our bodies and what we could be doing with them right now. I couldn't have been more successful if I'd shoved the three of them under a cold shower.

"I was distracted." Ash's jaw ticks while he stares at the table, shaking his head. The grim, determined look he wears shouldn't be a turn on, but his intensity does something to me. Geez, I need help. There I was, trying to get them off the topic of what we can't do, and now I'm practically drooling on myself.

"You can't take all that responsibility on your shoulders." Ryder elbows him until Ash looks his way. "For real. I shouldn't have told you guys about Pete right before the game. That was a mistake."

"Why did you?" I ask.

"I don't know. I felt so guilty. And I didn't want anybody thinking it was somebody else on the team, either. I thought I was doing the right thing."

"Your heart was in the right place," I offer.

"Yeah. It's a shame my brain wasn't."

I can't shake the longing in my heart when I see them like this. Even Soren — Mr. Personality, Mr. Sarcasm — looks grim and glum, and nobody seems particularly interested in their Chinese food anymore. I want to fall into their arms and help them forget everything that happened tonight. It's the one thing that might make everything feel better, at least for a little while.

No, that would be the easy way out. Instead, I gesture around the table with my chopsticks. "Let it go. Leave it behind you. You can't do anything about a game that's in the past now. And you can't carry that blame into the next game, either. All you can do is move forward. And you will. You all will."

I snag one of Soren's soup dumplings, winking at him as I do. "I mean, if you could come back from a miserable season like



the one you had last year, you can do anything. Right? And now you have your therapist back. Things are looking up.”

Soren’s lips twist in a smirk. “Be careful, guys. Next thing we know, she’ll have us meditating and reciting positive mantras.”

“Now that you mention it, that doesn’t sound like such a bad idea.”

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“LOOK AT YOU!” Corey’s voice rings out, full of positive energy. “And there I was, thinking you’d need time to get comfortable again after taking a pause on the lessons.”

“Careful!” I call back as I skate faster than I ever thought was possible around the perimeter of the rink. “You’re going to give me a big head!”

“You deserve it. Look how far you’ve come!” She catches up to me, then reminds me of how far I have to go by skating backwards and keeping pace. There I was, thinking I was flying, almost afraid of my speed. It’s taking real, conscious effort not to slow myself down out of fear. I don’t want to hold myself back or limit my potential.

Then she’s got to go and show me up so effortlessly. I still have a long way to go.

“It feels good. Being back here.” The fact that I can hold a conversation while skating like this is even further proof of my improvement. I’m getting stronger. My legs don’t burn the way they used to, either.

“And you look like it does.” She points to her mouth, then to me. “You look happy.”

“I guess I am.”

“Happy enough to try to turn on one blade?”

“I said happy. Not insane.”

“Chicken!”

“Sticks and stones,” I counter. “You’re not going to peer pressure me into breaking an ankle today.”

“I’ll get you skating backwards in no time.”

“Maybe I will. Anything feels possible.”

Her smile widens. “I still can’t get over it. After all that, all it took was you going in to talk to him.”

I’ve had a lot of time to think it over since last night, especially since I went home alone. I had to do something to get over the regret of not sharing my bed. “It happened when it needed to happen. He was too upset at first. With a little time, he came around.”

“But not all the way.”

Yes, because I needed to be reminded of that. “More than I expected. It’s not the end of the world.”

“It probably feels that way to the guys.”

“Yeah, well, considering we really shouldn’t be doing this in the first place...”

“Good point. I’m really happy for you. I knew it would all work out.”

“Did you though?”

“Okay, maybe not.” Her laughter rings out loud and joyful, the kind of laughter that feeds a person’s soul. That’s what I need now.

“Anyway, I don’t have any excuses to skip out on lessons now. I’m not afraid to show my face around here anymore.”

“That’s a good thing, because I plan on putting you through your paces, young woman.” We come to a stop and she folds her arms, her gaze hard and unflinching.

“I can hardly wait.” But the truth is, I feel great after spending an hour on my lesson. It’s no great secret that exercise does wonders for the body and the brain. What a shame exercise is the last thing a person wants to do when they’re depressed and scared. One of life’s great conundrums.

Though I’m starting to wonder if I maybe overdid it a little. By the time I’m back in my sneakers and heading up to my office to catch up on a little work, a sudden wave of dizziness stops

me in my tracks. I pause by the trophy case and lean against it a little until the moment passes.

And when it does, what follows is nausea so sudden and strong, I head straight for the ladies room. I'm going to have to tell Corey to ease up on me a little until my body gets used to the exertion again.

There's not much in my stomach as it is, and I'm glad for that as I hover over the toilet bowl. My stomach feels sour and unhappy, but I think I'll be okay. As soon as the sensation passes, I go to the sink and splash cold water on my face, then dampen a handful of paper towels and press them to the back of my neck.

It does the trick, thank goodness. Throwing up is bad enough, but doing so in a public bathroom is somehow even worse. If I'm going to be sick, I would rather wait until I get home.

My smart watch buzzes, congratulating me for meeting my fitness goal for the day. I pull out my phone to sync it with the app because deep down inside I am a data nerd who enjoys going over my stats. How many calories I burned, that kind of thing. While I'm waiting for the app to sync I scroll down through the other stats.

And that's when I see it.

Weird. I tap on the alert, which takes me to a small calendar where my monthly cycle is laid out. I remember my last period clearly, and it was carefully documented here.

And as I count through the weeks since then, it's clear there's no mistake.

I'm a week late.

## HARLOW

**O** *kay. Don't jump to conclusions. What are the facts?*

The facts? Let's see. I'm staring down at my phone like I've never seen it before, standing at the sink, hoping nobody walks in here right now. I wouldn't want to explain why I probably look like I just saw a ghost. Granted, I'm sure there are plenty of grown women who have had a moment like this. Maybe if someone did come in, whoever she is would offer words of encouragement.

Either that, or they'd tell me about a surprise pregnancy. I'm not sure if I could handle that.

But I'm not ready to leave this bathroom, either. See, if I do that, I run the risk of having to talk to somebody. Like, what if Coach Kozak happens to cross my path? I'd probably burst into tears. Rather than risk that, I duck into one of the stalls once again and lean against the door. The cool metal is a sharp contrast against my suddenly flushed, overheated body.

What are the facts?

Let's see. I'm a week late. It's not like that's never happened before in the entire history of my life. I've been under a lot of stress lately, God knows. Stress can affect a woman's cycle. That's common knowledge. For all I know, my monthly visitor will show up once I get home, or sometime overnight. That's usually how it happens. And this worrying and stressing will have all been for nothing.

Besides, I'm always careful with my pills. I never miss one. Especially now, being with the guys. The least I can do is be

responsible.

I have run like clockwork ever since I started on the pill. It's sort of hard not to. So no matter how I try to reassure myself that this is only a matter of stress messing with my hormones, there's part of me that doesn't buy it. Maybe if I weren't on birth control, that would make sense. But I am, and I've been stressed before, and it's never affected me this way. Binge eating, manic house cleaning? Sure. They are my fallback. But skipping a period? That's a new one.

Wouldn't that just be my luck? I cover my mouth with one hand to stifle a disbelieving laugh that sounds a lot more like a sob. Finally, everything is back on track. I have my work. My professional reputation is still intact. And even though it's hands off with the guys for now, I know they'll be waiting for me when the season's over. Everything is clicking again.

And now, something else. Something else with the power to rock my entire world.

Suddenly, there isn't enough air in the room. I force myself to breathe slowly, to take my time, to ground myself in reality. The cool metal against my back helps. I focus on that, touching a palm to the surface, closing my eyes and tuning into my surroundings. This is reality. This is the present moment. Everything else is a figment of my imagination.

Unfortunately, when we imagine things – especially very vividly, to the point where we involve our emotions – our subconscious can't tell we aren't going through that literal moment in reality. That's one thing I've had to remind pretty much every player on the team at one point or another. If you keep replaying your bad moments, your missed timing, your mistakes, your brain ends up in a constant feedback loop and your system keeps reacting like it's under stress. It's like rolling a snowball down the side of a snowy mountain. That's why it's better to envision things going well, to relive the positive moments. It changes your energy. It can even unlock an athlete's full potential.

I am no athlete, and it's not my potential that's at stake, but I cling to the concept just as desperately. Right now, I don't

know anything for sure, and stressing myself out before I have all the facts in order isn't going to help things. I didn't spend all those years in school to forget my training when it matters most.

*Deep breaths.* I take a few, then push away from the door. My legs feel stronger now, if a little sore from the exertion on the rink. Maybe I won't stop by my office, after all. I mean I'd probably sit at my desk and stare at the wall and wonder if anything in my life will ever be the same. I can do that at home.

Somehow, I manage to leave the bathroom and walk slowly and calmly to the parking lot. No big deal. Just another person going to their car, preparing to drive home. I'm not a nervous wreck or anything. Why should I be? Everything is going my way again, right? A nervous giggle bubbles up in my chest in time for a stranger exiting her car to notice. The concerned look she gives me makes me walk faster, hustling toward my car like it's my lifeline.

Yet when I'm inside, I don't feel much better. I fold my arms over the wheel and rest my forehead against them, closing my eyes, taking a few shaky breaths. There really is no reason for me to freak out like this. I'm on the pill. Things happen, cycles get messed up, and it doesn't necessarily mean I'm pregnant.

I wish somebody would tell that to the gut feeling I can't shake. This isn't a matter of me being a pessimist. I just... have a feeling.

*You're talking yourself into it.* Okay, maybe I am. But there's no talking myself out of it. *What if, what if.* That sort of thinking can drive a person out of their mind. I shouldn't do that to myself.

Especially when it could be bad for the baby.

Something that feels a lot like a lightning bolt zips through me and forces me to sit upright. This is madness. There's only one way to know for sure whether I have anything to worry about, and it's at the drugstore right this very minute. I am sure that if I take a test, I'll see how silly all this excitement was. All I

have to do is drive to the store, pick one up, and get it over with.

Yep. Here I go. Driving away, heading home, ready to face whatever comes my way.

In other words, the car hasn't moved and I can't bring myself to start the engine. Because right now, sitting out here, there's an equal chance of all this excitement and worry being for nothing. In a way, it's a lot like the back-and-forth struggle I went through when it came to confronting the coach about my job. In a way, it was safer to let things go as they were, to stay away and collect my direct deposit at the end of the week and float around in limbo. That way, I didn't have to face the very real possibility of being fired.

Right now, there's just as much a chance of me not being pregnant as there is of a life growing inside me. And as long as I sit here, gripping the wheel like it's a life raft I'm holding onto with all my might, I can brush this off as one of life's little whoopsies. A close call. A pregnancy scare.

Once I take a test, there's no pretending I don't know the truth.

What's the alternative? Staying in this car for the rest of my life? I need to get this over with. If it's true, it's true, and it's not going to change if I stick my fingers in my ears and shout as loud as I can.

Still, I'm almost quaking as I use the key to start the car, and it takes way more concentration than it should to keep from speeding or zoning out at red lights along the drive to the pharmacy a few blocks from home.

Why am I so nervous? Nobody's going to judge me for buying a pregnancy test. I'm sure people buy them all the time. But I can't bring myself to look the cashier in the eye as I pay for the test and a chocolate bar I grabbed at the last second. I might need all the emotional support I can get, depending on how this turns out.

But whatever happens, I'm going to get through it. No matter what.

Though it would be really, really nice if it turned out negative.

## HARLOW

What a great idea, making these instructions practically incomprehensible when you're dealing with a woman who may or may not be excited about the potential outcome of the test. Am I supposed to use a cup and pee into that, then dip the stick, or do I pee directly on the stick? It says you can go either way. The cup has to be sterile, though, but I don't know that my dishwasher gets them that clean.

Wait, what am I saying? I'm not trying to pee into one of the cups I use around the house. I don't have any plastic or paper ones lying around, either. Looks like I'm peeing on the stick. So that problem is solved.

What a shame there's so much more to consider.

I've got this. Right? I've totally got this. Everything's going to be okay, no matter what the outcome happens to be. I'm a grown woman, I make a comfortable salary, easy peasy.

Isn't it amazing the things we tell ourselves we're trying not to freak out about?

"Hold beneath urine stream for five seconds." Should I get a stopwatch? No, I can count to five. "Replace and leave test face down for five minutes."

Five minutes? Why not five years? I'm sure that's how it's going to feel. Heck, I've been back at the house for all of three or four minutes so far, having gone straight to the bathroom and torn the test open without bothering to leave the bag and the chocolate bar elsewhere. They're sitting on the counter, along with the box and the plastic wrapped stick that's going



to tell me really soon whether or not my entire life is about to change. No matter what the outcome, and no matter what I decide to do, this is going to change me. I can't imagine it not being the case.

Maybe I should call the guys.

Right away, red flags wave like crazy at that idea. No, they do not need to be part of this moment. I am supposed to help them. That's why I came to town, it's why I have this job, to somehow make their lives better. To help them manage their stresses, to work through their blocks, that sort of thing. I seriously doubt calling them out of the clear blue and telling them I might be pregnant would do anything but throw them into a panic. Even if they would want to be with me at a time like this, I'm not going to do that to them. Not until I know for sure what's happening. No reason to freak them out just because I'm freaked out.

And I am definitely, definitely freaked out. So freaked out, in fact, that when I go to unwrap the test, I almost drop the whole thing in the toilet. I have to close my eyes and take a slow, deep breath before getting everything in order, counting to five and capping the test, then leaving it on the sink.

Five minutes, huh? I'm sure they'll pass in the blink of an eye.

What do I do now? Stand here and wait? Not unless I want every minute to feel like an hour. I set a five minute timer on my phone and force myself to leave the room, going downstairs and heading straight for the kitchen. When times get tough, clean.

I get to work scouring the sink, grimacing in determination as I do. Like if I scrub hard enough, I can scrub all of this away. Of all times for something like this to happen. I know I shouldn't jump to conclusions, but there's still that feeling in the pit of my stomach that refuses to go anywhere. Not to mention the nausea that has re-introduced itself, though more mildly this time. How am I supposed to stress eat when I'm nauseated?

Instead of tearing into that candy bar, I fill the kettle with water and place it on the stove. A cup of ginger tea should

help settle my stomach, and it might even help me calm down a little bit. I need all the soothing I can get now.

How has it only been a minute and a half? Is there something wrong with my phone? It's incredible how much you can pack into such a short amount of time when you're both anxiously awaiting and dreading the results of a test. Another half minute passes as I finish scrubbing the sink and rinsing it out. I wash my hands, then get a mug from the cabinet and find the tin of loose tea I picked up recently at the farmer's market. I even bought a pretty, engraved mesh holder for the leaves, which I place in the cup before pouring the boiling water over top. The aroma is strong and fragrant, and I inhale the steam in hopes of forcing myself to calm down. No matter what happens, it's all going to be fine.

Two minutes to go. Jeez Louise, time has never crawled this slowly. The tea is too hot to sip without scalding myself, so I settle for puttering around, straightening things out, wiping down the counter absentmindedly while an uncertain future unfurls in my mind. So many questions, so many possibilities. I wish I hadn't unloaded the dishwasher this morning. That would be a nice way to kill a little time.

We've been so careful. That alone should be reason enough for me to brush all of this off as a coincidence. I never skip a pill. I haven't been on any sort of medication that would make the pill ineffective. I did everything I was supposed to do.

Ninety seconds until I find out whether I'm part of the very slim percentage of the population whose hormonal birth control fails them. What if it's positive and they don't believe I got pregnant by accident?

Wait. What am I even saying? I freeze in mid-thought, halfway through wiping crumbs out of the utensil organizer in the drawer. Whose baby is it? If I am pregnant, who's the father?

Terrific. Because I needed another layer of horror on top of everything else I'm scrambling to handle.

What happens if the other two are resentful? What if the father decides he didn't sign on for this? What if I go overnight from having three boyfriends to none, and a baby on the way? I

unconsciously place a hand over my chest, where my heart is pumping madly. I could end up all alone. Raising a baby by myself. They could all hate me for this. Accuse me of trying to trap them.

Sure, they love me, and I love them, but stranger things have happened. Life events such as this one tend to bring out either the best or the worst in people.

No. I cannot do this to myself. And it's not like I don't have options if I decide not to keep the baby. This does not have to destroy any of our lives.

I still don't even know if the test is positive, and already I'm thinking months ahead. That's who I am. It's what I do.

The ringing of the alarm on my phone signaling five minutes has passed shakes me to my core. I couldn't wait for the timer to go off, and now I sort of wish I had another five minutes. But I can't run away. All I can do is climb the stairs while my heart thuds almost painfully and my head spins thanks to all the possibilities, all the potential drama and pain that might come out of this. Once I see the result, there's no going back. No pretending I don't know.

I can handle this. I know I can. Even if that little plastic wand suddenly looks much bigger and more important than it did five minutes ago. I stare at it for a few breathless moments, close my eyes, and force myself to flip it over.

Here goes nothing.

At first, I'm not sure what I'm looking at. I should've reviewed the instructions again. I do it now, though deep down inside, I'm already aware of what the test reads.

Two lines. Positive.

I'm pregnant.

And I have no idea who the father is.

I also have no idea how much time passes as I stand at the sink, staring down at those two lines. I suspected. I was right. I'm the same person I was when I woke up this morning, but somehow I feel completely different.

Pregnant. I'm going to have a baby. There's still so much to figure out, but that one fact is true as of this moment. I am pregnant. It's still very early and anything can happen, but right now, I'm pregnant.

No matter how many times I think the word or whisper it to myself, it sounds just as foreign.

There's only one thing I can think to do, one place my mind immediately goes. It's not to any of the guys, either, though eventually it will be. Eventually, I'm going to have to figure out what to do.

But right now I need a shoulder to lean on. Right now, I pull up Corey's contact and call her, biting my lip hard to hold back tears.

"Hey," I manage to croak when she answers. "I know we just saw each other, but do you think you could stop by? I... I sort of need help."

## HARLOW

I'm pretty sure I shocked her to death. She is still on her feet, but all the color has drained from Corey's face, and her eyes are almost glassy as she stares at me without blinking for an increasingly uncomfortable amount of time. I don't know what she figured she'd find when she got here, but I doubt it was me shoving a positive pregnancy test in her face within moments of her stepping through the door.

Finally, I can't take the suspense anymore. "Are you alive in there? Did I kill you?"

Her eyelids flutter and her lips move, but she doesn't make a sound. Not at first. And when she does, a moan that sounds like it comes from her toes fills the room. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Do you know how much I wish I were? This isn't an April Fool's joke."

"Okay, okay. Hang on a second." She covers the top of her head with her hands and puffs out her cheeks as she releases a deep breath. "Let me get this straight. You just found out about it?"

"I felt sort of pukey after our lesson, and I finally realized when I was looking at my app that I was a week late."

"And you didn't say anything to me before you left?"

"I was sort of hoping this was all a big worry over nothing. I didn't want to pull you into it until I knew for sure."

“Oh, sweetie.” She takes me by the shoulders and her touch is gentle, comforting. “How do you feel about this? I think that’s the most important question right now. Are you happy?”

“Happy?” I blurt out a disbelieving laugh. “I can’t imagine being happy about this.”

But that’s not completely true. I can imagine a world in which this would be a joyful discovery, but I’m not living there right now. “I can’t imagine being happy about this with the way things stand right now,” I amend. “What am I going to do?”

“What you are going to do right now is sit down, breathe, and remind yourself you don’t have to make any big decisions right this very minute. You have time. You said you were a week late? So it’s still really early.”

She isn’t telling me anything I haven’t already told myself, but it is nice to hear it coming from somebody else. It doesn’t feel like I’m trying to fool myself into believing things aren’t as bleak as they seem right now.

At her insistence, I take a seat in the living room, and she brings the tissue box over before sitting next to me. “What do you need? What can I do?”

“Just being here means everything. I think I’d go insane sitting here alone.”

“Can I make you something? Some tea, maybe?”

Right. I did brew a cup, didn’t I? She’s nice enough to grab it for me, and while it’s not scalding hot anymore, it’s not cold either. I sip it slowly, forcing myself to take deep breaths rather than panicking.

“I guess asking about the father would be pointless.”

“I have no idea. It could be any of them.”

“Are you going to tell them, do you think?”

The cup shakes. “One problem at a time.”

She winces and pats my arm. “Sorry. It’s a bad habit. Always thinking ahead.”

“We really do have a lot in common, you know.” I wish I felt the gentle laugh that somehow rumbles in my chest, but it’s sort of flat.

“It’s going to be okay. You’re a smart, capable person. Whatever you decide to do, I know it will be the right thing for you.”

“The way deciding to sleep with three men at the same time was the right thing for me to do?” The nausea is starting again. I don’t think there’s enough ginger in the world to make it go away completely.

“Hey. It feels right for you. It doesn’t have to be right for everybody. If they make you happy, and you can’t see living your life without them, then it’s right. You know?”

Her kindness brings tears to my eyes. I brush them away before asking, “Is this the same girl whose brain almost melted when I told her I was with the three of them?”

“Hey. You can’t blame a person for being surprised and maybe needing a little time to get over something. It’s still unusual. But I would never judge you for it.”

But I know people who would. Quite a few people.

Including...

“Oh, no.” I slam the mug on the coffee table and stumble away from the couch, racing blindly for the powder room next to my office. I barely make it in time before the entire contents of my stomach come rushing out. By the time I’m finished, I’m breathless and weak and more miserable than I have felt in a long time. I flush the toilet and lower the lid before resting the side of my face against it.

“Are you okay?” Corey’s hanging around near the doorway, and it’s clear she feels awkward and unsure of what to do. She wants to help. I know she does. I wish I could tell her how she can manage it.

“Oh, I’m fine.” She doesn’t deserve my sarcasm, but I can’t hold it back any more than I could hold back what I just threw up. “Just yesterday, I promised the team’s head coach there would be no relationship between me and the guys until the

season is over. I went from being afraid I lost my job and my license to being back on top of the world.”

I lift my head to look at her through the strands of hair hanging around my face. “And now, I’m going to be walking around with the evidence of our relationship growing in my belly for everybody to see, and there’s no guarantee I’ll be able to work through my pregnancy or afterward. I’m doing just great.”

Before I can apologize for being a sarcastic bitch, my stomach clenches again, and I barely lift the lid in time to avoid a massive mess. Corey holds my hair back while I heave until my shoulders ache and my ribs feel like they might be broken. I’ve never thrown up so hard in my life. I’ve never felt so miserable afterward.

When it’s over, she hands me a wet washcloth to wipe my sweaty face. It feels good. I can almost believe I’m human by the time she speaks. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” I accept the tea, as well, which she fetched from the living room. At least it gets the taste of puke out of my mouth for a little bit. I don’t have the strength right now to go upstairs and brush my teeth. I’m feeling a little too weak and woozy.

“If this were an ideal world, what would your life look like? No obstacles, no judgment from anybody, just Harlow’s ideal existence. What do you see?”

The image that immediately comes to mind, just as fresh and clear as if I were looking at a movie, makes my heart skip a beat. I don’t need to think about it. I know what I want more than anything – and I know how impossible it is. I may as well wish for a billion dollars.

“Promise you won’t laugh?” I ask squinting up at her from the floor.

“Come on. Like I would laugh at you.”

“If I had my way... I would want to live with the three of them. One house, where all of us could live together.” I can’t help but smile as the picture becomes even sharper and more defined. “I would want to raise this baby together, all of us.



We could argue about who is spoiling the baby the worst. We could make schedules for who will get up at what time for feedings and diaper changes. Later on, they could teach him or her how to skate and how to play hockey.”

She clears her throat and raises a hand. “Excuse me. Teaching them to skate is exclusively Aunt Corey’s domain. And I’d happily fight any hockey player who decides to challenge me for the right.”

“Honestly? I would pay money to see that fight.”

“Sell tickets,” she suggests with a shrug. “Pay for the kid’s college education.”

It all feels so right when I think about it. “That’s all I want. It doesn’t have to be much. Just all of us together. One family.”

I’m a little embarrassed—even though we just laughed together, there’s still the fear of her telling me I’m out of my mind. But she’s smiling when I look up at her. Still, I see the sadness in her eyes, mostly because I feel it, too. “That does sound nice,” she whispers.

“And absolutely impossible.” Because let’s face it, things like that don’t happen in real life. This isn’t some idealized fantasy world. This is reality, and dreams like that just don’t come true.

## HARLOW

Something's wrong with Ryder.

This isn't a matter of me being paranoid, either. Of course, I always watch my guys closer than the rest of the team, and now there's the whole baby issue to make them even more important to me than ever. I still haven't wrapped my head around it. I mean, how do you wrap your head around something so monumental that came as such a shock? I guess it would be bad enough if I were in a so-called traditional relationship with only one man. The past few days since I took the test have been one long exercise in trying to control my stress and anxiety.

It's not going well.

It would be easy in light of all this stress to dismiss my concerns over Ryder, but I don't think I'm imagining things. The Raptors are up three-to-two with only another minute and a half left in the game, and the team is firing on all cylinders. It looks like a win.

Except for Ryder. His playing reminds me of the way Ash was playing the day he was injured. He's half a second behind everybody else. Awkward, stilted. Like he's overthinking everything. It's obvious when an athlete is in the zone, and even more so when they aren't. It happens to everybody at some point.

That doesn't make me feel any better, and something tells me it won't help Ryder, either.

When the final buzzer sounds, I cheer along with the rest of the fans, but my heart's not completely in it when I can't take my eyes off him. Even at a distance, I see the strain written on his face. What could've happened? Is it about Pete?

On the way back to my office, I send him a text he'll probably get once he's out of the shower.

**Me: Meet me in my office? I'd like to talk to you.**

Then it's a matter of occupying myself until he gets here, but that's no big issue. I'm behind on reports on player progress – I never go into detail, since that's confidential, but it's my responsibility to alert the coach to anything that might be a problem. One player not getting along with another, maybe the need for a little extra practice if someone's feeling less than confident. That sort of thing. I don't always have anything to report, but I like sending them anyway so it's clear I'm doing my job.

I'm finished typing my email when there's a knock at the door. Usually, Ryder smiles when he sees me. I guess I didn't notice until now what a habit that is for him. And the reason I know this is because his face is a stern, stony blank as he enters the room.

This doesn't bode well.

"Hey. Congrats on the win." At a time like this, I need to be careful. Nobody appreciates being pushed or patronized, but especially not Ryder.

"Yeah, thanks." He closes the door and stands with his back to the wood, arms folded. "Well? Let's hear it."

Terrific. He's feeling mildly confrontational. This keeps getting better. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"No offense, but you're full of shit."

"No, gosh, why would I take offense to that?"

He only rolls his eyes and scoffs. "I played like shit out there and you want to know why. That's why you called me in here."

“Now that you mention it, I’m a little concerned for you. I was wondering if there is anything you want to talk about. Is everything okay with Pete? Has there been anything new?”

“No, but he’s always on my mind.” He rakes his fingers through his wet hair, sighing heavily. “But I have other problems now on top of him.”

When he glances my way, there is an immediate shift in his expression. “Sorry. I’m being a dick. I’m not trying to scare you or anything.”

“Yeah, well, you’re sort of doing it anyway.” I’m trying hard to keep things light, but with the baby in the back of my mind and influencing virtually everything related to my guys, it’s a real struggle.

“I was trying to think of a way to tell you this. But I still haven’t figured out what to think about it myself.”

“You’re driving me nuts. Tell me what it is before I completely lose it.”

His chest puffs out when he pulls in the longest, deepest breath ever before blurting it out. “I’m going to Minnesota. I found out before the start of the game.”

I wait for more, but he doesn’t say anything else. “Is that it?”

He frowns. “Is what it?”

“I mean, I’m just saying. You’re being sent up to Minnesota. That’s exciting! Yeah, I’ll miss you. We’ll all miss you. But this is something we should celebrate, right?”

“You don’t understand.” He hangs his head before his shoulders rise and fall in a deep sigh that seems tinged with sadness. “I’m not being sent up. I’m being traded.”

One day, I’m going to have to get used to dealing with bombshells like this. I mean, it’s obvious I’m going to face them constantly. That’s how it feels lately, anyway. I might as well start adjusting to them.

“Traded?” I push my chair back from the desk and stand, slowly crossing the room until we’re standing toe to toe.

“Like, permanently?”

“It’s all my damn fault.” He bangs a fist against the door behind him, then groans when I jump. “I’m sorry. None of this is your fault. I shouldn’t freak you out.”

My heart is sinking like a stone, deeper with every strained breath I take. “It’s the request you made,” I whisper, horrified.

“I guess Coach Kozak put things in motion. He told me he didn’t want to, but he did it, anyway.”

I don’t want to say it out loud, but I can’t help wondering if he put all of this in motion as a way of breaking up the four of us. Back before we talked things out, when he was mad and disappointed. He might have seen this as a godsend, a way of removing a part of the equation.

Not that it matters. The result is the same. There’s only one thing I can think to do, since bursting into tears doesn’t seem like it would be very helpful. When he looks so distraught, I can’t stand here and not at least try to pick up his spirits—even when my own spirits are depressingly low. “It’s going to be okay.” I reach for him, trying to hug him, but he only stiffens and looks away.

“Is it? I have to leave soon. Like, I’m supposed to be there next week.”

*Hold it together.* The last thing he needs is to watch me break down when he’s already feeling bad enough. “That’s... very sudden.”

“Yeah, no shit. They don’t give you a lot of warning when something like this happens.” The back of his head touches the door before he sighs again. “Who cares if I have a whole house to pack up and a car to transport and a life to take care of?”

“And it’s all been finalized?”

“Trust me,” he grunts, looking miserable when our eyes meet. “I’ve already asked all the questions. Like if there’s a way to get out of this, that kind of thing.”

He covers his face with his hands — a helpless gesture that threatens to break my heart. “It’s all my damn fault. I wasn’t

thinking. I didn't want to be away from you, but I told myself I couldn't stand being here, facing them, being broken up."

"Well..." I lift a shoulder, because I can't stand seeing him like this without trying to turn things around. "Think about it this way. We weren't allowed to be together during the season, anyway. And once you come back, you can—"

"But this won't be my home anymore. I have to start over somewhere else. A new house. A new team. New everything. And there's nothing I can do about it, and I don't want to leave you."

I'm in his arms before he's finished, my face buried in his chest while his is buried in my hair. "How am I supposed to leave you?"

Especially now. When I'm carrying a baby that could be his.

"Oh, crap." I have to fight to break free of his arms when my stomach turns and bile begins to rush into my throat. I stumble out of the room and run blindly for the bathroom, where I can throw up and cry in private.

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I DON'T WANT to be here.

And once Ryder steps back into the restaurant with Soren and Ash behind him, it's pretty obvious they feel the same. He told them. He said he would, that he didn't have a chance to do it in the locker room. And after the fiasco of telling them about Pete before the game they went on to lose spectacularly, he figured it was for the best to save it for afterward. At least he learns from his mistakes.

They both look shellshocked, though they're doing their best to hide it. After all, as far as the rest of the team is concerned, there's nothing to do but celebrate. They just won a game, and everybody is flying high on happy, positive energy. I have to give them credit for how hard they are working to get back into the groove as they wander over to my end of the long table, set up toward the back of the pub the team chose for their celebratory dinner.

“You okay?” I murmur to Soren when he sits down.

“Define okay.” He groans before taking his head in his hands.

“I’m not sure I can handle any more of these sudden surprises.”

Funny you should mention that, because I’ve got a surprise for you. Nope. Not the time. I’m not sure when the time will ever come, but it is certainly not right now. “I know what you mean,” I murmur instead, eyeing the table in case anybody’s watching us too closely.

“How are you handling it?” Ash turns his chair around, wrapping his arms around the back after straddling the seat.

“I’m not thrilled, of course. But it is what it is. Everything will work out.” That’s about as much as I feel comfortable saying in mixed company – granted, the pub is full of people, and I doubt anyone is paying much attention to us. Even the rest of the team, most of whom invited their wives and girlfriends out with us.

I happen to glance toward Max and his wife, and the sight of them sitting close together with their hands joined unlocks something in my chest. It’s bittersweet – that’s the best word I can come up with to describe it. I’m happy for them, obviously. Max is a nice guy, and he has his priorities in order. At the end of the day, his family matters most. What’s not to like about that?

But dammit, they get to be together in public. They get to be affectionate, tender, and nobody thinks twice about it. Meanwhile, here I am, afraid to show too much attention to the three men I love and who love me. I can’t even joyfully announce my pregnancy for fear of what will follow. So yeah, I’m a little sad, too.

“Here I am again. It’s all my fault.” Ryder drops into his chair with a grunt, and his hangdog expression tugs at my heart strings.

“Cut it out,” Soren tells him. “Stop taking all this blame on your shoulders. These things happen.”

“If I hadn’t gone and run my mouth to the coach —”

“Soren is right,” I tell him, keeping my voice low. “Stop beating yourself up. That’s not going to help anything. Everything will be alright in the end. I’m only sorry you have to uproot your life like this.”

“It’s what I deserve. I need to think before I act.”

“Well, I’m not going to argue with that.” But I wink so he knows I’m only joking. The last thing I want is for him to feel even worse.

“I need a drink.” He looks around at the three of us. “What do you think? I’m buying.”

“Hell, yeah,” Soren agrees.

“I’m not gonna turn down an offer like that,” Ash tells him with a smirk.

“Actually, I think I’ll skip out on this round.” At the looks of surprise they give me, I shrug. “I already feel like I’m getting a headache, and that will only make it worse.” *And, you know, I’m pregnant.* I have to bite hard on my lip to stifle the sudden giggle that threatens to burst out of me when I imagine their reactions. It would be cruel to announce it that way, and that’s what stops me.

“Suit yourself. Don’t say I never offered you anything.” He gets up to order at the bar and I watch with no small amount of envy because if there’s one thing I could use right now, it’s a stiff drink. That’s also the last thing I need.

What are we going to do? What are any of us going to do now? For all I know, Ryder is the father of my baby, and he’s moving all the way out to Minnesota in a matter of days. Is it unfair not to tell him about the baby before he goes? Or would it be unfair to drop a surprise like that in his lap when I know very well it will destroy him to have to be away from me?

“Don’t worry.” Ash reaches under the table and takes my hand out of sight of the rest of the team. “Like you said, everything is going to be alright. We’ll get through this.”

I manage a weak smile. It’s the best I can do, since he doesn’t have the first idea just how complicated things have now become.



## ASH

“Come on, you guys! Let’s see a little hustle out here.” Coach cups his hands around his mouth and shouts at those of us running drills. “Don’t think you can rest on your laurels just because we’ve got some wins under our belts!”

It isn’t easy to bite back the sarcasm his encouragement stirs up in me. It seems like no matter how I try, no matter what I tell myself, he keeps finding ways to irritate and piss me off.

Did he deliberately arrange for Ryder’s trade after learning about the relationship? Because from everything I’ve heard, Kozak wasn’t a fan of the idea. He didn’t want to see Ryder go – and that’s coming straight from Ryder, when we were discussing things at the pub. He wanted Ryder to think about it, to not be hasty. Now, all of a sudden, he pushes the trade through? That’s a little too convenient for me to swallow without struggling over the aftertaste it leaves in my mouth.

“Fix your face,” Soren advises on his way past me. He’s probably right, even if it irritates me to be called out like that. I’m sure I look about as friendly and positive as I feel right now.

I catch up to him, and for a while, we distract ourselves by racing from one goal to the other. “Look out!” somebody calls out with a laugh, which only makes me skate harder now that I know they’re watching. My legs are burning, and every breath is like ice on fire, searing the inside of my lungs. I welcome the sensation just like I welcome the exhaustion I’m trying to

work toward. Sure, beating him will be nice, but what I need more is to exhaust myself to the point where none of this matters.

“Okay, okay!” Coach blows his whistle once we come to a stop at the far end of the rink opposite where he’s standing. “Very nice, you guys, but let’s get back to it. Start scrimmage in five. Grab your water and whatever else you need now.”

We’re both breathing heavily, and Soren gives me one of his patented smirks. “Beat you by a hair.”

“Fuck off, you did not. It was a tie.”

“Now I know I beat you,” he laughs. “Otherwise, you’d be rubbing it in my face that you won. If you’re willing to accept a tie, that means it’s better than losing.”

The worst part is, he’s right. “Because you know me so well. You’re such an expert.”

His smile slips away all at once, and his gaze hardens. “I know you well enough to know you need to let it go.”

“Let what go?”

“Come on.” He looks across the ice, and I don’t need to follow his eyes to know where his attention has drifted. “You’re pissed off. So am I. But that’s not helping anybody.”

“It’s just...” I shake my head firmly before heading for the bench where I left my Gatorade. “No. This isn’t the time.”

“Try to keep it in mind, then,” he mutters, skating by my side. “Keep your angry faces for later, when nobody else on the team is going to see them.”

“Fine. I’ll... be more aware, or something. Satisfied?”

“Sure. I’ll sleep a lot better tonight.” Let him roll his eyes all he wants. He’s just as pissed by the situation as I am. We finally got a good thing going, even if keeping our hands to ourselves until the end of the season weren’t something I wasn’t looking forward to. At least we were all going to be together. And it’s not only because of our relationship that I’m feeling this way, either. We got a good thing going on the team, too. We found our rhythm, we work together seamlessly

when everything is clicking. Now, we'll have to fill in the gap Ryder's departure will lead to.

The assistant coaches gather together while Coach Kozak shows them whatever he's got going on in that binder of his. I'd like to hit him over the head with that binder. Let Ryder blame himself all he wants, but I put a lot of the blame squarely on the coach's shoulders. He knew what he was doing. But he did it anyway, even if it affected the team negatively.

I could be completely wrong, but it just seems a little too convenient for me to take it any other way.

Ryder is putting on a happy face for the sake of the team, being lighthearted and even philosophical about the trade. "Laugh it up," he calls out when one of the guys jokes about him being buried in snow up in Minnesota. "I'll be busy cuddling by the fire with a blond."

Is this the sort of thing he has to say, but I immediately look up at where Harlow is sitting, anyway. She had to hear that. I'm sure she took it the way he meant it, as a way to deflect. I've had my questions about Ryder in the past, but one thing I've never questioned is his devotion to her. He is as committed as I am, as Soren is. I bet the nights are going to get pretty damn lonely out there.

She's watching him, sitting alone, her attention trained on him as he skates. Maybe somebody should tell her to fix her face, since there's pretty obvious emotion written all over hers. Sadness, mostly, and concern. She's already missing him when he hasn't even left yet.

Soren joins me and I jerk my chin in her direction. "Do you think she's okay?"

"Finding out one of her boyfriends is moving in a couple of days? Sure, why wouldn't she be?"

"Is everything a joke? For once, can you take something seriously?"

"Easy, boy. Don't bite my head off." He seems to take me more seriously, though, gazing up at her wearing a frown. "I

don't know. She's pretty much the way I would expect her to be. Why, do you think it's something else?"

I'm torn on what to say. On one hand, what good is it, worrying him? On the other hand, maybe I need to prove to myself that I'm not making all of this up in my head — either that, or I need to be assured that I'm overthinking it.

"She seems... Less. I know," I grumble when he laughs, "it sounds weird. That's the only way I can think to describe it. She is, like, faded. Low energy. Distracted. And didn't she say at the pub she was getting a headache?"

"So was I. It was loud as fuck in there."

Of course, he has to treat it like a joke. "I'm just saying. I'm a little worried about her."

"We'll have to make it a point to pick her spirits up however we can. She's just upset about Ryder," he concludes. He's probably right, too.

Still. I can't shake the feeling that I need to watch her. She's the kind of person who doesn't like to ask for help. Those are the people you need to watch after.

**RYDER**

I've gotten myself into some situations before. The sort of stuff I didn't think I would survive. I've made more than my share of mistakes, I've acted before I thought, and most of the time I didn't give a damn about the consequences.

This is not one of those times. I can't help wanting to kick myself every time I put another item in a bag or a box. Every time I think about everything I'm leaving behind as I pack up my life – a life I wasn't ready to uproot – and do my best to fumble my way through a shitty situation.

What makes it even worse – as if I needed something else on my plate – is not being able to get in touch with Pete. Last I checked, Erin still hasn't heard from him and can't reach him. Neither can I, and I don't know whether that's because he is ignoring me or because something terrible has happened. I hate to let my thoughts drift in that direction, but I'm too much of a realist to think positive. I mean, there's trying to look at the bright side, and there's being a jerk about it. I don't want to delude myself.

The best I can do is send him a text with my new address in Minnesota and let him know if he wants to meet me up there, I'll be glad to buy him a ticket. Otherwise, I can only hope he does the right thing for himself. It's not easy, letting go. And I'm letting go of so much, aren't I?

One thing is for damn sure as I shove socks and underwear into a carry-on, no more acting without thinking for me. Never again. Sure, that's easy to say at a time like this when I'm

basically watching my life go up in flames around me. I need to remember it when the time comes, that's all. When I'm in the moment. No going off half-cocked, not anymore. Now, I have something worth taking care of. Something worth guarding and protecting. I have Harlow. And she has to suffer for my stupid mistake.

It won't be easy, letting go of this place. It was never really mine, and I always knew that, but it's the first place I've been able to call home in as long as I can remember. Even Erin's house, the foster home where I spent the most time, was no replacement for having a home of my own. Somewhere I could call the shots, make the rules, live by my own terms instead of dancing to somebody else's beat. I don't think I'll ever forget when I first walked in here and saw all the space. Just space for the sake of having it. Space that didn't need to be filled unless I wanted to fill it.

I want to laugh at myself now, but I can't when I know damn well how I had to fight and claw to get here. It's the first time in my life a dream came true. And it was something I made happen, which made it all so much sweeter.

I'm sure the house in Minnesota will be just as nice. Big, roomy, comfortable. But there's a reason they say nothing ever beats your first time – this isn't exactly on the same level as losing my virginity, but the feeling is the same. This was my first home. I always figured if I ever left, it would be on my terms.

*But you set this in motion, dumbass.* Yes, because it was what I thought I wanted at the time.

The sudden clanging of the doorbell makes me jump and drop a full box on my foot. "Dammit!" I growl, kicking it before I storm out of my room. I swear, if this is Pete... I mean, I'd be glad to get a look at him and talk face-to-face, but I wouldn't exactly welcome him with open arms, either. I'm still pretty pissed.

Turns out, it's the one person I will always be glad to see. Somebody I know I'm going to miss like crazy. Somebody who looks as upset as a girl whose boyfriend is moving away

tomorrow. “Hey,” she whispers when I open the door. “I hope I didn’t come over at a bad time. I should’ve called.”

“No, it’s fine. I was only...” The words lodge themselves in my throat. I have to force them out. “I was packing. I could use the company.” *And I’m going to have to spend the next six months away from you, so any spare second you can give me is great.* I don’t have it in me to say that out loud, but I don’t think I need to, either. If anybody would ever understand what I’m feeling as she steps into the house, it’s Harlow. Just one reason I love her like I do.

“I’d be happy to help.” Her voice is heavy. Sad. Like I needed another reason to hate myself; making her sad. Maybe she’s better off without me. What good can I ever do for her, going off and making split second decisions like an idiot.

“Actually, I have a lot of it already packed. This is one of those times I’m glad I never really got into... stuff, you know. Clutter. I hate clutter.” She follows me up the stairs, then sits on the end of the bed and frowns at the suitcases and boxes in the corner of the room.

I guess I feel like I need to keep talking, because I can’t stop myself. “I’m pretty sure it comes from living in all those different homes.” I toss shoes into a box and tape it closed, then stack it with the others the movers will load into a truck in the morning. “There was never enough room and always too much shit laying around. I mean, listen, I’m grateful for the people who took me in, you know? But I’m not one of those guys who got their first paycheck and decided to go out and buy a few thousand bucks worth of electronics and clothes and stuff.”

“Funny. A lot of people do exactly that kind of thing when they were raised without much money of their own.”

“Yeah, and the rest of us know what it’s like to not have any money, so we’re afraid to spend it even when we have a chance.”

“Hence, you being determined not to buy a new car with air-conditioning?”

“I am not going to put up with any more slander toward my baby.” I’m grinning when I look over my shoulder, but all she does is frown and wrap her arms around herself. What did I say? There I was, thinking we were joking, but she looks worse than ever.

“Hey.” I kneel in front of her and take her hands after I manage to unwind her arms from around her middle. “I’m sorry. I hate seeing you like this. I hate feeling like I’m the reason for it.”

“I’m going to miss you.” Her bottom lip quivers, and she might as well have stuck a knife in my chest. I almost wish she would. It might hurt less.

“And you know I’m going to miss the hell out of you. Every minute. Every second.” I lift her hands to my lips and kiss the backs of them, closing my eyes and inhaling her sweet scent. I’ll miss that, too. It would probably be creepy if I ask what perfume she uses, so I won’t, but I want to. I want a little bit of her that I can carry with me.

“But we can talk every day,” I remind her with as much of a smile as I can manage. It’s not much, but I’m doing my best. “We can FaceTime. We can text. You know my meme game is strong.”

She snorts before squeezing my hands. “You are the king of stupid memes.”

“They’re not stupid if they make you laugh.”

This is all wrong. Here I am, trying to smile through the ache in my heart, and all she’s doing is crying. “Hey. It’s going to be okay. We’ll get through this, right?” Won’t we? Is that why she’s so upset?

“I just want you to stay. Can you please?” She uses the sleeves of her sweater to wipe the tears rolling down her cheeks. “I know I have no right to ask you that. I love you, but it’s not like we’re, you know, married or anything. But do you think there’s a chance you could stay for me? Please?”

Forget stabbing me. She may as well reach into my chest and pull out my heart while it’s still beating. I don’t know what to



do with this feeling, like I'm totally helpless and useless. Here she is with all this hope in her eyes, and all I can do is let her down.

"I wish I could." Her broken whimper makes me hate myself more than I did before, and I didn't think that was possible. "I can see if they'll trade me back for next season. I'll do my best, I swear. But for now, I have to go. That's just how it works."

Her head bobs up and down as her face goes red. "Yeah. I thought so." And then she covers her face with both hands and sobs.

While all I can do is kneel here and wonder if there's something she's not telling me.

## HARLOW

**O**f course, I knew it was a longshot. That was the kind of question a kid asks their parents because they don't know any better. I had to ask. I had to do it for the baby's sake, at least.

"Hey." He wraps his strong arms around me and I lean against him, closing my eyes and leaking tears onto his shoulder.

"Listen, I'm flattered that you'll miss me so much, but this doesn't have to change anything. You know that, right?" He tightens his hold on me before sighing. "I'm still yours. I'll always be yours. It doesn't matter how many miles there are between us. That is never going to change. Is that what you're worried about?"

No, it wasn't, but now he's got me nervous about that, too. He's only human. A healthy young man. Who could blame him if he wanted to see what else is out there? What happens if he goes to Minnesota and finds the love of his life and forgets I ever existed? While I'm back here in California, carrying a baby that might be his.

There's a reason why I drove over here unannounced. I didn't want to take the time to call him – I was in that much of a hurry to get here and tell him about the baby. I was ready to blurt the whole thing out. Not even because I wanted to stop him from going. Deep down inside, I know I can't stop this from happening. I convinced myself he deserves to know before he leaves.

I'm still convinced. I can't imagine him flying out to Minnesota without knowing. I can imagine him being hurt and confused, and maybe even angry if I didn't tell him until he was practically on the other side of the country. Like I was keeping a secret and trying to hurt him somehow.

On top of that, there's my completely out of control hormones. I can't even tell how much of what I'm thinking and feeling is warranted and how much is the result of my completely out of whack emotions. It's bad enough Ryder already made a rash decision he ended up regretting. I don't want to do the same thing. He means too much.

"I'm all messed up."

"You're the least messed up person I ever met." The hand he rubs in circles over my back is a gift. It loosens tightness I hadn't even noticed. I had my muscles locked up. I can even breathe more deeply now, and the wave of breathtaking emotion that overwhelmed me moments ago subsides.

I bury my face in his neck and breathe deep, like I can soak him into me somehow. "I don't know. I feel pretty messy right now."

"That's because I'm a fuck-up. It's not your fault."

"You wouldn't have asked for the trade if I hadn't broken up with you guys."

"You were trying to do the right thing."

"So were you," I remind him. "I know your heart was in the right place."

Laughter rumbles in his chest. "Maybe that's the problem. Maybe my heart needs to be in the wrong place from now on."

A wave of love sweeps over me, and it's intense enough to force the words out. "I have to tell you something." I pull back, determined to get it over with. I don't know if I'll forgive myself if I don't tell him.

"I'm all ears." Gray eyes search my face while he dries my tears with his thumbs.

“I...” I still don’t have the guts. I blurted that out without thinking. It doesn’t seem right, telling him when it’s just the two of us. I should wait until we’re all together.

“What is it? You can tell me anything. I mean it.” And he does, and I can tell. His whole sweet, understanding heart is on display, shining through his eyes and his gentle words, through his tender touch.

There’s no taking this back. No pretending it was a joke. And it could make an already complicated situation a hundred times worse. I know that. Which is why I can’t bring myself to get it over with. There’s no turning back the clock or wiping the slate clean.

“You know, I think this is something I should tell all three of you at once.”

Okay, he’s bound to figure it out now, right? I mean what could this possibly be about? The sort of thing I would want to tell all three of them at the same time. What could it be other than an unexpected pregnancy? Then again, as far as they’re concerned, we’re covered. I’m on the pill, we’re safe. I mean, I certainly believed it. I can’t blame them for not jumping to that conclusion.

He looks at the clock on the nightstand and frowns. “It’s pretty late. My flight’s at six, and Ash is supposed to drive me to the airport...”

“But you’re leaving in the morning, and I really have to talk to all of you at once.”

“Fine.” He’s obviously confused and concerned, but he grabs his phone and calls Soren, then Ash. “She said it’s important,” he murmurs to Ash— it’s just like him to ask why, even though Soren was agreeable without asking questions.

The whole thing only takes a few minutes, and afterward he tosses his phone onto the bed. “They’re on the way over. I’ve got to finish up here. I hope you don’t mind if I keep packing.”

“Of course, I don’t mind. Let me help you.”

He stops me before I can get up. “No, that’s alright. You just stay there, relax.”

But I can't relax. Pretty soon, he'll understand why. My body is humming with adrenaline, and the questions and fears and worries that have run through my head ever since I took the test are just as loud and demanding of my attention as ever. Who could sit still through something like this? I have to settle for pacing up and down the hallway, chewing my nails, running through countless scenarios in my head.

There are so many *what if's*. What if they hate me for it? What if they accuse me of doing this on purpose? All the same questions and fears I've battled for days, only now the fear is more immediate. Only a few minutes, and I'll have to fess up. I mean, what's the alternative? Telling them I was only kidding and they can go home and go to bed? Something tells me that wouldn't fly – especially with Ash, who has yet to master the art of going along to get along.

All the doors to the spare rooms are open, and the emptiness on the other side makes my eyes well up all over again. He's really going. I know how much he loves this house and how proud he was of it. It's been the symbol of everything he's achieved. Of how far he's come from the kid wearing somebody else's equipment. The sad part is, as the team therapist, this is the kind of conversation we should be having at a time like this. I should be here addressing his emotional needs, talking it out with him. My job, in other words.

But no, I'm here to make things even more complicated.

I'm on the verge of a breakdown, counting the seconds, wishing they'd hurry so I can get this over with – but as soon as the doorbell rings, I wish I had more time. I don't know if there's enough time to prepare myself for this. I guess there's no preparing for it, ever, and all anybody can do is get through it. I just never expected to be one of those people.

"I'll get it." Ryder gives me one last concerned look before jogging downstairs. All I can do is bounce up and down on the balls of my feet and shake my hands out and hope I can get through this without puking or sobbing or both.

Considering my track record lately, it's not looking too good.

## HARLOW

**I**t's now or never. I have to get this over with. I walk slowly downstairs, psyching myself up, breathing deeply. I can do this. I'm in control here. Whatever happens, happens. But they love me. I believe that. And I love them. And I know that's enough to get us through this.

At the very least, I hope with all my heart that it is.

“Man, if you want a ride to the airport in the morning, you can't bring me out here at this time of night.” Good to know Ash is in his typical pleasant mood. This does not give me much confidence.

“For real.” Even Soren sounds irritable, which is unusual. “I mean, we'll miss you and everything, but does this require a late night visit?”

“This wasn't my idea. Don't take it out on me.” When he hears my footsteps, Ryder looks up from the entryway, and so do the others.

“Holy shit. Are you all right?” Right away, Ash meets me at the foot of the stairs, and all his complaints are forgotten.

“Here's a hot tip. Don't say that kind of thing with so much horror on your face unless you want to make a girl feel really bad about herself.” I'm smiling as much as I can, hoping to ease his worries before I inevitably set them off all over again. I mean, I don't expect any of them to be thrilled. I know they'll be alright, that in the end we'll all be okay, but I'm not deluded. There won't be any singing and dancing over this announcement.

“No offense,” Soren offers with a wince. “But you’ve looked better. Did this dipshit say something to upset you?” He jerks his thumb toward Ryder, who growls.

“Don’t look at me,” he insists, raising his hands into the air. “I’ve been trying to figure out what’s bothering her ever since she showed up here out of nowhere.”

“Why don’t we go to the living room?” I suggest, because doing this here seems wrong somehow. And I get the feeling they should be sitting down, just in case. I can’t imagine anybody, like, fainting... but I’m not trying to tempt fate, either. It wouldn’t be much fun trying to explain to Coach Kozak how somebody ended up with a concussion after bouncing their head off the floor.

Soren narrows his eyes. “This doesn’t sound good.”

“For heaven’s sake. If you’re in such a hurry to get this over with, maybe you should stop arguing with me.”

“Let’s just go.” Ryder waves us through the house. I couldn’t be more grateful, since I’m not sure what I would do if they offered more resistance. I might blurt out the news just to shock them into listening.

Ash flops down on the sofa – he will not be satisfied until everybody knows just how annoyed he is at being dragged out here with no explanation. Soren sits at the other end, leaning forward like he is literally on the edge of his seat. For once, he’s not joking around, being sarcastic. Maybe he senses how important this is.

Ryder lowers himself into a leather easy chair before sighing softly. “We’re here. And I’ve been going crazy, trying to figure out what it is you want to say.”

“I know, and I’m sorry I worried you. I don’t want to worry anybody. Especially at a time like this, with everything changing and in flux.”

Ash scrubs a hand over his face. “You’re starting to freak me out. What’s the matter?”

“Let her talk and she’ll tell you,” Ryder mutters.

“Wow, Dad. Thanks for the advice.”

This is going nowhere. I need to get a grip on myself and force the words out, or else I will never get the courage together.

“Please. You’re not helping.” I stare at Ash until he groans and rolls his eyes. “This isn’t easy for me to say.”

“Just spit it out.” Someone’s watching me closely, studying me. His gaze is so intense, I wonder if he somehow knows what I’m trying to confess.

He’s right. All I have to do is spit it out. Just put it out there in the open and get it over with. The chips will fall where the chips fall. No matter what happens, I can handle it.

Or so I tell myself before my stomach decides to start doing cartwheels. All at once my throat fills, and I know my mouth is next before I clap a hand over it and look around wildly.

A hand clamped over the mouth is pretty much the international symbol for *I’m about to puke my guts up, and I need somewhere to put it.*

“Shit!” Ryder jumps to his feet like he wants to help but I can’t wait for that. My body takes over and I run for the stairs, pounding up them before I throw myself toward the bathroom next to Ryder’s room.

Well. I wanted to break the news, right? This is as good a way as any to do it, I guess. Not exactly dignified, but dignity is not exactly my highest priority right now. Not when I’m too busy focusing on getting all of my vomit into the toilet and not all over myself.

After what feels like forever, the almost violent spasms start to subside and I can breathe without gagging. Still, I don’t feel confident enough to stand. Not yet. I flush but stay in place, leaning over the bowl just in case.

If there’s one thing worse than throwing up, it’s throwing up with an audience. “Shit. What do you think it is?” That’s Ash, and he’s standing way too close to the bathroom door for my comfort. How would he like it if I hung around while he was throwing up?



“How the hell should I know?” Ryder whispers. “Do I look like a doctor?”

“She’s obviously sick. Did she say anything to you about being sick?” Soren asks.

“No. She didn’t say anything to me,” Ash insists.

“If I knew something, don’t you think I would tell you?” Ryder mutters.

“Genius.” Ash snickers. “Did it occur to you that maybe this is what she wanted to tell us? Like, maybe this is the big deal.”

I feel bad. I should set them straight, since they sound a little more worried with every word they exchange. But every time I take a gulp of air, prepared to calm them down, a wave of nausea steals my voice. I can’t possibly have anything more to throw up, can I? I’m pretty sure I threw up a kidney just now.

“Oh, hell. That makes sense.” Ryder mutters a few choice words. “How am I supposed to leave with this going on back here? I’ll have to quit. I’m not leaving her when she’s sick.”

“Stop jumping to conclusions,” Soren tells him. “Just because she’s nauseated doesn’t mean she’s dying.”

This is almost funny. Listening to the three of them talk in circles, freaking themselves and each other out. I love them, but they have a habit of feeding off each other’s energy until I don’t know whether I want to laugh or bang their heads together to get through to them.

“But what if she is?” Ash whispers. He’s standing closest to the door, so I hear him clearly. “You know? What if she didn’t want Ryder to go without saying something?”

“You know what? She did ask me one more time to stay. If there were any way I could make it happen, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, hell.” Now Soren is starting to sound genuinely worried. “But let’s be fair. She doesn’t want you to go. That’s not any big secret.”

“It was more the way it sounded like a last-ditch effort.”

“What if she has cancer?” Ash murmurs.

“What?” Ryder whispers. “Don’t even say that.”

“I’m just saying. What if it is? She is different lately. I’ve been worried about something like this.”

“What kind of cancer makes somebody throw up?” Ryder wants to know.

“I don’t know. Stomach, maybe?”

Alright. I feel like it’s time to put an end to this before they have me admitted to an oncology unit. “Oh, my God,” I groan, lifting my head and looking over my shoulder into their worried faces. “It’s not cancer. I’m pregnant, you idiots.”

## ASH

**C**ertain moments, you remember for the rest of your life. Where you were standing, what you were doing. What you were eating, wearing, thinking. Feeling.

I'm nobody's idea of an old man, but I have plenty of those moments stuck in my memory. The first time I ever scored a goal when I was eight years old. The exhilaration, the cheers from the fans – parents, mostly. A single moment set me up for a lifetime of chasing that thrill again. Hearing those cheers and knowing they were for me. I was the reason everybody jumped to their feet and screamed their heads off.

And there's more, so many more. Making varsity. Winning the state championship in high school. Getting signed to the Raptors. Hell, even finding out I was getting sent up to Seattle with a two-way contract – it didn't matter that the arrangement wasn't permanent. It was another goal knocked down.

Then there's the personal moments. When I got home from school one day, and my parents sat me down to tell me my grandfather died. When a friend of mine in middle school got sick, really sick, the kind of sickness that makes you miss the rest of the school year and gets your classmates wondering if the same thing could happen to them.

The moment I first set eyes on Harlow. There she was, throwing her arms overhead on the dance floor. It didn't matter that she was by herself. It didn't matter if people were watching. She was in the moment, totally free. I think that's what grabbed my attention and held it. She was so refreshing.

Hot, yes, but real. I had no idea the rest of my life would hinge on that moment. I could never have guessed it would lead me here.

Here in this new moment I'll never forget. I'm wearing a gray T-shirt and loose fitting black shorts. I jammed my feet into a pair of trainers without putting on socks first. Ryder's bathroom smells like some fake apple scented air freshener shit—and puke. There is a definite puke aroma hanging in the air as Harlow fights her way to her feet after throwing up a little more and flushing the toilet.

I'm here, but I'm not here. Like part of my brain completely shut down on hearing those words. Maybe I imagined them. Or it was something my brain made up to ease my fear over her maybe being sick.

When I look at Ryder and Soren, though, that theory goes out the window. Unless they also imagined her using those words. Maybe it's some sort of group hallucination.

Or maybe she really is pregnant.

“Is this for real?” Ryder's face would be funny if this weren't so serious. I've never seen him look so shocked, like a bomb had been dropped on his head. He looks around like he's waiting for somebody to deliver the punchline. Or like he hopes somebody will. Because the idea of this being for real is a little too much to handle.

Pregnant? A baby? I can't imagine it.

From the looks of things, Harlow doesn't have the luxury of saying she can't imagine it, since she is the one leaning against the sink after rinsing her mouth and washing her face. Now that she's flipped on the lights, I wonder how I missed her pale complexion – or that could be the nausea making her look that way now. It's not like I didn't already pick up on cues that there was something different about her. I had no way of guessing how different she was.

“Sorry.” Soren tries to laugh, but it comes out, sounding, choked and unsteady. “I'm thinking I might have blanked out

for a second there... Unless you really just said... what I think you said.”

“It’s not a dirty word,” she points out. “Pregnant. I’m pregnant. And I feel sick, and I’m exhausted.”

This, I can do something about. This, I can help with. “Here, let’s sit you down.” I go to her and reach out, placing her hand on her hip, and the other one on her shoulder before turning her in place. “Do you think maybe you’ll get sick again?”

Over my shoulder, I ask Ryder, “Do you have a trashcan or a bucket or something?”

“I don’t think I’ll need it,” she murmurs, but I’m not convinced. I saw how suddenly it overtook her. One second, she seemed fine, and the next she was running around with her hand over her mouth and hurling her guts up.

“Do you have, like, crackers or ginger ale?” Soren follows us, standing next to Ryder’s bed while I pull back the blankets so Harlow can lie down.

“I don’t think I need all that.” She’s gentle and sweet, smiling up at me when she sits down. “But thank you. Sorry if I grossed you guys out. Or, you know... freaked you out.”

Ryder blurts out a laugh from the doorway. “Freaked me out? What gave you that idea?”

“At least we know it’s not cancer or anything like that,” Soren points out.

“But it’s still a foreign invader in my body.” She rests a hand over her flat stomach and a cold chill runs through me. It’s not disgust or anger or anything like that. There’s no distaste.

I just can’t get used to the idea, is all. I mean, I’ve only known about it for less than five minutes, so I guess nobody could blame me for feeling shaken up and unsure of just about everything.

“How long have you known?” Soren folds his arms, looking stern. I hope I can catch his eye, since somebody needs to tell him to loosen up. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was pissed off. Body language goes a long way, and she doesn’t

need to be upset. Not in her condition. Damn, I can't believe I just thought that.

"Not long. Only a few days, and I'm not very far along." She looks around helplessly, like she's afraid we won't believe her. "I haven't been trying to keep it a secret. I just haven't known how to bring it up. Especially when Ryder told me he's getting traded, and..."

"And now you're pregnant." Ryder leans against the door frame like he's propping it up — or it's keeping him upright, either way... "No wonder you were upset. Is that why you got sick?"

"Honestly, I thought you'd figure it out right away."

"Yeah, maybe I would have if I thought it was possible."

"I swear." If she folded her hands and held them out like she was praying, she couldn't look more desperate. "I didn't do this on purpose. I was taking the pill religiously. I'm just as surprised as anybody."

I can't believe she would even think any of us would jump to that conclusion. "I would never accuse you of that."

"Neither would I," Soren quickly agrees. He finally loosens up a little, too, unfolding his arms and jamming his hand into his pockets. "We know you better."

"You don't have to worry about me ever thinking that about you." Ryder is the quietest for once. He's usually the one whose voice fills the room, but now it's barely a whisper. I don't think it has anything to do with lack of trust, or not believing her. He feels guiltier than ever. That's how I would feel. I'd be worried sick about stressing her out, hurting the baby somehow. Hurting her. And the idea of having so many miles between us... I don't think I could handle it. I'm sure all of that and more is going through his head.

Soren sits next to her and drapes an arm around her shoulders. She leans against him with a soft sigh that tells me how grateful she is. "Listen. No matter what happens, no matter what you decide to do, you have my full support."

Right. I didn't think of that, either. She hasn't even said whether she wants to keep the baby or not, and I'm sure there's no way of knowing which of us is the father. Not yet. Not this early on.

I want to support her, too. I'm behind her all the way. I meant it when I said I love her. She means the world to me.

But a baby? How the hell am I supposed to be a father? How are any of us? What would that look like? Things are complicated enough without adding a baby to the mix. I mean, we're not allowed to be in an open, public relationship during the season. What, are we supposed to do, pretend we don't know she's pregnant and one of us had something to do with it?

Ryder finally steps into the room and sits on the corner of the bed. "Have you thought about it at all? What to do next?"

"I'm still not sure what I want to do." Her hands are in her lap, her fingers fluttering while she fidgets and picks at her nails. She stares down at them and presses her lips together tightly before murmuring, "But I'm leaning toward keeping it. Would that be alright with all of you?"

**RYDER**

She keeps hitting me. Not with her fists, but with her words. She's rocking my world, shaking me up like a snow globe. Right now, the snow is swirling too thick and too fast for me to see anything clearly.

A baby. She's going to have a baby. And she wants to keep it.

"What do you think?" she asks when one moment passes after another and nobody has said anything yet. I can tell she takes the question seriously. She knows how heavy all of this is and how impossible it feels to make any sense of it.

"About this, or about kids in general?" Ash asks. He even has the nerve to roll his eyes at me when I give him a dirty look, but really. Maybe now isn't the time to be a smart ass.

"Well, now that you mention it." She folds her hands and looks up at him. "How do you feel about kids? It's not like we've ever talked about it. We never had a reason to."

"Kids in general, I'm fine with."

Something close to pain crosses her face, and I swear I could strangle him. I would, too, if I didn't know he was just as lost in all of this as I am. When you're this lost, you don't always take the time to ask yourself if you're using the right words.

He finally figures out he's made a mistake when Soren and I glare at him. "I'm just saying." He runs a hand through his hair and shrugs. "I don't mind kids. Would it be better if I said I hate them? Some people do. Some people decide they never want to have kids, and that's it. I'm not one of those people."



“That’s good to hear.” She lets out a shaky little laugh before nudging Soren, who chooses the exact wrong moment to drop his arm from around her shoulders. She flinches, and it makes me flinch. I swear, the things I would say if she weren’t here right now. They both need to know how stupid and awkward they’re being. And I’m supposed to leave her alone with them for months? Like I need one more thing to worry about.

“I guess I like kids.” He shrugs and shoots me a frantic sort of look over the top of her head. “This is the first time I ever really thought about them this way. They’ve always been somebody else’s kids. Somebody else’s problem.”

It’s a relief when Harlow snickers at that. “I know. Believe me, none of you are saying anything I haven’t already thought. You don’t have to feel bad for feeling the way you do. I’m not expecting you to, like, shed happy tears or something. You don’t have to worry about hurting my feelings, either.”

She offers a hopeful smile as she looks around the room. “I know you would never deliberately hurt my feelings.”

“I hate thinking about you going through this alone, even for a few days.” I move a little closer, then put an arm around her. She must’ve been so scared. When I try to put myself in her shoes, it seems too much to comprehend. She would already be going through it with a surprise pregnancy – I know she has plans, goals, all of that.

But this isn’t exactly a typical sort of situation. It’s so much more complex for her. For all of us, I guess.

What I want more than anything is to give her a little comfort, so she knows she’s not alone in this. This is the last night we’ll be spending together until the end of the season, so I want to do all I can. Anything, so long as she knows she’s not losing me. I’m not going anywhere.

It’s like she feels what I’m thinking as she turns my way, wearing a wry grin. “What about you? Do you like kids? Did you ever plan on being a parent one day?”

“I haven’t planned what I’m going to eat for breakfast tomorrow.”

It's good to hear her laugh, and it's good to see the relief that spreads itself across her face. The air in the room doesn't feel so thick anymore, either. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Please." Ash chuckles as he jerks his chin in my direction. "This guy? No offense, but he barely gets along with the rest of the team. I shudder to think about how a kid would get on his nerves."

"You get on my nerves, and I haven't killed you yet." I don't really appreciate it, but I understand he's only trying to joke around so Harlow feels better. That's what matters more than anything right now. That she not feel bad about this, that she not be afraid. I don't know a lot about babies or pregnancy or anything like that, but I know it's better if the mother isn't super stressed. So I'll take his sarcasm and let it roll off my back for her sake.

"And to tell you the truth," I continue as my hand starts moving in circles over her back, "I like kids. I really do. I don't love people – like adults. They generally get on my nerves and can really suck. Especially when they act like sarcastic douchebags."

"Do you think he's talking about me?" Ash asks Soren, who snorts.

"But kids are great. I've lived with kids of all different ages. Some families had little ones, kids who were younger than me, and they were a lot of fun. They are so honest. Sometimes, they come out with things that are so wise it's scary. I've always liked spending time with kids."

"You're still a big kid, yourself."

I can only shrug at Harlow's comment. "Yeah. I guess I am." Then my rubbing slows down when a pretty important fact comes to mind. "I don't know how to be a dad. Not a good one. I never really had an example. There were a couple of decent guys, but I was never around them long enough to learn anything. Always getting moved to the next home for one reason or another."

“That doesn’t have to mean anything.” She squeezes my knee and narrows her eyes, looking straight at me. “I need you to believe that. Not just now, but for the rest of your life. I know you would do your best. You would always try to do the right thing.”

I shouldn’t laugh, but something close to it comes out of me before I can stop myself. “Yeah, just like I was trying to do the right thing by asking for a trade out of Palm Springs.”

“Nobody’s perfect.” Soren tries to offer an understanding grin that feels more sympathetic than anything. Like he feels sorry for me. I’ve never been a fan of pity.

“And hey,” Harlow offers. “Look at the example I had of motherhood. I know my mom does her best, and sometimes that’s the only thing that keeps me from strangling her. I don’t have the first idea how to raise a baby or be a good mom or any of that. I doubt anybody does the first time around. It’s the sort of thing you have to learn on the job.”

“You’ll be great at it.” Now Soren rubs her shoulder while I continue tracing circles on her back with the palm of my hand. “Just like you’re great at everything.”

“I don’t know about that.” She rests her head on my shoulder and sighs, and I feel the fatigue in that sigh. It’s like it comes from all the way down in her toes. I guess pregnancy can make people tired, but I get the feeling it has more to do with the whole situation. At least now she knows she’s safe – I hate to think that she ever questioned whether or not she was, but this is reality. And I’m sure there are plenty of relationships that started out just great until something like this came along and upset everything.

“So long as you guys don’t hate me for this.”

“How could you even say that?” Ash manages somehow to sound angry. I know that’s not what he’s going for, but anybody who didn’t know him would probably think he was pretty pissed, sounding like he does.

“I told you that you had nothing to worry about, and I was wrong. I promise, I really did take my pill every day.”

“Things happen.” I would tell her about all the kids out there who grew up the way I did, all the evidence of how birth control isn’t always foolproof. I’m sure she doesn’t need to hear about that now, so I’ll keep it to myself. “And hey, it’s not like none of us played a part in it. It’s not like you, like, stole our seed or whatever you wanna call it.”

“Seriously.” Soren squeezes her shoulder. “Nobody is blaming this on you. If we didn’t trust you, we wouldn’t be with you. And that’s the truth.”

“Agreed,” Ash adds with a firm nod.

Harlow lifts her head from my shoulder and places it on Soren’s, instead. “Thank you. I’m sorry I blurted it out like I did, but I guess that’s how this needed to go. I needed to get the courage to tell you. I’m so glad you know.”

So am I. I’m glad she told me before I left.

Even if it means taking a situation that already sucked and making it suck so much worse.

**ASH**

I swear. Sometimes, it's like we're living in two different worlds.

Where they are, all happy and supportive and loving, and whatever. And sure, I want to be supportive. I want to make sure she knows I love her and that's not going to change because of this.

But this is real life. This isn't some fairytale where we will all live happily ever after just because that's how we feel it should be. Life doesn't work that way. Hell, I would think Ryder, of all people, would agree with me on that. But there he is, and there's Soren, and neither of them are thinking about the future. Not really.

"No offense." I wait until the three of them look at me. "But maybe we need to talk seriously about what happens next. What all of this means."

"Do we really need to talk about the whole future right now? Isn't there enough going on?"

All I can do is scoff at Ryder's question. "There's always going to be shit going on. That's life. Things aren't going to just stop happening because we want them to. And I'm sorry, but I think we need to talk about the real logistics of this."

How can they sit there and look at me like I'm talking out of my ass? Am I not speaking English? "I'm sorry to burst your bubble," I mutter, "but this is a big deal, and we need to treat it that way."

This is coming out all wrong. With every word I only sound angrier. I don't want her to think I'm angry. I don't want to hurt her.

The way her forehead wrinkles and her mouth turns down at the corners tells me I'm fucking it all up, no matter what my intentions are. "You're right. We need to take this seriously. You are not telling me anything I don't already know."

"You really don't need to rub it in our faces, man." Soren looks disappointed. Like he's scolding a kid. Practicing for fatherhood already? I'm not sure how to feel about that.

"But I mean, can we look at this logically? Can we do that without anybody biting my head off?"

"What do you mean?" The guys still look pissed, but Harlow is reasonable. "What are you thinking? Talk to me. I want to hear it."

The thing is, now I don't want to say it out loud. Not with the three of them staring at me like they are. "Well, for one thing, we're all talking about how we feel about kids like we're all going to be the parents."

"And?" Now I'm starting to think Soren is deliberately trying to get under my skin. No way is he genuinely looking at me with so much confusion.

"And... not all of us are parents. I mean, do I have to say it? Only one of the three of us can be the father."

"Oh, is that how it works? Thanks, I had no idea." Ryder and Soren exchange looks behind Harlow's back.

Harlow only stares at me. "Yes, I know. Only one of you is the father."

"Well? Doesn't that matter?"

I have faced guys much bigger than me all my life. Stronger, faster. It doesn't matter how good you get. There's always going to be somebody better than you, somebody bigger and more skilled and intimidating.

But there is nothing in this world as intimidating as a woman when she goes completely still and deathly silent. The way she

is now. Only the gentle rise and fall of her shoulders tells me she's still breathing. Otherwise, she could be a mannequin sitting on Ryder's bed.

Something tells me I said the wrong thing.

"Why don't you say what you're really wondering, Ash? You've danced around the subject enough. Come out and say it. You want to know which one of you is the father. The biological father," she adds, emphasizing the word.

"Is that such a crime? Should I be hanged for wanting to know whether or not the kid you're carrying is my biological child?" I have to throw my hands into the air as I bark out a disbelieving laugh. "You can't tell me I'm the only one thinking about this."

She stands slowly, never breaking eye contact. "You think that wasn't one of the first things that came to my head? There won't be any way of knowing which of you is the father unless we run a DNA test. I googled it, in case you were wondering. And it is possible after the eighth week, from what I understand."

She narrows her eyes and tips her head to the side and I feel roughly six inches tall. "I was hoping that wouldn't be one of the first things you've asked about, is all."

"I'm not saying I would walk away if the baby isn't mine, Harlow."

"Then what are you saying, Ash?"

"Maybe there shouldn't be any fighting about this," Ryder murmurs.

We both ignore him. "Are you telling me you wouldn't want to have anything to do with the baby? I get it if that's how you feel. I just wish you would say it out loud and get it over with."

Is that what I'm saying? "You're jumping too far into the future."

"You're the one saying we're not acting like we're living in reality," Soren points out as if I'd asked for his opinion.

“I just don’t understand how you expect me to act like I had any part in this if I didn’t have any part in this.”

“I thought we were all in this together. This relationship. Obviously, this sort of thing can happen. You had to know there was at least a slim chance of this happening at some point.”

“It doesn’t matter what I knew was possible. There was a whole other ninety-nine percent chance it wasn’t ever going to happen. And maybe, just maybe, at some point down the line, we would discuss how to handle something like this. If you wanted a baby, if one of us wanted to be a father. A biological father,” I add just in case there’s any confusion.

“You know what?” With her hands on her hips, she throws her head back and gives me a look that is equal parts infuriating and mind-blowingly sexy. She’s regal, like a duchess or a queen. And she’s staring at one of her subjects like I’m the most useless thing ever born. “You’re going to have to decide for yourself if you are okay with the baby not being yours. That is your issue to work out in your own time, however it feels best for you. But no matter what, I am not letting your opinion influence my decision. If you decide you don’t want to have anything to do with the baby or with me, that’s up to you. But I am the one who’s going to go through this pregnancy. I’m the one whose body and life and career will bear most of the brunt. That’s just how it is. I don’t make the rules – unfortunately. You’ll still be able to play hockey. You’ll get to live your dreams while I’m the one who’s accused of either neglecting my career or my child, no matter what I try to do.”

Soren puffs out his cheeks as he blows out a deep sigh. Ryder squeezes his eyes shut, rubbing his temples.

And what do I do? The only thing I can do when I miss her so much. When it’s been so long since I held her, touched her, kissed her.

She goes stiff in surprise when I take her face in my hands and press my lips to hers — hard, fierce. I use my kiss to say all the things I can’t find it in me to say. How much I don’t want to screw this up. How it scares the shit out of me to think



about a future that includes not only all of us, but a baby. How I can't imagine living in a world where three guys raising a baby as theirs wouldn't raise eyebrows — at the least. At the very least.

How I want to be with her no matter what.

Once the first second of surprise passes, my heart threatens to explode when she kisses me back. Her tongue slides against mine before she melts into me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me down to kiss me harder, to rake her fingers through my hair and press her body to mine.

The bed springs creak and I break the kiss in a hurry. Maybe that wasn't the right thing to do, since we aren't supposed to be involved like this right now. I'm not trying to start a fight. "Shit, I'm—"

My apology goes silent when Soren grips Harlow's jaw in his hand and replaces my lips with his. His kiss is slower, sensual, and pretty soon they're both sighing and holding each other close. I might not be part of it, but I feel the intensity. I feel how much he wants her to know she's safe and loved. I know it because I feel the same way. Like nothing matters more than showing her how protected and wanted she is. We are together. That hasn't changed. She's not going to go through this alone.

They're both breathing hard when they come up for air, and I'm not surprised when she turns toward Ryder next. He hasn't moved, sitting on the bed with the oddest look of confusion on his face. Like he's wondering if there's a joke nobody let him in on, that sort of thing.

She sits down, then touches a hand to his cheek to turn his face toward hers. He doesn't make it easy, grunting and frowning. "We're not supposed to be doing this." I hear the way he's struggling. Speaking through gritted teeth. Going against his natural impulse because he wants to do the right thing. I respect him for that.

I also think he's a complete idiot. Sometimes, there're more important things than following the rules. Of all people, I would think he knows that.

“You think I’m going to let you go all the way to Minnesota without at least kissing you one more time?” He tries again to turn his face away, but she is determined. She won’t let go.

It was a waste of time, trying to fight what his body and soul need more than anything. He’s still hesitant, though, kissing her gently once she breaks down his defenses. It doesn’t take long for things to heat up, and soon he’s clutching her, holding her tight like he’s afraid to lose her if he lets go.

I understand the feeling. I’m fighting it here and now, and I’m not the one flying to Minnesota tomorrow.

## HARLOW

It's like trying to hold sand in my cupped hands and not let a single grain fall through. Impossible, in other words. It's impossible to keep him here with me no matter how hard I kiss him, no matter how tightly I hold him. He's going to slip through my hands in the end. That doesn't stop me from trying.

All of his hesitation is gone, replaced by a fierce, deep kiss that lights me up inside in a way Ash's and Soren's didn't. Not that I wasn't practically dying for a physical reminder of how they're feeling, what they're thinking, whether they still want me. I needed that more than anything, I think. A little reassurance after days of being so scared, dreading the possibility of being abandoned.

I know they love me, but love has gone up in a puff of smoke over less than this. And to this day, there's still a part of me that can't believe they think I'm worth making the sort of sacrifices for that they have. Sharing. Keeping secrets. So yes, I was scared. I was in need of a little reassurance.

The thing is, I've known from the beginning that there's no quenching my need when it comes to them. There's no amount of kissing that will ever be enough to tire me out or fill the bottomless well of desire. Every kiss makes me greedy for more. Every touch against my clothes makes me angry that I'm wearing clothes at all. I want to feel them on my bare skin. I want to soak them in, all of them.

Rather than break the kiss before things go too far, I offer no resistance when Ryder leans over me, pressing me against the bed until I'm flat on my back with my feet on the floor. I roll onto my side and drape a leg over his, drawing it between my thighs before I bury my hands in his hair and grip tight. His tongue moves against mine, and he groans into my mouth as my heart swells with joy.

And once Soren lies down behind me, I think it might burst. He runs his hand over my thigh and caresses the curve of my ass before digging his fingers into my flesh with a deep grunt. His breath is hot against my neck, hot and welcome. A sign of his desire. He still wants me.

I turn my head to meet his kiss, and Ryder settles for nuzzling my neck. Good, so good. I reach behind me and take Soren by the back of his head, scratching my nails over his scalp until his helpless moans unlock warmth in my core that results in a flood of wetness in my panties. The intensity of my reaction surprises me in the small part of my brain still capable of rational thought. Usually it doesn't take much to light my fire, but this is ridiculous. Hormones, I guess. And from what I've already read, it's only going to get more intense as time goes on.

I sense Ash's presence on the other side of the bed, above where my head rests. When I come up for air, he's there, hovering over me. I take a taste of his lips before going back to Ryder, then Soren, drinking in every lingering kiss, every touch. Hands slide over my body, while my wandering hands brush against hard pecs and even harder erections. It's an old, familiar dance, one the three of us have mastered.

I wish I could let myself give in completely. I wish there were no hesitation. No dread or lingering dismay. I made a promise. No, nobody in this room would tell the coach I broke my word. Nobody would have to. I would know, and that's bad enough.

I have already broken so many promises to myself, after all.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I sit up, shaking my head against their disappointed groans. The room is spinning a little and my

heart thuds frantically against my ribs while the rest of my body is basically throwing a revolt. I'm flushed, aching. But it doesn't matter. It can't matter.

"I made a promise." When the three of them sigh almost in unison, I have to grit my teeth and deal with it rather than give in to my desire to make them happy.

"Well, I can't think of many things that could kill a boner faster than thinking about Mitch Kozak." Ryder flops back onto the bed and we laugh together because he's right. It's more effective than a cold shower.

"Dammit, it's so late," Ash groans as he stretches out diagonally across the mattress. He folds his hands on top of his stomach and sighs. "It doesn't make any sense to drive all the way home, then come back here in like five hours."

"You might as well stay here," Ryder offers. "You're right. It doesn't make sense to drive home and back."

He sits up and looks around with a soft, mournful sigh. "I'm pretty much finished with the packing, anyway. I can throw a few more things into boxes and be done with it."

"Do you want me to stick around here tomorrow until the movers show up?" I ask.

"That would be helpful. Thank you."

Soren lets out an enormous yawn. "I'm wiped. Let's try to get some sleep. I'll pack up whatever is left when we get up."

It's sweet, how genuinely grateful Ryder looks. "Thank you guys. For real, thank you. This is the first time I've ever felt like I had a support system in place. Like I don't have to handle everything on my own."

"Don't think I won't come up with a way for you to pay me back," Ash warns with a smirk. I know he doesn't mean it—at least, I hope he doesn't. But one ever knows when it comes to these guys. They've been busting each other's balls since long before I ever showed up.

It's one of those things we don't need to discuss out loud. It simply makes sense for the four of us to arrange ourselves

after kicking off our shoes and settling in together. Like before, Ryder and Soren lie on either side of me, while Ash is stretched out perpendicular to me, his head close to mine, his hand stroking my hair. At some point I drift off to sleep without trying. And for the first time in days, I'm at peace. Sure, I know all of my troubles haven't been solved – there will be plenty more challenges, and I'll have to face them without Ryder at my side. But he'll be back, and until then, I know Ash and Soren will take care of me. Finally, I know we'll get through this.

I'm dreaming about rocking a baby to sleep when a soft voice works its way into my subconscious and pulls me out of sleep. "Would it matter to you if you weren't the father?"

I keep my eyes closed. It's not like I'm trying to trick anybody. But I would like to know the answer to Ryder's question, whispered to the others. I would like to hear the truth without it being softened for my sake.

"Honestly?" Ash whispers back. "At first, I was freaked out."

"No shit," Soren murmurs. His breath stirs the hair at the nape of my neck but I pretend it doesn't register.

"Now that I've thought about it a little," Ash continues, "I don't think it would. I mean, if she wants us to all raise the baby together. It wouldn't bother me if I weren't the biological dad."

"So you would do that?" Soren asks. There's a lot of disbelief in his voice. I don't know whether that's because he doesn't believe Ash, or he can't relate.

"I mean... it won't be simple. I know that. The world can really suck."

"Maybe you need to stop worrying so much about the world," Ryder suggests.

"Cute," Ash retorts, "but that's easier said than done, and we all know it. Let's be real here. I want to believe in fairytales and miracles as much as the two of you, but we have to be rational. This is another life we're talking about. We have to do what's right for the kid."

“You’re not going to hear me argue with that,” Ryder sounds so serious, and I guess I understand why. His past has to be coloring his thoughts and reactions. It’s only natural.

“But if it means all of us being together, sort of being a family?” I hold my breath and wait for Ash to finish his thought. *Please, don’t let me down.* “Yeah. I can see raising the kid together.”

“Hell, it could make things easier in a lot of ways.” Soren is the more levelheaded, and always ready to look for the positive side of things. “More hands for feedings and changing, and all that.”

“And this kid’s not going to want for anything,” Ryder firmly insists. “Clothes, equipment, attention. They’re going to have everything.” He almost sounds angry, like he’s waiting for somebody to challenge him. As if anybody would. I’m sure we all want what’s best, but to him, it’s personal.

“I bet they’ll be smart, like she is,” Soren muses.

“What if they’re not into sports?” Ash wonders.

“They will be,” Ryder insists. “I mean, no matter which one of us is the father, they’ll have it in their genes.”

“Then explain where I came from,” I whisper, giggling softly when all three of them jump a little. “What, you thought I could sleep through the three of you whispering like kids at summer camp?”

“Sorry,” Ryder murmurs. “I guess being tired isn’t enough to get me to sleep.”

“I never sleep well before traveling.”

“Yeah,” Soren agrees. “And it’s not like you’re just going on vacation or whatever. You’ve got a lot going on.”

“I guess you heard what we were talking about.” Ash pushes himself up on his elbow and looks down at me. There’s a mixture of tenderness and concern visible even in the faint streetlights filtering through the blinds.

“Sure. And I honestly think it’s really cute.”

“Cute?” Soren makes a big deal of grumbling and acting offended, even though it’s all clearly an act.

“Yes, cute.” I give him a playful nudge before pulling his arm tighter around my midsection. “And it’s sweet that you’re all thinking into the future like this. It’s wonderful, it really is. I was so worried, so this feels like a miracle.”

“What is it you want?” Ryder pulls back a little, studying me. “Forget about what you think any of us might want. What do you want? How do you see this playing out?”

It’s funny. I love the three of them so much, and I have trusted them with my heart. I’ve trusted them with my future. I mean, there has to be a healthy amount of trust involved in a situation like ours. I have to believe they won’t betray me.

But I still feel hesitant and nervous. Tongue-tied, nervous. The second Ryder asked the question, the same image that came to my mind when Corey asked about my ideal scenario filled my mind again. As nerve-racking as it is to imagine, confessing my heart’s desire, I can’t bring myself to make up some watered down version of the image running through my head like something from a movie.

“I’ve been back-and-forth,” I admit softly. “One minute, I told myself I didn’t have to go through this, that I have choices. But the next, I imagine having a baby and being a mother and I get this feeling of... rightness. It seems like it makes total sense, having this baby. No matter which one of you is the father, this baby was conceived in love, and I’ll never be sorry.”

I make a point to look at all of them one at a time. “And when I imagine what life might look like, I see us. All of us together. A family. That’s what I want deep down inside. But for now, I’ll settle for saying I’ll keep the baby. Everything else after that, we can take one day at a time. But hearing the three of you talk the way you are... I know this is right. And I know the baby will be so loved. That’s a good place to start.”

“You’re loved, too.” Soren hugs me tight, while Ryder nods before kissing me gently. Ash’s lips brush the top of my head before he murmurs sweet, loving words of his own.



This is it. This is where I belong. Loved, cherished, supported. No, it doesn't look like it's supposed to—nothing ever does, and besides, thinking that way only ever leads to misery. Trying to model life after some vague idea that most lives never fit into. I tried to squeeze my life into a box that never quite fit, one labeled *Kyle*. Look where that got me.

It looked right on the surface, but it never felt right.

This does. The four of us. When we're together, there's a sense of peace and belonging I never knew was possible until I met them. All I can do is trust my gut.

"So this is it?" I ask. "You're with me?"

"Even when I'm not here, physically, I'm with you." Ryder touches his forehead to mine and closes his eyes. "I am always going to love you. That is never going to change."

"We're behind you all the way," Ash assures me.

"No matter what," Soren agrees.

"And I love you. All of you." There's a smile on my face as my eyes drift shut and sleep pulls me under again. This time, there's no whispering to wake me up. It's like we're all finally at peace.

## SOREN

Well. If anybody wondered what Ryder brought to the team, there's no need to wonder anymore.

"Dammit!" I growl when another goal leaves us down by two with only five minutes left in the third period.

Considering we haven't managed to put a point on the board yet, I don't exactly have high hopes. I'm too damn tired and sore to have high hopes, anyway. I feel like I'm doing the work of two players out here, and it's still getting us nowhere.

Our energy sucks, to put it mildly. We simply didn't have enough time to prepare for his absence. Sure, Harlow worked out a bunch of scenarios to compensate for one of us taking a two-way contract – good thing, or we'd be in worse shape than we are now.

It's just not enough. And I don't think we can chalk it up entirely to the lack of a single player. There's a different energy now. I'm trying like hell not to let it affect me, but there's only so much I can do. Turns out Ryder added more to our performance than just his abilities. He brought a sense of excitement to the game. I could always trust him to be where I needed him to be, but there were other times when he would simply explode. Like he had so much pent-up excitement, he couldn't help but let it leak onto the ice.

That's what we're missing. That excitement. That joy. It always inspired me. As many times as we've butted heads – which is a lot – there was no ignoring his unfettered joy. When playing the sport he loved so much on a professional level, he

found a way to lift all of us up. Now that he's gone, I realize he kept me on my toes and made me dig deeper and push harder because dammit, he was right. We are lucky to do what we love and get paid for it.

Right now, I'm not loving it quite so much. But then it's easy to love things when you're winning. It's when you are losing that your commitment has to be stronger than ever.

It's a relief when we're called off the ice for a breather. "What the hell," Ash grits out through his clenched teeth. "This is not our night."

"No kidding. We'll shake it off." Do I sound like I mean it? I hope so. Even if I don't quite feel it.

No surprise Ash understands what's really going on behind my halfhearted attempt at being a team player and picking up everyone's spirits. "Next thing I know," he mutters out of the corner of his mouth after dropping to the bench, "you'll be telling me about a bridge for sale."

"No one ever got anywhere with a shitty attitude."

"But let's be honest. We don't have it tonight." He leans forward, breathing hard. "We lost more than we counted on."

He's not wrong. "There's still six months left in the season. We need to adjust, but there's plenty of time to do that."

Slowly, he turns to face me, ignoring the action going on in front of us. "Don't give me that shit."

"Come on..." I groan. "He just left this morning. Of course, it'll take time to get over that. But we will."

Ash snickers and shakes his head, but he's smart enough not to argue with me anymore. It would be a waste of time. Especially here, in front of everyone else.

When I look toward the coach, his gaze darts away. He was watching us instead of the game. I have no doubt he's keenly aware of us right now. Wondering if we are going to break the conditions of our agreement and strut around like a bunch of roosters in the henhouse. One of my mother's old expressions which she used whenever she was good and angry with my

father. He was always a ladies' man. And while he never exactly demanded attention, he didn't shy away from it, either.

There's a very perverse impulse that threatens to overtake me all at once, before my good sense stops me. The idea of standing up and announcing to the coach and everyone else in earshot that Harlow is pregnant — and we don't know which of us is the father.

I have to settle for chuckling to myself at what I know would be shock and dismay. He's going to find out eventually. She's not showing yet, but she will be, and the man is not stupid. He'll put two and two together in no time, and then what?

It's safer for me to sit here and think about that than it is to think about how very little I know about babies. There's time to learn, sure, but something tells me raising kids is the kind of thing you need to do, not something you can read about. Like driving a car. No doubt the entire process could be easily described step-by-step. That's still no substitute for getting behind the wheel and doing it yourself.

So while I understand the basics of changing a diaper or giving a bath, when it comes time to deal with a squirmy little human, it'll be like starting from square one no matter how many books I read or videos I watch. And I plan to. I want to be as present and helpful as I can.

After all, I'll be here. There's no chance of going anywhere else now.

This is not the time for me to start brooding. That time will never come. I'm a grown man and I have responsibilities. Choices have consequences and all that.

It's my choice to stay. Sure, I was hoping to return to Seattle at some point this season. Unlike Ash, I had nothing but positive experiences up there—aside from our fight. Everything to do with the team and with my playing went well. Better than well. I kept my hopes to myself but have been waiting anxiously for word of whether the team would need me to come back.

What if Kozak told me after this game that the Orcas asked me to return? I couldn't go. It would rip my heart out to leave her

now. Yes, even when I don't know for sure which of us is the father. I couldn't go. Hell, I wouldn't be able to play at my best, either. Not while my thoughts would always be down here, with her. Away games will be enough of a challenge.

The final buzzer comes as a relief. Finally, we can stop bleeding out all over the ice and get our shit together. "Not your best effort, fellas." Coach Kozak heaves a sigh on the way to the locker room with the rest of us. "But it's to be expected. Once we iron out the kinks from Ryder's absence, we'll get back out there and play to our full potential."

We'd be playing to our full potential if he hadn't been stupid enough to let Ryder go. As far as I know, Ash and I are the only ones who know Ryder initiated the trade, so nobody else would hold it against our coach. It's just one of those things as far as the rest of the team is concerned.

I guess it always will be if there's any hope of pulling ourselves together and learning to play without Ryder. I wish I'd known how much he added to the team back when he was here with us.

It's not like I won't have the chance to tell him. So long as we both love Harlow, we're sort of stuck with each other. And as far as I'm concerned, that isn't going to change.

## HARLOW

“**A** lright, Harlow. Let’s see how the baby is developing.” Dr. Graves offers one of her warm, friendly smiles as she wheels her chair closer to the table I’m lying on. “Are we learning the baby’s sex today?”

“No. I want it to be a surprise.” Out of the many questions that have popped up over the past six months, that’s one I don’t have to think about as the doctor lifts my shirt a little to squirt gel on my belly. The guys and I are in agreement. We want to wait.

After all, we know what it means to wait. We’ve been waiting for months to touch each other and counting the days until the season’s over. I’ve literally crossed the days off on a calendar in my office, willing time to move faster. But that meant flying through my pregnancy, too. Now there’s one month to go before I’m officially a mom.

And only hours to go before the season’s over. Tonight’s the championship and, unlike last year, the Raptors are one of the two teams who’ve made it all the way. Ryder and I plan on watching the game together. I was sad his team didn’t make the playoffs, but then I’m not sure I could handle watching the Wolves play against the Raptors. I might have gone into labor in the middle of the game. My nerves are shot as it is.

“Let’s see here...” The doctor touches a few buttons on her keyboard before she begins moving the wand over my belly. “Come on, baby. Let’s see how you’re doing in there.”

I can't help but smile at the first sight of the image on the screen. There's my baby. We've already been through a lot together, and the real adventure has yet to begin. "Hi, sweetheart," I whisper as emotion swells in my chest. "I can't wait to meet you. I'd also like you to stop waking me up to pee in the middle of the night."

The doctor chuckles. "Sorry, mama. That's only going to get worse in the final month."

"Good to know," I say with a sigh.

"But then I look at it this way, you're getting ready for the real fun of waking up throughout the night for feeding and changing."

Good point. Even so, I have to stop myself from blurting out the truth, I won't be alone when the baby is born. I'm not alone now, though I've attended every appointment on my own. I've assured the doctor I have a support system in place and the baby's father is very much involved.

I haven't given her a name, is all. Nor have I mentioned the other two daddies in the situation. Too many questions, too many awkward explanations. I'd rather wait until the big day to drop that particular bombshell. Since the three of them have every intention of attending the birth, I guess that will be the time.

Oh, the stories that will no doubt spread around the maternity ward that day.

"You're starting your thirty-sixth week, and everything's looking perfect." She captures a few images to print out for me. "I'm very happy with the baby's size and development. Do you have any questions or concerns you want to share?"

"I don't think so." I have to laugh as I sit up—slowly, very slowly, the way I do almost everything anymore now that I'm roughly the size of a small whale. "It felt like this would take forever, but now the days are flying by."

"Wait until the baby's here and learning something new every day and growing like a weed." We schedule an appointment two weeks from now, then I'm on my way home.

After stopping off for donuts. There are certain perks about being pregnant, and having an excuse to eat donuts whenever the baby has a craving is one of them. I've been very careful with my nutrition and exercise these past six months, but the excuse to enjoy a treat is always welcome.

"Hello?" I call out once I've stepped into the house. The energy here is totally different now that Ash and Soren have essentially moved in. We still haven't gotten physical, but they've slept over more often than not. It's just as much for their sake as it is mine. I don't know how many late-night calls and check-in texts I could take.

It's bad enough there's a baby jumping on my bladder most of the time.

"Up here!" Ash's voice floats down from the second floor.

"Give us a minute!" There's a lot of noise and movement up there after Soren calls out, with the two of them muttering to each other. I can only roll my eyes at their shenanigans. Life is certainly never dull around here. Ryder's return was the icing on the cake. It was one thing to FaceTime every day and for him to fly back and forth whenever possible, but having him here full-time is a whole other situation.

And I'm loving it. I can't pretend otherwise.

"Okay! Come up."

"As long as you're sure." Of course, it's not so simple for me to jog up and down the stairs anymore. Maybe they should've given me a head start. "I'll get there eventually. I hope this wasn't a time-sensitive reveal."

I have to say, they are wizards. When I left for my appointment, what used to be the spare bedroom was stripped bare. The walls were the same flat, pale gray color they were when I first moved in—I didn't see any reason to repaint, since the room didn't get used much.

Now, its walls are a cheerful, pale green color, and the windows are framed by gauzy, white curtains. But that's not all of it. In the center of the floor, there is a half-constructed crib.



“I cannot believe you got all this done while I was gone!” I can hardly believe my eyes, walking around carrying a box of doughnuts and smiling like a complete goober.

“Here, let me take these off your hands.” Ash winks at Soren before opening the box. “I don’t know what I’m hungrier for, food, or you.”

“You need to stop saying things like that.” As it is, I practically have to rub my legs together like a grasshopper in hopes of calming the rush of heat that flares to life at the vaguest sexual reference. That’s pretty much been the way it’s gone over the entire course of my pregnancy, meaning the course of the season. Basically, it’s been the perfect storm of insanely wild hormones that have me wet at the slightest breeze that brushes across the back of my neck, and a promise that’s looking more and more impossible to keep.

But we kept it, and my blood was already racing at the thought of what tonight is going to look like. Win or lose, it’s the end of the season, and that means it’s time to make up for months of all of us taking care of ourselves instead of indulging the way we wanted to.

“Yo! I could use a little help down here!”

“I’ve been painting all morning.” Soren makes a big deal of groaning and pressing a hand to his lower back as the three of us walk downstairs.

Ryder gives him a dirty look as he finishes lifting grocery bags onto the counter. “Yeah? You sore, grandpa? Maybe you’ll need me to step in for you tonight, during the game.”

“Not a chance.” Not that Ryder meant it, of course, but even if Soren was in full traction, he would find a way to get those skates laced up. The team fought like hell to get to this point, somehow finding it in themselves to rally together after losing Ryder to the Wolves. He worked too hard to get to this place.

“Exactly how many people live in this house?” I ask, munching a donut while the three of them put the groceries away. There are definite perks to living with three men, even when we’re not allowed to touch each other.

“Three men with big appetites and...” Ryder clears his throat before sliding a knowing look at the other two. “And a gorgeous, breathtaking goddess who gets the weirdest cravings.” As if he wants to prove his point, he pulls a jar of olives from one of the bags, then retrieves a bottle of hot fudge sauce.

“I would never eat them together,” I grumble. “Sometimes, I get a craving.”

“I know all about cravings.” Soren wanders up behind me and runs a hand over my belly before nuzzling my neck. “God, I can’t wait.”

And I can’t understand how any of them could be so attracted to me in this state, but it doesn’t seem to matter. I catch Ash eyeing me with undeniable hunger in his eyes, and if Ryder doesn’t stop staring at my boobs, he’s going to end up walking into a wall or tripping and breaking something important.

“Try not to wear yourselves out too much tonight,” I tease. “I’ll need you to have a little energy for me.”

With the energy in the room crackling the way it is, I’m pretty sure I have nothing to worry about.

## ASH

**T**here's no way I won't have energy for Harlow tonight. Not when I've spent every day craving her. Moving into her house at least puts me in her presence, but that only makes things worse sometimes. So close, but so far away.

Considering we're now in overtime after being tied at one the entire course of the second and third period, I have to wonder how much stamina I'll have left. Nothing could stop me from ravishing her at the first opportunity... but that might be all I can manage.

"Let's go, let's go!" I hear Coach Kozak shouting as I fly past, racing one of the Rattlesnakes for the puck that's loose up ahead. I reach it before he does and he checks me against the boards and claims the puck for himself, but Soren swoops in and takes it.

The air in here is charged with electricity. It's like the fans are pushing us on, their screams and cheers carrying us across the ice. Or maybe that's just my brain making me think these things. It's been a hell of a season, a hell of a year, and it all comes down to this. It's like I see the game happening as a player and a spectator. I need to get out of my head, and I'm doing my best, but there's still part of my consciousness that can't stop going over all the obstacles I had to face to make it this far.

All of it goes through my mind in an instant as I watch the puck being passed around by a trio of Rattlesnakes. Danny

cuts through their triangle and catches the puck, which he passes to me.

Everything around me fades away. The fans screaming in the stands—Ryder and Harlow are there, close to our bench. The other players. The lights, everything. It all goes fuzzy and fades into the background. There is nothing but the goal ahead.

Time seems to stand still. All I hear is the heavy thumping of my heart and the slicing of blades against ice. I control the puck while the goalkeeper prepares himself. Left, right, I feint in both directions to throw him off. This is it. It all comes down to this.

And when I draw back my stick and shoot at the goal, everything I have is behind it. All of me. All my hopes. All the fears when I was injured. The doubts I wrestled with in Seattle. Everything and more is behind that shot.

I'm not even aware at first of whether I made it. Not until Soren slams into me, and Max, and I can now hear the screams of joy all around us. "You did it! You fucking did it!" I can barely hear Soren over the chaos that's erupting.

"We did!" I look around and finally spot Harlow with Ryder. They're both jumping up and down, banging on the glass, screaming. She's here. She saw it. And I know deep down inside she understands everything that was going through my head in those final seconds. And how much it means to not only win, but to win this way. The hard-fought wins are always the sweetest.

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I NEVER THOUGHT I would want a celebration to end as much as I want to get it over with tonight. Sure, we all deserve to let loose and get a little crazy, but there's another celebration I'm much more interested in. A reason the three of us didn't drink more than a beer apiece while everyone else practically soaked the locker room in suds. They're all out at the bar, and I'm sure they'll close the place down.

Last year at this time, I would have been there with them.

Now, I'm finally home, and Harlow's here, and there's nothing stopping us anymore.

Which means the minute the door is closed, my hands are on her. I can't help it. I have watched her body change and blossom. I've never seen a pregnant woman so beautiful, luscious, and I have months of pent-up yearning to make up for now.

"Let a girl put her purse down," she laughs. I respond by pulling the strap from her shoulder and tossing the thing on the floor, then pulling her into my arms and claiming her mouth.

There's scoring the winning goal in the championship, then there's this. The sudden rush of finally having what I've missed so deeply. I didn't know how necessary she was until I had to go without her. Sure, I've had her with me. She's never far away, especially now that I've essentially moved in. But the intimacy of sharing breath is next level. I'll never take a simple kiss for granted again.

"God, I love you," I breathe once we come up for air. I'm trembling, almost overwhelmed by the sudden need to claim her.

"Hey, don't be greedy." Soren's watching from the arm of the sofa, and I'm sure he's only half kidding.

"Did you win the game for us tonight? I didn't think so." My hands haven't stopped moving over her body, and the way she melts against me only intensifies my hunger.

"What am I, the trophy?" she whispers while her hands run through my hair and set off a series of earthquakes in my core. I need her. I need her right now.

"I've never seen such a beautiful trophy."

"There's never been a hornier trophy, either," she admits, then cups my already rock-hard erection in one hand like she's trying to prove it. "I need somebody to make me come right here and now, or I'm going to die."

Soren gets up and guides her to where he'd just been sitting, and she wastes no time bending over the sofa after pulling down her leggings and panties in one quick motion. It's not the

most romantic lead-in, but I don't think any of us is looking for romance right now.

I'm already throbbing and dripping with excitement by the time I line myself up with her entrance. "Oh, yes, give it to me," she moans, pushing back against me. She's already wet, so hot, and I'm not sure if I push into her or she takes me inside. Maybe both together.

"Oh, God! Fuck yes!" Right away she pushes against me, fucking herself on me, and at first I'm too amazed to do anything but watch as I disappear inside her again and again. Ryder and Soren take off their clothes, watching the way I am, and soon they're stroking themselves to the sight of our Harlow, our love, getting herself off. I don't mind being used. I actually sort of love it.

It doesn't take long before she's gripping me tighter, moving faster, determined to get her satisfaction. I reach out and take hold of her boobs—they're so much bigger, fuller, and the way she yelps with relief leaves me playing with her nipples to heighten her pleasure. This is all about her. I want to get her off as many times as possible.

When she does get off, it's ear-splitting, world-shaking. I want to hold on, to keep fucking her through her orgasm, but there is no way I can do it. It's not like I haven't jerked off like it was my job, but there's still nothing like the sensation of being milked by her fluttering muscles while she sobs out her relief.

Somehow, I manage to pull out before filling her. I want everyone to get their turn before things get messy. I spill my cum on her ass, instead, while she whimpers in the aftermath of an enormous orgasm.

She's barely caught her breath before she lifts her head while I clean her skin. "Who's up next?" she asks in a breathless whisper that gets me twitching again, even this soon after coming. There's a fire in her eyes and a deep, endless need in her voice.

This is going to be a long night. I wouldn't have it any other way.

**RYDER**

I would wait until we get upstairs, but I can't. Not after all these months without her. Alone. At least they were here with her, even if they couldn't do anything physical. They could still feel her warmth and smell her sweet perfume. They got to watch her body change. I was only able to observe over the phone or during short visits.

In other words, I'm too desperate to wait. She's still on her knees, holding the arm of the couch, when I kneel on the floor behind her and bury my face in her pussy.

"Oh, my God!" She throws her head back before grinding against my face. "Oh, God, yes! Eat me. Make me come, baby."

Holy shit. I love this new side of her. She was always eager, always in touch with her needs. She's never been shy about taking what she wants. But this? This is a whole other beast I'm pleasuring, and I am the lucky bastard who gets to reap the rewards.

"Here." I look up in time to find Soren standing in front of her, cupping the back of her head in his hand so she can eagerly take him into her mouth. His eyes almost rolled back in his head and he blurts out a laugh. "Damn. It was almost worth waiting for this."

I return to my work, running my tongue through her folds, teasing her twitching entrance. Her juices are flowing and I'm the lucky one who gets to lick them up and savor every drop. She moans around Soren's dick, and his abs flex as he thrusts

into her mouth. “Oh, yeah,” he moans, letting his head fall back while he fucks her face.

I turn my focus to her clit, sucking it between my lips and flicking the tip with my tongue. She goes wild, bucking her hips, and the fresh rush of her sweet nectar tells me she’s coming again. I would normally stop but there’s something special about tonight, something that keeps me going. Licking, sucking, while my hands run over her back and her hips, her thighs, her swollen stomach. There is something so erotic about this, deeper and hotter than anything I’ve ever experienced.

“You want to come again?” I whisper, invading her with two fingers and hooking them to massage her G-spot while she continues slurping on Soren’s dick. “You think you can do that for me? Can you give me another one?” She moans in agreement and grinds her hips, chasing another one. There is so much lost time to make up for.

“Come on, baby,” Soren grunts, now holding her head with both hands and pumping almost frantically. “Come for me and I’ll fill your throat. Would you like that? Do you want me to do that for you?” She moans again, high-pitched, needy, and his ecstatic groans blend with her muffled cries. Her muscles twitch and her body tenses before she goes limp, falling against the back of the couch with a deep sigh.

“Holy hell.” Soren is breathless, chuckling as he pulls himself together. “That was intense.”

“Right? Insane.” But Ash doesn’t sound unhappy as he crosses the room and heads for the kitchen. “Let me get you some water. You just rest there.”

To my surprise, Harlow rolls onto her back and locks eyes with me. “But I don’t want to rest. Sorry, but I’ve waited too long for this.”

She holds a hand out to me. “And you haven’t come yet.”

“We have all night.” Of course, my dick has other ideas, but I’m not trying to hurt her or exhaust her. But once she wraps her tapered fingers around my shaft, all bets are off.



“You don’t have to—” That’s all I manage to croak before she’s running her tongue along my ridge, then taking me deep into her waiting mouth. How am I supposed to resist this? All I can do is give in, helpless against the spell she weaves around me.

It doesn’t feel right, not doing anything for her when I know how desperate she is for everything we can give her. I reach down between her spread legs and stroke her glistening lips. She’ll be super sensitive right now, so I try to stay away from her clit. She only jerks her hips upward in a silent demand. She is like a woman possessed.

All it does is make me want her more. Our eyes meet and she moans around me, hollowing out her cheeks, sucking for all she’s worth. Any thought of holding back is out the window—it’s been too long, and I’ve wanted her too badly. Pretty soon my hips are moving on their own, and the familiar tingling at the base of my spine signals I’m getting close.

“I’m going to come for you,” I grunt, fingering her faster, hoping she’ll come with me. “Is that what you want? Do you want to make me come?”

Her head bobs up and down slightly and the pressure from her lips increases and that’s it, I can’t take any more. I let go, pouring myself into her while she squeals with pleasure as another orgasm tears its way through her.

And by the time it’s over, I feel like I just got hit by a train. “I was not prepared for this,” I admit, while the guys laughed knowingly. It’s like we’re all meeting another side of her. I love this side just as much as all of her other sides. I love her.

And I tell her so as I help her to her feet. She gulps down some water from Ash before releasing a satisfied sigh. “That was a nice first round.”

“Are you sure all of this is safe?” I ask, since it feels like the sort of thing we should be concerned about. Now that we’ve all come, we can think a little more logically.

“Oh, sure,” she tells me right away. “It’s absolutely fine. So long as we’re not, you know, swinging from the chandelier or

doing acrobatic stuff.”

“Damn.” Soren snaps his fingers and frowns. “And I was just about to suggest we start with the acrobatic stuff.”

“After the baby’s born,” she tells him with a wink. She then looks around, the picture of innocence. “Well? Should we go upstairs where we can be more comfortable?”

I love this woman.

## SOREN

I sincerely hope someone got the plate of the truck that ran me over.

Normally, I would already be slightly sore after a game like the one we played last night. Every single one of us gave it their all, and it paid off. Normally, I would spend a little more time than usual this morning lying in bed, recovering.

Of course, if this were a typical situation, I would be recovering from more than just the game. I would have partied along with the rest of the team last night. I might just now be rolling up to my house, come to think of it. Many was the night that didn't end until morning.

But that was then. That was the past, that was the old Soren. Now, I'm waking up to something so much better even if I'm just as worn out, if not more so. I would much rather feel this way because I spent the night pleasuring the woman I love rather than because I spent it drinking myself into oblivion before hooking up with a stranger.

She is lying on her side, facing me, with Ryder behind her. Ash is sacked out in an armchair next to the bed, and his feet are propped up on the mattress.

At first, it's enough to lie here and gaze at her. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever set eyes on, and it's not even close. She is like a sleeping angel—but no angel ever had a night like the one she did. I would swear she was possessed, practically insatiable. After we came up here for another round, there was no choice but to rest for a while. I was counting her orgasms

and I'm pretty sure she'd made it to seven at that point. The human body can only take so much, right?

Besides, like I reminded her, there's plenty of time. We're all together now, and nothing's going to change that. We don't need to wear ourselves out the first night.

When she opens her eyes and a slow, sleepy smile spreads across her plump lips, I'm glad we took a break. Because I know that light in her eyes. I know why her smile is so sweet yet naughty at the same time.

And like Pavlov's dog, I can't help but react. My dick is thickening and growing by the time I reach for her, placing a hand on her hip and drawing closer so she can feel what she does to me.

"Good morning," I mouth, because I want this moment just for us.

"Good morning," she mouths back, still smiling as she reaches out and cups my cheek. Her touch is soft, loving, and I close my eyes to soak in that love. Because that's what it's all about in the end. As hard as this is, as complicated as our lives can be, at the root of it all is love. The sort of love that defies convention. It might be the only kind of love that matters.

I'm still thinking about that love as her fingers trail down my chest, her nails gently scratching my skin and waking up my entire body. Once she's reached the very demanding erection poking her thigh, I close my eyes to soak in the sensation of her touch. There were nights when my almost obsessive need for her drove me close to madness. There were nights that I almost hated her, I wanted her so much. All of that has come to an end and now there's nothing to do but enjoy.

One stroke of my fingers along her seam confirms she's already wet and ready. She closes her eyes and sighs softly, then lifts the leg on top to give me access to all of her. That isn't enough, and we both know it.

It takes a little maneuvering, but I drape both of her legs over my thigh and position myself so I'm aligned with her pussy.

She seemed to get a little uncomfortable in her back last night, and I want to make sure this is as good for her as it is for me.

We take it slow, with me delivering deep, lazy strokes that barely move the bed. She runs her hands through my hair, gazing at me, and I would swear our souls are mingling. It might be corny, but it feels right. All of this feels so right.

It isn't long before Ryder's hand cups her tit, massaging it gently, his thumb flicking the nipple. "Good morning," he whispers in her ear before running his tongue around the seashell curve.

"No fair," Ash grumbles, joining us on the bed. He kneels behind me and strokes Harlow's legs and feet. "Getting started without us."

"I figured you would wake up eventually," I tell him before going deep and making her moan. We don't have to be quiet anymore.

"And there I was," Ryder muses between kisses against her neck. "Figuring you'd be too wiped out this morning."

"There's no such thing," she tells him before moaning again, arching her back, closing her eyes. I watch her, totally absorbed in her reactions while she sinks deeper into bliss.

"That's right." I roll my hips, grinding into her, and she whimpers her approval. "Let it go. Let yourself feel good. Do you feel good? Do you like how it feels when I'm inside you?"

"Yes, yes," she whispers, her head bobbing up and down. She reaches behind her to rake her nails over Ryder's scalp, making him groan while he runs his hands over her body. I feel the effect it has on her, and soon her juices run over my balls while she comes closer and closer to the end.

And when she does, I can't help but go along with her, filling her with my seed before pulling back, breathless and satisfied. For now, anyway.

She gasps in surprise, and I look down to realize Ryder quickly took my place. He's not interested in taking her slowly, gently, instead practically rutting from behind. The sight of him taking her so soon after I did is surprisingly

satisfying, and I understand Ash's eagerness to get me out of the way so he can take advantage of her open mouth. If I hadn't just finished coming, I would be hard as a rock now.

"Oh, yes," she moans, taking Ash in her hand and guiding him to her open mouth. I watch in amazement as she takes them both, working them in tandem until all three of them are breathless and grunting and losing themselves in what they're creating together. Her body is incredible—nurturing life while providing so much satisfaction to all of us. I could spend the rest of my days worshiping this woman and it wouldn't be enough.

"So good," Ryder grunts, molding her tits in his hand before burying his face in her golden hair and crying out his release. She moans helplessly around Ash's dick, high-pitched and desperate like she's coming again.

Instead of coming in her mouth, Ash pulls out and strokes himself rapidly. A moment later, the first spurts of cum splash across her heavy tits. "Oh, fuck yes," he groans as he comes, before releasing a satisfied sigh.

And then he smiles a little sheepishly. "I'm sorry, but I had to come on those tits. They're too much to resist."

"You're forgiven." She closes her eyes and goes limp, while Ash gets up to grab a washcloth and I hand her a bottle of water from the nightstand. Ryder stays behind her, gently caressing her while she comes back to earth after flying so high.

There's something so natural about all of this. Like finally, all the missing parts of my life have fallen into place and the picture is complete. I can see doing this for the rest of our lives, I honestly can. There are challenges, and of course three egos to manage, but it's all worth it in moments like this. Not the sex so much as the feeling it inspires. Togetherness. Unity.

That's what's going through my head when she frowns and pushes herself up on one elbow. I'm about to ask what's wrong when she answers my silent question by covering her belly with her hand.

“Harlow.” Ryder sits up. “What’s the matter?”

“I just felt the funniest thing. Like a cramp.” She closes her eyes and winces. “There it is again. Oh, my God. Oh no.”

Her eyes fly open and she looks around and asks the question I bet is on all of our minds. “Is this it? Am I going into labor?”

## HARLOW

“It’s too early. It’s not time yet.”

“Everything is fine.” Ryder grips my hand hard enough to hurt, leaning forward from the back seat of Ash’s truck to reach me. “Even if it is labor, you’re eight months along.”

He makes sense, but that doesn’t mean I want to hear it. “But it’s still too early! It wasn’t supposed to be like this!”

“You have to try to calm down.”

I’m glad Ash isn’t looking at me, since he’s too busy trying to get us to the hospital in one piece. That means he can’t see the absolutely blistering look I give him. “Do me a favor and don’t tell me to calm down at a time like this.”

“But he makes a good point,” Soren insists—gently, almost like he’s afraid to piss me off. He should be when I feel like this. “If you are in labor, they’ll know what to do at the hospital. But getting yourself worked up like this isn’t going to help you or the baby.”

I know they’re right, but it’s not exactly helping right now. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be ready. I’m supposed to be prepared. I’m not prepared. The crib isn’t even put together all the way yet.”

“We can work on that.” Ryder strokes my hair and I’m sure that would be comforting at any other time, but I’m too worried. What if I was wrong and we shouldn’t have had all that sex? What if all the advice I read was meant for people who have, like, so-called normal sex lives? One orgasm is no



big deal, maybe two. But I completely lost track. What if this is all my fault and I should have been thinking more about the baby than about my libido?

“Remember,” Ash points out as we turn into the hospital complex. Really, it’s more like a small city. “The doctor didn’t sound too concerned over the phone.”

“That’s her job,” I remind him. “To keep me calm.”

“And you’re not helping by being this upset.” I swear, I’m going to kill him. I know he means well and I love him for it, but he is taking his life in his hands with every word he says.

Thankfully, Doctor Graves is waiting when we arrive. I have barely had time to remove my leggings for an exam before she knocks on the door and steps into the examination room—then falls back a step when she sees I’m not alone. “Oh. I wasn’t expecting...” It’s like I can almost hear her counting to three in her head as she looks at Ryder, Soren, and Ash.

“Please, can you check the baby?” Because this is not the time to waste precious seconds on the intricacies of my personal life.

“All right. There’s not a lot of room in here,” she points out gently. “Could we have a little privacy?”

“Actually, can they stay? They’ll stand in the corner and they won’t get in the way.” Because I need them now. It was bad enough going to all of my appointments without them—granted, that was my idea, but I didn’t have to love it. I can face an ultrasound by myself, when everything seems okay and I’m only here for a checkup. This? I don’t know if I can handle this on my own.

“This is very unusual. Can I ask...” She looks around at them while pulling her wheeled chair up to the end of the table, between my legs.

Well, I was going to tell her eventually. “The four of us will be raising the baby together,” I tell her. “One of them is the father, but we don’t know which. We are... all together.”

I have to give it to her. She takes it well. “Oh. I see. Well, fellas, it’s nice to meet you.” She blinks rapidly and sort of

shakes her head a little like she's clearing the cobwebs, but she's still pleasant. "Let's check on your baby."

*Please, God. Please, don't let me have hurt the baby.* I lie back and force myself to take a deep breath because really, there's nothing else I can do now. I trust the doctor implicitly. She knows what she's doing. I don't, I don't have the first clue, but she's got it under control.

"Well, it looks like you're only around a centimeter dilated."

"Is that bad?" Ryder asks from the corner, where he and the others are clustered together.

"Not at all. That's perfectly normal. Your cervix is loosening up now that your baby's getting heavier. Many women are a centimeter dilated and have no idea. It's absolutely normal."

"But the cramping..."

"Did you have any spotting?"

"Well, no..."

"That's a good sign. Let me give you an ultrasound just so we can be doubly sure, but I think this is false labor." She wastes no time getting everything ready, and soon my guys are treated to something only I've experienced before now.

"Wow. That's the baby?" Ash's jaw drops. Soren folds his hands on top of his head while looking amazed. Ryder just shakes his head, wearing a funny, disbelieving sort of smile. Now I'm so glad they're here with me, even more than before. I get to watch them see the baby for the first time.

"That's the baby," Doctor Graves confirms. "And everything is looking good, the same as it did yesterday. Baby is sleeping away, nice and warm and contented. Maybe a little cramped, but it'll have more space soon enough." She winks at me before turning off the machine. "You have nothing to worry about. It could be your body was reacting strongly to... the activity."

And now I want to curl up in a ball and disappear because duh, I'm sure it was obvious once she took a look that I've been

busy. Soren and Ryder came inside me less than an hour ago. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I whisper, horrified.

“You don’t have to apologize at all. But...” She takes a look around the room and I can tell she’s regretting having to say this. “Maybe take it easy. I’m sure the baby will be fine if it were born at this stage, but we want to keep it cooking for as long as we can. And we want Mama here to relax and not stress out. Okay?”

They’re like a trio of Boy Scouts, nodding in unison. “We’ll take care of her,” Ryder promises.

“Good. You’re free to go.”

Now I feel like a complete idiot for freaking out. “I’m so sorry to take up your time like this.”

“Harlow.” She gives my hand a gentle pat. “Do you think you’re the only expectant mother who’s ever worried like this? It can be scary, feeling random cramps like that. Especially your first time around. That’s what I’m here for. Don’t ever hesitate to call.” I’m feeling a lot better by the time she leaves the room so I can get dressed and we can go.

“At least she didn’t yell at us for making that happen,” Soren mutters. “I thought for sure she’d blame us.”

“I’m sure she’s seen just about everything,” I point out, even though I’m still a little embarrassed, myself. “And hey, now I don’t have to break the news while I’m in labor. She can be prepared to see all of you again when the day comes.”

As we leave the hospital, I run a hand over my belly, relieved and grateful. I doubt we’ll have a night like last night again until after the baby is born—and as much as that will suck with my body in a constant state of arousal and three healthy men in my life, something tells me we’ll all learn to live with it. They were just as worried as I was, even if they pretended otherwise for my sake.

“Just another adventure in parenthood,” I joke as Ash helps me into the truck.

“And just think how much more fun it’ll be when the baby gets here.” He looks and sounds exhausted but relieved as he

closes the door.

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## HARLOW

The funniest thing about being a hugely pregnant woman is how quick everybody is to try to do things for you.

“Let me get that. You shouldn’t be carrying things.” Corey doesn’t wait for me to hand over the canvas tote I’m carrying around the farmer’s market before practically ripping the thing off my shoulder.

“Corey.” I can’t help but laugh, even if she is trying to be helpful. “I’m not an invalid. I’m just pregnant. Women have been doing this for thousands of years.”

“Sue me for trying to be a good friend. But you’re carrying... all that.” She waves a hand in the general direction of my belly. “The least I can do is carry a bag.”

Frankly, my feet are too swollen and my back aches too much to argue. “Thanks. Honestly, my back is a little tight, so that helps.”

“Then let’s go. We don’t need to walk around here anymore.”

“We’ve only been here for ten minutes,” I remind her as I check out a barrel full of ripe peaches.

“And I only suggested we come out because you said you wanted a little exercise and some fresh air. But we can totally go back to your house if you want.”

It is sort of tempting. “Actually, no. I have all this energy. And the guys are putting the finishing touches on the baby’s room, and I know I’m not going to be able to sit still without trying

to help, and they're just going to get annoyed because they keep treating me like I'm going to shatter at any minute."

"Well, I mean, you did say you thought you were going into labor last week. That probably shook them up."

"It shook me up, too, but otherwise everything's been great."

"I have to admit, you look and sound a lot better than I would expect."

"I'm pregnant, not sick." So pregnant, that seems like everywhere we go, somebody is staring at me. I know my stomach is huge, but I've gotten used to it over the time it's grown. Maybe it's unusually large? No matter who the father is, they're a rather large athlete. So I guess it makes sense that the baby would be large, too.

"But I'm just saying, you're glowing. You look fantastic."

"Now I know you are just saying that to be nice," I tell her with a laugh as I waddle along next to her. "I look like somebody stuck the end of an air pump in my mouth and blew me up."

"Not even close. And you still have all three of them drooling over you, right?"

"You're right about that," I confess. "Not to brag or anything, but they're the reason I ended up in the hospital in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"You know." I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively until she bursts out laughing.

"Oh, my God! So you did it so much, it felt like you were going into labor?"

"That's pretty much it, yeah." I'm torn between cringing and laughing. "The doctor said it was normal, but it was kind of embarrassing when she figured out what kicked it off."

"Geez. After all those months, I guess they were feeling... Excited?"

“They weren’t the only ones,” I confess. “I swear, there have been times I could hump the corner of a coffee table.”

She laughs so hard she has to stop and leave the bags on the ground while she composes herself. “Oh... my... God. You are too much!”

“Wait and see. Someday, you’ll know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m not sure about that. Not everybody gets lucky the way you did.”

She’s right. I am lucky. And maybe it was wrong to assume she even wants to be in this position one day... but I think she does. I’ve caught the longing in her voice and the look in her eyes when she’s felt the baby kick. And of course I already know she’s terrific with kids from being part of her lessons at the arena. I hope I don’t turn into one of those women who is so happy, she makes it her life’s mission to meddle in her friends’ personal lives so they can be as happy as she is.

“Did you find out whether it’s a boy or a girl yet?”

“I told you, we all want it to be a surprise.”

“I know, but I figured maybe they would have said something when you went in for your surprise examination.”

“No, the doctor’s good like that.” I have to snicker at the memory. “Honestly, I think she was too busy trying to recover from having all three of them in the room with us.”

“Oh, no, can you imagine the way they’re going to try to coach you through labor?”

The thought makes me laugh. “Come on, Harlow!” I grunt.

“Keep pushing. Keep digging. Give it all you’ve got!”

“Hey, if you could master skating without breaking anything, you can push out a baby.”

“What are you talking about? I never mastered anything except for staying upright.”

She blows out a heavy sigh before tossing her dark hair over her shoulder in an exasperated gesture. “I’m trying to be nice, for heaven’s sake.”

“When it comes to skating, I’m happy to sit on the sidelines.”

“Well, just so you know, I’ve already signed the baby up for lessons.”

“Thanks. One last thing to think about.” But I have no doubt the guys would want the baby to know how to skate. Knowing them, they’ll probably push for that before they push for bike riding or throwing a ball.

“All I know is, I’m ready to give this kid an eviction notice.” I know I’m going to have to pee again soon, and I feel like I’m carrying a bowling ball in front of me. If I get much bigger I won’t have any clothes that fit. As much as I know the guys would not protest if I walked around naked, I’m not too keen on the idea.

“So they want to have the nursery done today?” she asks once we’ve stopped off for cheese at one of the booths. I have to smile my way through my jealousy that Corey gets to eat delicious, wonderful things like that. I can’t wait to indulge in a soft, stinky cheese as soon as possible. Aside from fantasizing about sex, that’s the sort of thing I’ve thought about the most. I’m not sure how easy it will be for me to get my body back when there’s part of me that wants nothing more than to stuff my face full of everything I couldn’t have these past months. Sushi, salami, blue cheese...

“Yeah, and it’s pretty much finished. I think the scare we had last week got them moving with more determination. You just never know when the baby will decide to make an appearance.”

“Knowing them, it’s a miracle they haven’t torn the house apart, arguing.”

“Oh, there’s been plenty of that.” But there’s fondness that comes along with the memories. “They’re trying. They really are. They want to be a team. Because I warned them, you can’t bicker like children when there’s a child in the house. You need to at least pretend to be on the same side even if you disagree.”



I can't help but snicker. "You know, the way my parents never did."

"Their hearts are all in the right place, and they would do anything to make you happy."

I know that. I know how incredibly lucky I am. "You know, it's only been a little over a year since everything changed," I muse as we walk together on the bright, sunshine-soaked afternoon. "I never in a million years could have imagined what life would look like by now."

"Man makes plans and God laughs," she muses.

"I never really understood how true that is until now," I admit. "We can spend all of our lives planning and preparing, then all of a sudden, everything can change at the drop of a hat."

When Corey comes to a dead stop, I do the same out of surprise. "What? What's wrong?"

She looks down at my feet and winces. "My friend, I think your pipes are leaking."

"My what?" And that's when I feel it. That's when I look down to find a puddle on the ground.

"Did you..." She's trying to be diplomatic and not hurt my feelings.

"This is not pee." Our eyes meet and we gasp at the same time.

Something tells me this time, it's for real. I am going to have this baby today.

## HARLOW

**S**illy me, thinking it would be that easy and that quick. Like every part of labor would go as smoothly as having my water break in the middle of the farmer's market. Something I didn't even feel happening, that surprised me as much as it surprised Corey.

I didn't know there was so much farther to go. Thirty-six hours, in fact.

"You've got this." Ryder rubs my back on one side of the bed while Ash and Soren stand by my knees, one on each side. "You can do it."

"I'm glad you think so." At least the epidural finally kicked in. It took two tries, but I'm officially feeling much better than I did before. Unfortunately, a simple shot doesn't do anything to take away my fatigue.

*"Try to rest when you can,"* the doctor told me. If I never have to hear that again, it will be too soon, because naturally that became the mantra since yesterday. *Rest when you can, the doctor said so.* It's a miracle I haven't bitten off my tongue, since I've wanted more than anything to ask them if they've ever been through labor and if they have the first clue how impossible it is to rest between contractions sometimes. It felt like just as I was starting to catch my breath, the next one would come along.

"You didn't think you could learn to skate, either," Corey reminds me, standing behind Ryder. "And look at how far you've come."

Once again. Not the same thing. But I appreciate them trying to help.

“How are you feeling, Mama?” Doctor Graves joins us again now that there’s been time for the medication to kick in.

“Like it worked this time.”

“I bet you’re glad for that, right?” She offers a sympathetic pat against my leg that I sort of feel but not really. It’s weird. “All right, now. We’re in the homestretch.”

“You hear that?” Ryder places a kiss against my temple. I kind of wish he wouldn’t since I’m a little sweaty, but he doesn’t seem to mind. “You’re almost through it.”

“I don’t think I can make it.”

“You can.” Soren reaches out to stroke my cheek. “I know you can.”

“One breath at a time. We’re right here with you.” Ash tries to smile, but I see his strain.

“Are you alright?” I ask him.

Everyone laughs softly. “You would ask me that at a time like this,” he replies.

“I just want to be sure you’re okay. Is there a problem? Should I be worried?”

“No, no.” He rubs my leg—again, I see him doing it, but I can’t really feel it. Bonkers. “I just hate seeing you like this. I want it to be over for your sake.”

“Not to worry, because it should be over soon,” the doctor announces. “Now, Harlow, I’m going to want you to push on your next contraction.” She looks at the monitor, then back at me. “It’s coming up. You feel it?”

Do I feel it? Strangely enough, yes. I don’t feel much, and it’s definitely not as intense as before, but I feel the pressure building.

“Ryder, I’m going to want you to get behind her and give her support, because we’re going to push.” Ryder wedges himself

between me and the back of the bed, and it does make it easier to bear down with him at my back.

“Okay, here we go. Take a deep breath... and push!”

“You’ve got this. You can do it!” Soren insists.

“Push, baby,” Ryder murmurs close to my ear. “Push.”

“Oh, my God.” Ash lets out something that could be a laugh or could be a cry. “Is that the head? Oh, my God!”

“Now stop!” The doctor looks up at me from over the sheet draped across my thighs. “Beautiful job. And yes, we are at the crowning stage. Another solid push, and your baby will be here.”

The baby will be here. I want that, I want it more than anything, but I’m still so scared. What if I screw it all up? What if even though I try my hardest, it’s not good enough? What if, what if, the questions ring out in the back of my mind as the pressure increases all at once, with no warning.

“Alright, this is it.” The doctor’s head disappears and the pressure ramps up. “Now, Harlow. Deep breath... and push!”

Ryder presses me forward and I bear down with all my might, screaming from the effort. I can’t keep doing this, it’s too much, I can’t take it—

“Oh! That’s it!” Soren’s joyful whoop fills the room before I fall back, exhausted and laughing and crying.

But the best is yet to come. When a baby’s cry fills the air.

That sound. It unlocks my heart and all at once, the most euphoric rush of joy fills me. Joy and love and wonder that only grows when the doctor lifts the baby up so I can see.

“You have a daughter,” she announces, and the room erupts in laughter and joy and more love than I thought was humanly possible. I hold out my arms and accept the wriggling little bundle the doctor covers with a blanket once she’s placed my daughter on my chest.

My daughter. My little girl. “Hello,” I whisper while tears course down my cheeks and drip from my chin. My guys surround me and Corey takes pictures I wouldn’t want her to

take at any other time, looking like I do, but what matters more now is capturing this moment forever. Not that I would ever forget it, but I want it to look back on. The moment we all became parents, the four of us.

“Do you have a name yet?” one of the nurses asks once they take the baby to wash and measure her.

“We haven’t been able to decide,” I remind the guys, looking around. “Everybody has something they want.”

“What about what the mama wants?” Corey points out before leaning over to give me a hug. “You are a rock star,” she whispers in my ear, and when she pulls away her cheeks are wet with tears. “Congratulations.”

“I’ve kind of been leaning towards Eva. My grandmother’s name,” I explain. “She was always so good to me. I loved her so much and I wish she could be here.”

The guys have a silent conversation between the three of them before they nod. “Eva sounds pretty good to me,” Ash decides, lifting my hand to his lips and pressing a kiss against my knuckles before closing his eyes and letting out a deep, shaky breath.

“I don’t know about anybody else, but I need a nap,” Soren announces, which gets the nurses laughing.

“Gee, and here I was, thinking about running a marathon,” I retort, which gets everyone laughing again. This is perfect. This is exactly how I imagined it. Granted, in my daydreams, Corey wasn’t here—but her presence only made things better, since I’ve learned men aren’t exactly the best at times like this. No matter how much they wanted to help, they were too anxious, too worried about me.

“Any family waiting outside?” one of the nurses asks before placing my freshly washed baby in my arms.

I blurt out a laugh before shaking my head. “My parents are overseas right now, in Africa. And there I was, telling them not to worry about being here and how there would be plenty of time.” If I were feeling especially honest, I would add the part where I’m sort of glad they missed this. Sure, it would

have been nice to have them here, but things are still too complicated and touchy. The less drama they spread on one of the most important days of my entire life, the better. Knowing my father, he'd be running around, demanding a paternity test from all three of them.

No, this is better. Surrounded by love, at peace with my life and how things have turned out. There's no need to apologize to anyone or try to make anybody understand. That's on them if they want to understand or not. I can't force it.

And I have much better things to do with my time, anyway. Such as counting the fingers and toes of this perfect little person in my arms and inhaling her sweet baby scent before handing her to one of her adoring fathers.

"How about it?" I ask in a whisper, offering the baby to Ryder. He looks like I just tried to hand him a ticking bomb but holds out his arms anyway, and soon I have the heart stopping pleasure of watching him step into his new role as he cradles Eva so tenderly, it could almost break my heart. Ash repeats the process, then Soren, and the love radiating from them makes everything worth it. Even the stress and drama from my parents fades to nothing in the face of so much love.

"That is one lucky little girl," the doctor murmurs.

She's right, of course. Right now, though? I'm the lucky one.

## HARLOW

What a difference three months can make.

“Are you sure it’s alright to still have her out here?”

Ryder is the quietly fretful one, always checking to make sure Eva is okay, even sometimes waking her up because he has to check her while she’s asleep. We’ve talked about his anxiety and he’s trying to work through it. I know it comes from a good place, but sometimes he needs to let the baby sleep for heaven’s sake.

“She’s fine,” Ash calls out from his spot at the grill. “We’ll bring her in before we eat.”

“We already slathered her in sunscreen and she’s under an umbrella,” Soren concludes as he brings me a glass of Chardonnay from inside. With all four of us taking baby duties, it made sense to formula feed, so I happily accept the drink.

“I’ll take her in a few minutes,” I tell him in a soft voice. “I just wanted to have her out here with us for a little bit.”

“Just wouldn’t want her to get burned.” He strokes her tiny fingers and she coos in her sleep. The way he smiles lights up my heart.

They all light up my heart. I had no doubt they would step up and be by my side through everything, but actually living it is beyond my wildest dreams. And all things considered, giving birth so soon after the season ended was a bit of divine timing, since it means there’s no traveling for away games.

Everybody's here, and we all take a shift at night so we can get the most sleep possible.

Now, Ash is grilling chicken and vegetables for dinner since it's his turn to cook. All I can do is sit back and wonder how I got this lucky. "You know," I muse, "there are times I feel sort of guilty."

"Why?" Soren sits next to me with a beer and lets his feet dangle in the water.

"Because I hear stories about new mothers not being able to even do little things like shower or make sure they change their clothes and eat properly, and you guys have made this so easy for me."

"It's what we're here for," Ryder reminds me with a shrug. "It's not like we've always made things easy for you, either."

I can't argue with that. They've added so much to my life but yes, there have been challenges and setbacks. That was then, though. I'm not deluded—I know there's always going to be hurdles to make it over, but we can do it together. Of that, I have no doubt.

"I'm just saying, I would be completely underwater if it weren't for you guys. No way could I handle all of this by myself."

"We all knew what we were signing up for," Ash points out over his shoulder. "And I wouldn't have it any other way. I don't know about the rest of you jokers."

"For once, I can say you're speaking for me," Soren tells him with a laugh.

"I think I'm going to take her in," Ryder decides. The food's almost ready, anyway, and I would have put Eva in her crib before we settled in to eat. She's such a good baby, sleeping soundly as Ryder reaches into her pack and play and picks her up. His soft, secret smile when she settles against his chest isn't such a secret. I'm always watching, whether he knows it or not. Yet another joy that I couldn't have predicted; watching the three of them fall in love with our daughter.



Our daughter. It almost feels too good to be true sometimes, but then my entire life does. I've come to understand how little it actually matters what anybody else thinks. Anybody who doesn't happen to be in this backyard at this very moment, anyway. What we have together works for us, and that's enough.

With the baby monitor nearby at all times, the four of us sit down to eat beneath the rays of the setting sun. It's just like the old days, when we were first getting to know each other. There's the same laughter, the same teasing. The good-natured rivalry that exists among the three of them. Every so often I have to step in and end an argument, but they're always good-natured. There's never any real rancor. It's not perfect—there are still dust-ups every so often—but they are just as much a team off the ice as they are on it.

It's a joy to take a dip once everything's cleaned up and put away. I never feel more fully in my body than when I'm in the water lately. It's something I've tried to explain to the guys, but I don't think it's something anybody can understand unless they've been through it themselves. After sharing my body and going through so many changes, reconnecting with myself has been a journey. I'm still on that journey now, as I slowly paddle my way through the water while wearing a new two-piece suit.

"Nobody would ever believe you gave birth three months ago," Ash observes as he joins me.

"You're so full of it," I insist, laughing and swimming away when he tries to approach. "This suit is a size bigger than the ones I used to wear. You're just trying to butter me up."

"That's not true!" When Soren comes back out from the kitchen, Ash looks to him for backup.

"You're hot as hell, get used to the idea." There's Soren, expertly getting to the heart of the matter with as few words as possible.

Ryder's head bobs up and down before he starts swimming my way. I am completely outnumbered, but that's the way I like it. "You are more beautiful now than you were the first day I laid

eyes on you. Remember when I brought you those Crumbl cookies?”

I do. It feels like a lifetime has passed since then. “How could I forget? You kicked off my addiction.”

“I wanted so much to kiss you that day.” He takes hold of my waist and pulls me close so I can wrap my arms around his neck. “I thought I would die if I didn’t get to do it.”

“Did you ever think we’d end up here?” I ask as Ash swims up behind me and takes hold of my hips.

“I mean, did I give it some serious thought? Usually when I was in the shower?”

“Oh, my God!” I swat at him, laughing.

“What can I say? I had it bad.” He grazes his lips over my jaw. “I still do.”

“We all do.” For once, Soren is serious as he takes a seat at the edge of the pool and I settle between his knees so he can lean down for a kiss. He gazes into my eyes once I’ve pulled back, and he’s smiling. “And we always will.”

“I love you all so much,” I tell them. It sounds so simple, but it’s the most profound truth of my life. All of the drama, all of the secrets and the risks we took... it was all worth it, because it brought us here. It made us a family.

A family that now moves together in the water, touching and kissing and connecting.

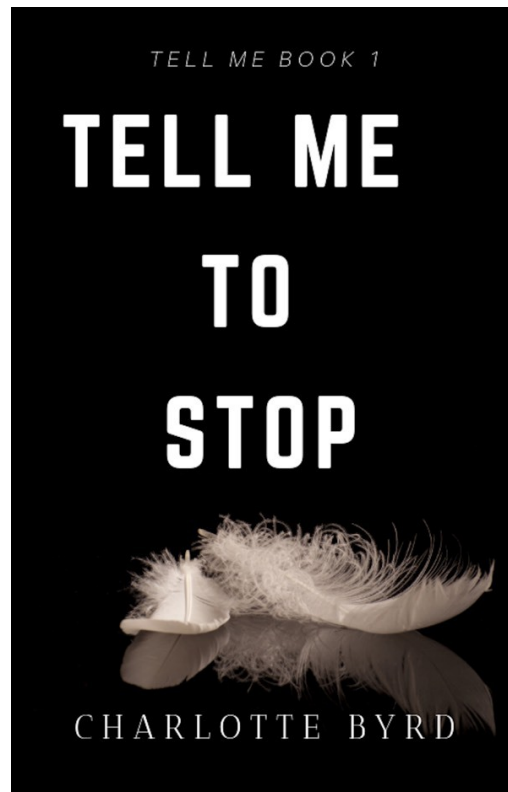
“Come on,” I suggest, pulling back and moving toward the ladder once things start heating up. “Let’s take this inside.”

“Aw, come on.” Ash pouts as the three of them watch me emerge from the water.

“Hey. We’re parents now,” I remind them with a teasing smile as I back away, reaching behind my neck to tug at the string holding my top up. “We have to be respectable.” And in the last second before I turn toward the sliding door, I let the top of my suit fall away.

In the history of mankind, I don't think anyone's ever gotten out of a pool faster than they do.

THANK you for reading Puck It! I hope you enjoyed spending time with Harlow and the boys. If you want more, please check out my bestselling series - [Tell Me to Stop](#).



*I owe him a debt. The kind money can't repay.*

He wants something else: **me, for one year.** But I don't even know who he is...

**365 days and nights doing everything he wants...except that.**

"I'm not going to sleep with you," I say categorically. He laughs.

"I'm going to make you a promise," his eyes challenge mine.

**"Before our time is up, you'll beg me for it."**

[ONE-CLICK TELL Me to Stop now!](#)

# ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

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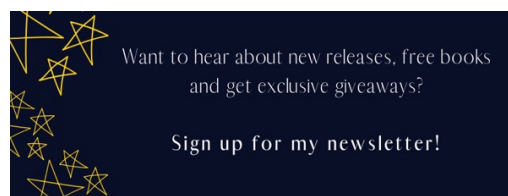
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[Best Laid Plans \(Cargill Brothers 2\)](#)

[Picture Perfect \(Cargill Brothers 3\)](#)

[Always Never \(Cargill Brothers 4\)](#)

[Kiss Me Again \(Macmillan Brothers 1\)](#)

[Say You'll Stay \(Macmillan Brothers 2\)](#)

[Never Let Go \(Macmillan Brothers 3\)](#)

[Keep Me Close \(Macmillan Brothers 4\)](#)

## Hockey Why Choose

[One Pucking Night](#) (Novella)

[Kiss and Puck](#)

[Pucking Disaster](#)

[Puck Me](#)

[Puck It](#)

**Tell me Series**

[Tell Me to Stop](#)

[Tell Me to Go](#)

[Tell Me to Stay](#)

[Tell Me to Run](#)

[Tell Me to Fight](#)

[Tell Me to Lie](#)

[Tell Me to Stop Box Set Books 1-6](#)

**Black Series**

[Black Edge](#)

[Black Rules](#)

[Black Bounds](#)

[Black Contract](#)

[Black Limit](#)

[Black Edge Box Set Books 1-5](#)

**Dark Intentions Series**

[Dark Intentions](#)

[Dark Redemption](#)

[Dark Sins](#)

[Dark Temptations](#)

[Dark Inheritance](#)

Dark Intentions Box Set Books 1-5

**Tangled Series**

[Tangled up in Ice](#)

[Tangled up in Pain](#)

[Tangled up in Lace](#)

[Tangled up in Hate](#)

[Tangled up in Love](#)

[Tangled up in Ice Box Set Books 1-5](#)

**The Perfect Stranger Series**

[The Perfect Stranger](#)

[The Perfect Cover](#)

[The Perfect Lie](#)

[The Perfect Life](#)

[The Perfect Getaway](#)

[The Perfect Stranger Box Set Books 1-5](#)

**Wedlocked Trilogy**

[Dangerous Engagement](#)

[Lethal Wedding](#)

[Fatal Wedding](#)

[Dangerous Engagement Box Set Books 1-3](#)

**Lavish Trilogy**

[Lavish Lies](#)

[Lavish Betrayal](#)

[Lavish Obsession](#)

[Lavish Lies Box Set Books 1-3](#)

**All the Lies Series**

[All the Lies](#)

[All the Secrets](#)

[All the Doubts](#)

[All the Lies Box Set Books 1-3](#)

**Not into you Duet**

[Not into you](#)

[Still not into you](#)

## **Standalone Novels**

[Dressing Mr. Dalton](#)

[Debt](#)

[Offer](#)

[Unknown](#)