

908



THE
Scarlet
HOTEL



A CONTEMPORARY M/M MPREG ROMANCE

TRISHA LINDE

Room 908

The Scarlet Hotel

Trisha Linde

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About the Book

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS AT The Scarlet Hotel, anything can happen... maybe even a second chance at love.

Omega Jasper never intended to be a teenage dad. He had big plans to become a surgeon. But then, he foolishly fell for the school's star quarterback. And he would've told him about the baby if the alpha hadn't turned out to be such a no-good, selfish, back-stabbing... jock! *Grr!* So even though Jasper hadn't planned for his son, he worked hard to be the best damn father ever. And everything is great until he runs into the alpha at their ten-year high school reunion.

Alpha Eric has been looking forward to this reunion for the past ten years. Every game he's played over the past decade, he's wondered if—*hoped*—that Jasper was watching. He was the tutor who helped Eric graduate, but he's always been more than that. He's the one who got away. Except, as it turns out, it wasn't just the omega who got away, but his son. Is it too late

to fix past mistakes? Or will it take another ten years to earn Jasper's forgiveness?

Room 908 is the tenth standalone book in the m/m mpreg romance series, The Scarlet Hotel, from bestselling author Trisha Linde. Each book features a new couple and begins and ends in a different room at The Scarlet Hotel. Room 908 features an omega who wishes he could turn back time, an alpha looking for a way to make amends, a child caught in the middle but who might just bind them together, and a second chance at love ten years in the making.

Prologue

THE STAFF

THE KITCHEN ECHOED WITH chaos. Clattering dishes, meat sizzling on the grill, popping oil in the fryer, bursts of steam, the air filled with an array of scents and flavors, not to mention the chef barking orders. “Get your lazy ass in gear, Benny! Those drinks won’t serve themselves.”

Diya sighed in complete contentedness as she plated a massive tray full of appetizers. She loved the hullabaloo of a bustling kitchen. Things had been far too quiet lately, and for it to be crazy busy like this, that meant only one thing—business was booming.

This wasn’t just dinner service in the restaurant, plus snacks in the lounge, though that was part of it. The hotel had also managed to snag a high school reunion, which was huge, considering a lot of these guests were in from out of town, so most of the rooms were booked up too. It was a pretty sweet score, and it was all thanks to a glowing review on a travel blog.

To stay on top of things, the manager, Monsieur Holland, had given Cherie the go-ahead to hire a bunch of new staff. Cherie, herself, was new in the role of chef. She'd been sous chef for ages, but she'd received an unexpected promotion after the three-star chef, Raoul, threw a toddler-sized tantrum and stormed out, bitching about he was above all of this.

“Uh, Devon—David?” Diya called, pointing to one of the new servers. There were too many names to learn all at once, and she couldn't keep any of them straight. They all looked kinda the same, with their wide-eyed, fresh-faced fear.

“Peter?” he offered timidly, so that it almost sounded like he was questioning his own name.

“Peter? Really? Okay, whatever. Here, take this.” She indicated the full tray, then she moved on to the next one. It was like a conveyor belt in here, with a constant stream of food going out, dirty dishes coming back.

“Coral, I need another tray,” Diya shouted above the din to get the dishwasher's attention.

The pink-haired matron waved a tattooed arm to indicate she'd heard her.

“Freshy, what the fuck!” Cherie yelled as the tray came crashing down on the floor.

Diya turned and saw Peter staring down at his feet, his skin blushed up like a blotchy strawberry. “Sorry, Chef.”

When he didn't move fast enough, she growled. “Don't just stand there, rookie. Pick it up!”

As he scurried to pick up the scraps of food, Cherie huffed and stomped over to where Diya was flipping the meat on the grill. “I hate newbies,” she grouched, loud enough for all the newbies to hear her.

“Better than the alternative. I’m tired of being short-staffed,” Diya said, not at all put off by Cherie’s attitude. The tiny woman was actually a total softie, but when it came to running a kitchen, she had balls of steel and swore like a sailor, and it tended to make people cry. “Oh, and the newbie’s name is Peter.”

“So? What does it matter? My money is that he’ll quit by the end of the night. I’ll only bother to learn their names if they make it a week.” It was true, working in a kitchen like this was not for the faint of heart.

“Wanna bet on it?” Diya asked.

“Ooh, you know it. Fifty bucks?”

“You’re on,” Diya agreed.

They couldn’t shake hands without having to wash up all over again, so Cherie gave Diya a little wink and a hip bump, then headed to the fryer station to boss somebody else around.

Diya saw one of the servers, Delia, trying to give Peter a bit of a pep talk while he picked up the last of his mess. “It’s all about animal behavior,” she was saying while she filled an oversized bowl with ice cubes. “Intimidation is a strong motivator to instill obedience. You see it in a lot of larger predators, like an alpha lion or a silverback gorilla, but paired

with the dominance comes fierce loyalty. And Cherie, just like those animals, will guard and protect us. I would seriously entrust her with my life. There's a benefit to being a part of the pack, you know."

Peter was nodding, his jaw a little slack as he listened, enthralled by her. She was studying animal psychology at the local university, and she wasn't just smart, but also beautiful. Yep, with the way he was giving her those puppy-dog eyes, it was safe to say there was no way he was quitting now.

Easy money, Diya thought to herself, smirking as she tried to wipe the sweat from her brow on the shoulder of her kitchen whites.

When Delia tried to pick up the bowl of ice, she swayed to the side. She claimed she'd been working out, but it obviously wasn't enough. Peter reached to catch the bowl in time, but they'd already seen what his coordination was like once tonight. Diya, however, was in the right place at the right time. She jogged forward and caught the rim of the bowl before it could tip over.

"Isn't there an easier way to do this?" she asked Delia.

She chuckled, a little flustered. "Probably. Too late now, though, right? Wanna help me get this to the table?"

Diya shrugged. Why not? So long as their boss didn't see her walking around where the guests could see her in her grease-spattered outfit. The kitchen tended to get a little sweltering, standing in front of the grill for hours at a time. The banquet hall, however, was an air-conditioned 70 degrees. With the

bowl balanced between them, Delia pushed backward through the swinging door and led the way across into the banquet hall. A few guests had already arrived and were mingling in groups of twos and threes, but the night was young.

“Where do you want it?” Diya asked.

Delia jerked her head toward a long table set up along the wall where Benny was setting up a lame excuse for a bar. “Lemme guess,” Diya said, eyeing the cheap beer cans. “They didn’t want to splurge on champagne.”

She giggled. “That would be my guess. You know how these reunions are. A bunch of adults trying to relive their glory days.”

Diya snorted a laugh as they slid the bowl onto the table. “I didn’t go to my ten-year or my twenty-year reunion. I hated high school.” She’d stayed in touch with everyone she’d deemed worthy of friendship.

“Thanks, guys,” Benny said, sticking the beer cans into the ice. He sighed. “How do you make beer cans look classy?” He tried to move them around into a pattern, then gave up and turned around to pluck a flower from the large vase behind him. He placed the blossom on the edge of the bowl and nodded. “There.”

Diya hid her grimace. The types of guests who were going to drink that beer didn’t care about being classy, but he seemed so proud of himself, so she left it alone.

“You know, I kinda miss high school,” Benny admitted. “Life was so much easier when I was living with my parents, no bills, just coasting through classes doing the bare minimum.”

Delia sighed. “Tell me about it. Student loans are the absolute worst.”

It had been decades since Diya had lived with her parents, and even back then, she’d been helping pay the bills right from her very first paycheck at 15. School hadn’t been easy, and neither had living with her parents. She would take being an independent adult over reliving high school any day.

A group of four guys spied the beer and sauntered over. Diya could already tell the type—jocks. They’d probably been on the football team or something. They were all tall with broad shoulders, though a couple of them had clearly given up being athletes in exchange for a more reliable paycheck and now sported a few extra pounds around their waists. They were all wearing button-up shirts and sports jackets in various shades of blue and gray.

One, however, seemed to be the de facto ringleader. He still had the tightly packed muscles of an athlete. His buddies seemed to orbit around him, their eyes flicking over to watch him every few seconds. If he laughed, they would laugh, even if no one had told a joke. “Hey, is that beer for us?” he asked, already reaching for a can.

“Yeah, have at it,” Benny said, but his eyes widened. “Hey, you’re Eric Van Leer!”

The jock gave a practiced smile, half cocky, half shy, entirely charming. A dimple popped out on his cheek. “That’s me. Are you a fan?”

Benny bit his lip and averted his eyes. “Uh, yeah, sure. Totally. I love sports.” He was such an awful liar, which somehow made him even more endearing.

A jock. I so called that, Diya thought with a smirk.

Instead of being offended by Benny’s lack of enthusiasm, Eric laughed easily. “It’s all good, man. Football isn’t for everybody. Let me guess, you think it’s too violent?”

Benny made a face. “Nah, it’s the thirty seconds of action followed by five minutes of standing around that I can’t be bothered with. But I don’t mind the tight pants.” Now the whole group of guys was laughing, lewd grins on their faces. Delia was watching them with interest, likely comparing them to a bunch of hyenas or something.

They all grabbed a beer from the bowl of ice, popping the tops. “Cheers!” Eric said, holding up his can. “Here’s to another ten years of friendship.”

“No way! Here’s to the Comets for finally making the right trade. You’re gonna take the team all the way to the Super Bowl this year, I know it.”

Diya wasn’t a psychology student like her coworker, but she could’ve sworn there was a sad tilt to Eric’s eyes as the three other guys tapped their cans to his. He was a little slower to bring his drink to his lips.

There was movement from the door into the banquet hall, and Eric turned to check who was coming in, but he seemed disappointed. He looked like he was waiting for someone. With the crowd slowly beginning to trickle in, the DJ took his cue to put on some music, probably a playlist of all the top tunes from ten years ago. A few people cheered the opening bars of the tune.

As the former jocks headed off to mingle, Eric turned back once to say to Benny, “Hey, thanks. And I like the flower. It’s a nice touch.” He gave Benny a wink before sauntering away with his friends.

“Thanks!”

Diya reluctantly returned to her station and got back to work. For the rest of her shift, even through the kitchen chaos, she could feel the vibration of the music in her chest, and for a little while, she reminisced about the good times she’d had in high school. There might’ve been a few after all...

1

Jasper

“I LOVE YOUR EYES,” Eric said, sliding my glasses off and setting them aside on the bed. “They’re so impossibly blue. Like depthless-ocean blue. Like sapphires...” He leaned in to kiss me, and I evaded, but just barely. It was getting harder to resist his charms—no matter how cliché his lines were. The way he complimented me like he meant every word, it made it hard to forget why I was saying no.

“Nice try, Eric,” I said, aiming for casual, like my heart wasn’t throbbing a pulse of need through my veins. I ignored my traitorous body and shoved the textbook across the bed in front of him. “But if you don’t pass these exams, you won’t graduate. And if you don’t graduate—”

He groaned, rolling onto his back on my bed. “I know, I know. No scholarship, no college, no football, no future.”

“I don’t know about that last one. Feels a bit dramatic to me,” I said, shoving my glasses back on.

“Does it?”

“Yeah. Football isn’t everything, you know.”

“What if I told you there was a future for you where you weren’t a surgeon.” He was already smirking; he knew he’d stumped me with that one.

“W-well, I mean... I could live without becoming a doctor, theoretically, but that’s not going to happen. Failing your exams, however... a very real possibility.” I tapped my pencil’s eraser on the textbook again. “Now, focus.”

“How about, if I get this question right, you give me a kiss.”

I bit down on my lip, and Eric’s eyes lingered on my mouth. This was dangerous territory. “Let’s say, if you get every question on the page right...”

“Deal.” He grinned and sat up. “You’d better pucker up, because I am going to ace the hell out of this shit.”



“DAAAAAAD!” CAMERON YELLED FROM across the house, and even though I heard him loud and clear, I ignored him. He knew better than to expect me to yell back. If he wanted to talk to me, he could march over here and do it in a normal volume.

I heard his footsteps as he ran down the hall, and when he peeked around the corner at me, with those moss-green eyes, my heart gave a little skip. He was starting to look more and more like his alpha father every day, and a part of me wanted to curl up in a ball and cry sometimes.

“Didn’t you hear me calling?” he asked, and I raised an eyebrow and shot a look at him.

“What do you think I’m going to say.”

He rolled those gorgeous eyes of his in classic pre-teen fashion. “Yeah, yeah. No yelling in the house,” he drawled.

I didn’t have the energy to address the sass right now, so I decided to roll with it. I drew in a deep breath and yelled, “YES, CAM? WHAT CAN I HELP YOU WITH?”

His giggle made me smile. “I just wanted to know what time you’re coming home after this reunion thing.”

“Uh... I dunno. Probably not too late. Why?”

“Can I stay up and wait for you?” he asked, staring down at his toes. He was up to something.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “Maybe... if you tell me why.”

He huffed. “Nana said we could make popcorn and watch scary movies—but only if you said it was okay.”

“Who am I to deny Nana?” I said, ruffling his hair. “In fact, that sounds so fun, maybe I’ll just stay here with you guys tonight.”

“You can’t do that. You bought a new suit and everything.” This was true. I hadn’t bought myself any new clothes for the past two years, but I couldn’t very well show up at this stupid reunion looking like a hobo. I was voted most likely to take over the world. How was I supposed to tell everyone that I hadn’t even left town?

I could feel Cam watching me. He was far too astute for his almost-ten years. I busied myself fishing a noodle out of the pot and blowing it on it, before holding it out to my son. “Tell me if it’s done.”

He made an exaggerated chomping sound as he gobbled it up. “Mm-hm,” he mumbled, nodding, and I turned off the stove and brought the pot over to the colander in the sink to drain.

“Okay, then can you grate some cheese while I get changed? Nana will be here any minute, and I’m already going to be fashionably late.” Which was kind of my goal. I wanted to spend as little time at this thing as possible.

While Cameron got to work on the cheese—since he believed all sauce was the devil, but cheese was alllll good—I headed down the hall to my bedroom to get into my brand-new navy suit. My phone rang in my pocket, and I pulled it out and saw it was one of my coworkers.

I answered it on speaker and tossed my phone onto my bed. “Hey, Brent. What’s up? Please tell me I didn’t forget to close one of the cages.” I pulled my t-shirt over my head and tossed it into the hamper.

“Yes. You forgot to close *all* the cages, and the clinic has now been taken over by the animals, with Pookie the Pomeranian as their rightful king. They’re demanding squeaky toys and bacon.”

I laughed, adding my sweatpants to the laundry pile, which was beginning to get out of hand. I really needed to do

laundry, but I just hadn't found the time. "So really, what's up?"

He paused, and I could almost hear the face he was making, the one where his lips pinched because he was about to say something I didn't want to hear. "I was just wondering if you'd reconsidered my offer."

"Which offer is that?" I asked, though I knew perfectly well what offer he was talking about, but I was hoping he'd forgotten.

"I can come with you tonight. You don't need to go alone. It doesn't have to mean anything you don't want it to, but you shouldn't have to face him alone."

My throat tightened, and I gave a hard swallow as I threaded my arms through the sleeves of the white button-down shirt. "Thank you for the offer, but like I said earlier, he probably won't even be there."

"Right," Brent scoffed, sounding even more bitter than I felt, even though it was me it had happened to. "Bigshot football star, can't be seen lowering himself to rub shoulders with the peasants."

"Brent..." I warned in a low tone. He knew none of this was his business. The only reason he knew anything about it at all was because he'd overheard me talking to my friend at work.

He sighed. "Right. Sorry." He didn't sound sorry at all. He sounded miffed that he wasn't getting his way. "You're not gonna tell him about Cam, are you?" Also not his business.

I gritted my teeth in an effort not to snap at him, because that would only lead to an uncomfortable work environment. “I don’t know, Brent,” I huffed, my tension leaching out into my tone of voice. “I haven’t told him for the past ten years, but you never know. Maybe he’ll come up to me and say, ‘hey, remember that time we had sex and then I ditched you? Did you happen to have a kid, by any chance?’ I mean, if he asks, I’m not gonna lie.” I sat on the edge of the bed heavily and squeezed my eyes shut, frustrated tears sneaking out. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you,” I said with a sigh. “I’m just—”

“No! Don’t apologize, I get it. I didn’t mean to pry.” I could hear him breathing over the line. “Just... call me if you need me, okay? Even if it’s late. If you need a knight in shining armor or even just a ride home, I can be there in ten minutes.”

“Okay. Thanks, Brent,” I said softly, and I meant it.

He was a nice guy, and he’d made it more than obvious that he was interested in starting something with me. He was good with Cameron, he’d make a good dad, but... there were no sparks, no fireworks. Just like there hadn’t been chemistry with any of the guys I’d dated. Maybe I was being too picky. There was no doubt that my life would be easier with a partner. I gave the overflowing laundry hamper the side-eye.

Yes, I’m looking at you, laundry. And you, sink full of dishes. And dusty shelves and dirty floors and...

The list of chores went on forever, but the landlord had raised the rent, so I’d been picking up all the extra shifts I could get in order to make ends meet. And that meant less time

for picking up around the house. And there was no way I was going to give up quality time with my son in favor of chores.

“Daaaaaad! Nana’s here!” Cam shouted.

“Sorry, Brent, I’ve gotta go.”

“Yeah, I heard.” He laughed.

“Thanks again for the offer,” I told him genuinely. “It means a lot.”

I knew even without seeing him that he was smiling. “Anything for you.” And that was what worried me. I didn’t want to lead him on.

Disconnecting the call, I quickly tucked in my shirt and threw on the blazer, before heading for the door. *It’ll be fine*, I told myself. I would have a drink, catch up with old friends, all while dodging questions about why I wasn’t a surgeon like I’d planned.

Eric

CHEESY MUSIC, BAD DANCE moves, and cheap drinks. I didn't know what I was expecting when I'd told my assistant, Talia, to accept the invitation to this reunion, but this wasn't it.

No, that wasn't true. I knew exactly what I was expecting. I was going to walk into this ballroom, and the music would swell, a spotlight shining on the man I came here to see. Jasper. The one who got away. We would lock eyes from across the room, and everyone else would disappear into the background. We would walk toward each other in slow motion, and he would say something like, "I can't believe I was such an idiot. My life has been meaningless without you." And then I would draw him into my arms and kiss him, show him what he'd been missing. And then we would pick up where we left off ten years ago, riding off into the sunset in my Porsche to begin our epic romance.

It was like a scene out of some cheesy rom-com, and yes, I realized how ridiculous it sounded, but you couldn't blame a guy for dreaming. I'd even rented a room upstairs in the hopes

that we might need it in our desperation to get each other's clothes off. Except, this wasn't a movie. It was real life. And real life kinda sucked in comparison to the fantasy. I was still the pro football player, and I did drive a Porsche. But Jasper's absence hit me like a 300-pound defensive end to the chest.

My sulking was interrupted when my buddy John nudged my arm. "I saw that picture of you online, with that model, Remy something, at the Honors Awards. Reminded me a lot of my ex. Maaan, he had an ass that just wouldn't quit."

"Oh yeah?" I didn't care about his ex or his ass, and I didn't want to talk about Remy, but John was blinking at me with this expectant look on his face. Shit, he was like a dog waiting for praise after learning a new trick, like I was supposed to applaud having a hot ex. "How come you guys didn't work out?" I asked instead, trying to steer the conversation toward something more important, but it was immediately clear that wasn't what he wanted.

John's face fell, his eyes skittering away. "Uh, you know... we just drifted apart."

Except Dan let out a loud guffaw. "John got caught banging the neighbor, that's what happened."

My entire body deflated; what a predictable answer. So far, the night's discussions with these guys had revolved around all the tail they were getting, instead of meaningful relationships they'd built or life goals achieved, and it was like nothing had changed over the past decade. They were still horny teenagers. Gods, was I this bad back then? Yeah, I totally was. I wanted

to believe I had grown past all this immature bullshit, but seeing these guys who used to be my friends made me a little embarrassed.

It was no wonder Jasper wouldn't return my calls all those years ago. I used to be an asshole. But a part of me had thought he'd seen past that image I displayed for everyone else, the star quarterback, bringing the trophy home for our team. When I was with him, I felt *seen*. We'd never had meaningless conversations like this. We talked about real things, with substance and emotion. When I was with him, I felt like more than just a jock. I felt like a man—like I could be *his* man.

I set my beer down on a table. I'd barely taken a sip; it tasted like watery piss, and now that I'd been holding it for an hour, it was just *warm*, watery piss. Maybe I would slip over to the lounge and order some high-end whiskey.

Or maybe I should just go back to my room. It was time to let go of my unrealistic fantasy and any smidgen of hope I'd had. Jasper obviously wasn't going to show tonight. He probably had something better to do. Because of course he did. He was probably in the middle of surgery at this very moment, his hands in someone's chest, saving their life. Why did I think this throwback to the past would be important to him? It wasn't even important to me, except for tracking Jasper down.

I'd tried looking him up over the years, whenever I woke up from a dream about him, my skin flushed with need, cock aching. But I never found him. Maybe his number was

unlisted, but you would think if he'd become a surgeon, he would be on staff somewhere, at a hospital or clinic. It was weird, because he'd been so certain of his future. And he was smart enough to do it, too. I couldn't imagine anything standing in his way. Heck, maybe he was still in medical school. I'd heard it took ages, depending on your field of study.

“Hey, man, remember that time we had the bonfire down at the creek, and Dan set up that bike ramp?” John said, his cheeks pink from the six beers he'd had so far. He'd been lining the cans up on the table to form a pyramid. “He thought he was going to be able to jump clear across to the other side.”

I laughed involuntarily. It had been funny, the way he'd pedaled as hard as he could, letting out this drunken battle cry. Then as soon as his front wheel was over the lip of the ramp, the bike just tipped forward, and he ended up face first in the shallow, muddy creek. “Coach was pissed,” I reminded them. “He said, ‘If you're gonna break your neck, at least wait until after we win the championship.’”

The guys all laughed, slapping Dan on the back. “Good times,” Dan said with chagrin, rubbing his cheek as if the sting of injury had lingered all this time.

Together, the guys and I had made a pretty great team. We certainly won more games than we lost. I knew Dan had caught a football scholarship to college, like I had, but he'd never gone pro. Now he was an accountant, John was a

manager at a bank, and Andy sold used cars. We weren't the same people we used to be.

I'd have liked to think I'd grown...

I scanned the room again, looking for Jasper. He wouldn't look the same, so I was trying to paint his eyes on an older face. Would he have contacts instead of glasses? Maybe he'd grown his hair out, but I doubted it, because he'd always hated how it curled around his ears and the nape of his neck. Maybe a beard or a goatee? As painful as it was, I forced myself to examine the couples. I wasn't an idiot. I knew the chances of Jasper being married were high. He was a total catch, even back then. I was such a moron not to claim him when I had the chance. And now I was probably too late. That was probably why I hadn't found a Dr. Jasper Mayle online. He'd probably changed his name. At least married was a better option than the alternative—that he was dead.

Nope. I wasn't going there. He was alive somewhere on this earth. I just hadn't found him yet.

But even if he wasn't harboring the same deep longing I was, I at least had a few things I needed to tell him. Thank you, for starters. If it hadn't been for Jasper, I would've failed my final exams for sure. His sweet kisses had been the perfect motivation to keep focused. I wouldn't be where I was without him.

But I also wanted to apologize.

Jasper... well, he was a nerd. He got straight A's, was on the debate team and the chess club. He spent the lunch hour with

his friends playing Dungeons and Dragons. He hid his bluer-than-blue eyes behind thick glasses, and once he got braces, it was rare to see him smile in the hallways at school. He smiled for me, though... but only in private.

I was ashamed to admit that I'd kept him a secret from my friends. I was too worried about what they would think if I told them I had a crush on the brainiac. I had a certain reputation to maintain, after all. It would've been social suicide.

Fuck, what a total moron I was.

"Hey, Van Leer, you want another drink?" Andy held out a fresh can of beer.

I really, really didn't want it, but if I passed, I wouldn't have an excuse to stay. I'd end up going upstairs to my room and crashing before midnight. And maybe Jasper's surgery would've ended in time for him to catch the last hour or two of the reunion. Or maybe he was flying in from where he lived in California or something, and his flight was delayed. "Yeah, thanks," I said, forcing myself to reach out and take the can. At least this one was cold.

"Speaking of a fine piece of ass..." John said with a lascivious groan, "would you check that omega out?"

We weren't speaking of ass—finally. I had to bite down on my frustrated sigh. Just when I thought we were making some progress with conversation, he brought it right back around to objectifying omegas.

“Holy shit, dude. I’d tap that,” Dan agreed. If the man was as hot as they claimed, none of these guys had a chance with him.

And then Andy added his two cents. “I’d love to strip that suit off him and lay him out on the table and make a meal out of him.”

I shook my head, sick of this scene. I put my unopened beer on the table next to my last abandoned drink. “Hey, guys, I think I’m gonna call it a night.”

They were barely able to peel their attention off the omega in question long enough to say goodbye to me. *Seriously, how hot can this guy be?* I wondered. And so, against my better judgment, I turned and looked.

My whole world spun on its axis, the ground unsteady under my feet. “Jasper?” I gasped out, my voice barely more than a breathy whisper as the wind was knocked straight out of me, my chest too tight.

“You know him?” John asked. “Did we go to school with him?”

Because of course they didn’t recognize him. They’d only bullied him for four years. I would know him anywhere, though. How could I have been worried that he would’ve changed? I knew those lips in intimate detail, those hands and how they felt tangled in my hair. I knew he had a birthmark on his left hip, and I knew the sounds he made when he came. Just as I knew by the crease between his brows that he was unhappy.

I was moving without conscious thought, walking toward him in slow motion. I vaguely heard my old friends calling out to me, but they didn't matter right now. Only Jasper mattered.

Jasper

I NEVER SHOULD'VE COME.

I'd thought I wanted to reconnect with a few of my old friends, but it quickly became clear that they were more interested in bragging about their own successes than hearing about mine. And the second they started asking me about what I'd been up to the last ten years, I found myself holding back. I wasn't ashamed of my life—in fact, I was downright proud of my son. He was by far my greatest achievement, but everyone had these expectations of where I would be by now, that I couldn't seem to bring myself to admit how wrong they were. I lost count of the number of times I'd heard someone ask where I was practicing medicine, and every time, I answered vaguely, “Nowhere yet.” *Yet*. What a joke. Like I would ever get the opportunity to finish my degree.

I was starting to feel the pressure building behind my right eye, a precursor of a migraine. I'd spent the past 20 minutes hiding in the corner by the staff entrance at the back.

Clutching a glass of pop in my hand, I closed my eyes, trying to trace the path that had led me to this exact point in time. It all started with Eric Van Leer. With his dimple and his charming words, I had truly bought into what he was selling. What an idiot I was. Book smarts was one thing, but it seemed it didn't excuse me from blind naivety. I let him use me, and while the bitterness still lingered, I couldn't hate him entirely, because he gave me Cameron. Yes, it threw my life off its intended track, but who was to say this wasn't how it was always supposed to be?

If you believed in that fate bullshit. Which I totally didn't.

It was like the devil himself had been summoned, merely by thinking about him. I opened my eyes, and it was like the memory of Eric from my brain had been imprinted straight onto my eyeballs. Because there he was. A little older, a lot broader. Same dimple, same green eyes that I saw on my son's face every day. And he was looking straight at me.

"Shit," I muttered, spinning in place, looking for an escape route and coming up empty since I had backed myself into a literal corner.

I'd known there was a chance he would be here, and if I was being totally honest with myself, I would even admit that I'd been curious about seeing him. Like facing my fears, proving to myself that he held no sway over my heart. Which I could now say... was a total lie. The way my heart was slamming against my ribs, my breath speeding up until I was nearly panting, it was all evidence that I'd been fooling myself.

I was still the sucker I'd always been.

But I never in a million years would've thought he'd approach me. I was nothing more than a game to him, after all. And this game had been played out.

Oh gods, he's coming over! My palms went slick with sweat, and I nearly dropped my drink. Dammit, why did he have to look so good?!

Eric didn't break eye contact as he stalked over to me, and I suddenly knew exactly what it felt like to be a gazelle about to be taken down by a lion—if the gazelle had once been wildly in love with the lion, and still harbored intense sexual attraction. I might've actually whimpered as he came to a stop before me. "Jasper," he said, his voice low and raspy.

"E-Eric," I stuttered, inching back to create some distance between us. My muscles bunched up, prepared to bolt if he even flinched in my direction.

He took it all in, his eyes drawing a slow path down my body. It was hard to tell what he was thinking, but I could've sworn he lingered on my left hand, as if looking for a wedding ring. The corners of his lips twitched when he met my gaze, and it was like he'd gathered strength, his chest puffing up.

He drew in a deep breath, then said, "I just wanted to apologize."

"Oh?" I squeaked. "For what, exactly?"

He chuckled darkly, shaking his head. "Where do I start? How about, I'm sorry I was an asshole."

Those words sank in, and I found... they helped a little. I'd been waiting ten years for an apology. *Snap out of it, Jasper. Don't let him play you a second time. You're smarter than that.* So I shored up my walls, gritted my teeth, and pretended that none of what he said mattered.

"That's nice. Apology accepted. You can go back to your fan club now." I made a little shooing motion, but he was having none of it.

"Just hang on," he said, taking a step closer. "That apology sucked. I can do better."

My eyebrows shot up, then came crashing down in a frown. "You can?" I didn't think I could handle his definition of better. I knew too well what he could achieve when he set his mind to it.

"I wasn't just an asshole; I was a world-class asshole. I never should've cared what other people thought, but I did. I'm not trying to make excuses for myself, they're just facts. I cared so much about my own popularity, that I gave up the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn't be where I am today without you, and instead of my gratitude, devotion, and loyalty, I let you down."

"Right... because I was your tutor... I helped you graduate." I felt cold and unbalanced. I didn't like where this was headed.

He was shaking his head. "No. I mean, yes, but also, you were always more than my tutor. You know that, right? Tell me you felt it too. There was something between us." His eyes were pleading, his voice so earnest that I almost believed him.

He reached for me, and I would've tripped as I retreated if it weren't for the arm that came around my waist.

“Hey, honey, they didn't have the drink you wanted, so I got you a rum and Coke. Hope that's okay.”

My head whipped up, my mouth gaping. Brent? “What are ___”

“Oh, and I called home to check on things, and your mom said she's having a great time with her grandson.” Brent was looking pointedly at Eric, his arm squeezing tightly around me, making it hard to breathe.

Ah. I get it now.

Eric staggered back, his Adam's apple bobbing repeatedly as he swallowed. He looked like he'd been slapped. “You have a son. That's... great. Congratulations,” he said shakily.

His reaction made me pause, red flags waving. “Eric, wait...” I said, even though I had no clue what to say. All I knew was that if this was some kind of game, then why was he so crushed?

“No, no, it's okay,” he said, taking another step back. “I won't bother you any longer. I said all I needed to say. Good luck with... life.” And then he spun on his heel and shoved his way into the crowd, paying no attention to who he knocked out of his way.

The emotions barreling through me were nearly impossible to parse. Confusion, fear, anger, but above all... regret. My

eyes followed him, but he didn't look back even once, until he disappeared out of sight.

Brent's hand inched lower, resting just at the cusp of my ass, and I pushed out of his grip and whirled on him, temper flaring. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!" I snapped.

His face scrunched up in confusion. "What do you mean? I'm protecting you, obviously. That guy was going to lay his hands on you."

"So you laid your hands on me instead?" Surely, the irony wasn't lost on him.

He began backpedaling, a wary look on his face. "You know it's not like that. I was just doing you a favor."

"Well, don't do me any more fucking favors!" I snarled, slapping his hand away as he reached for my shoulder. "I never asked for you to be here, Brent. I can take care of myself."

He held his hands up in surrender, his eyes skittering left and right. "Shh, Jasper, people are staring."

"Why should I care if people are staring? Like their opinions should dictate how I act? What decisions I make? Like my entire life should change, all because someone is worried about being liked or being popular?" Brent and I both knew I wasn't talking about today. I was a decade late on dealing with these emotions. Tears stung behind my eyes, and I blinked in a

pointless effort to dispel them. It had been a long, hard ten years; I was allowed to cry every now and then.

I grappled with my control. “Can you just leave? Please?” I gritted out through clenched teeth.

For a second, I thought he was going to argue with me, but he finally nodded, his shoulders sagging. “Okay, I’ll go. Call me later.”

“Uh-huh.” There was no way I was going to call him. He’d crossed a line tonight by coming here. I had specifically told him no. I didn’t want his help, and I didn’t want to be anything more than friends. If he wouldn’t listen about this, how far would he go to get what he wanted?

“See you at work on Monday?” He waited for me to answer, but when I didn’t, he nodded in defeat and headed out.

I was suddenly alone in a crowded room. The music was blaring, but I barely heard it. Instead, I heard Eric saying, “*Tell me you felt it too.*” Because I thought I had, but when faced with a broken heart, it was too easy to believe the worst.

I’d screwed up. Just because I was sad or angry or offended, none of that excused what I’d done by keeping Eric’s son from him. Depriving Cameron of his father.

Fuck. I had to tell Eric the truth.

Eric

THE EVENING ONLY WENT down from there, and considering how it was going so far, that was really saying something.

I jostled my way through the crowd like a pinball, and my friends were all waiting, expressions on their faces ranging from disbelief to pity. They had witnessed my epic failure, and nobody was as surprised as I was. I supposed I hadn't really expected him to fall into my arms, but... was it really too much to ask for a little swoon?

My worst nightmares had come true. The one that got away was officially out of reach. The end.

I didn't give anyone a chance to give me some lame platitude about how it was no big deal to get shot down, it happened all the time—and while that might've been true, this was the only time it had mattered. “Let's get something real to drink,” I said, heading for the lounge. I didn't need to look back to know my friends were following.

I lost all track of time after the third drink. By the eighth, I'd forgotten my friends' names. Unfortunately, Jasper was still there, lodged firmly in my brain. There were overlapping images of him now, like cerebral double vision. On the one hand, I could perfectly recall how he'd looked sprawled on his bed, trying his damndest to keep our studying on track, all the while blushing, the scent of his slick a distraction like no other. But then I blinked and saw him as he was now, older, wiser, somehow even more handsome, but instead of blushing bashfully, he'd looked... cornered. I scared him.

My stomach clenched and lurched at the thought, and the acidic burn of bile crept up my throat. I swallowed hard to keep the vomit down. "I gotta... go to bed," I mumbled to whoever was left of my friends, but I could barely keep my eyes open. Someone patted me on the back.

The smart thing would've been to go up to my rented room and crash hard, but I couldn't stand the thought of sleeping in that bed by myself. I just wanted to go home and sleep for a week. Except I had practice tomorrow afternoon. Uuuuugh. Coach was going to kick my ass from here to LA and back again for showing up hungover.

Blinking in a pointless attempt to clear my head, I left the lounge and stepped up to the check-in desk, digging through my pocket for the room key. "Uh, room 908. I won't be needing it after all," I said, slapping the key down and sliding it across the counter to the night clerk. "And my car..."

“Don’t worry, Mr. Van Leer, we can have it dropped off at your home for you tomorrow,” he said. “Let me call you a cab.”

“Great, thanks...” I squinted at his nametag, “Roland. You’re a good man. No, a *great* man! Here, you deserve a tip.” I pulled out my wallet and shoved some cash at him, I had no clue how much.

He tried to refuse the money, but I insisted. “Thank you, sir. I assure you, it’s no trouble.” He was smiling at me in that overly polite way I recognized when someone was trying to placate a drunk.

I didn’t want to be that guy. Someone who partied too hard, got sloppy, then made a scene. A few of the players on my new team had made the news last month when they got out of hand and started a brawl at a strip club. But that wasn’t me. I refused to embarrass myself like that. Which was why I never drank this much. For a guy my size, I couldn’t hold my liquor worth a damn.

“Sorry,” I slurred, rubbing at my eyes, my vision blurry. “I’ll just wait outside.”

When I reached for the door handle, it seemed to slide out of reach, and I stretched for it. By the time I realized someone was opening the door for me, my balance was off, and I tilted forward.

“Whoa! Careful there, sir. I’ve got you.” A man caught my arm, and I looked up into the face of the doorman who’d gripped my arm. He pulled me upright.

“Thanks,” I said—or I thought I said, anyway. My lips felt a bit tingly. Even though I’d quit drinking for the night, the alcohol was still creeping through my system, dragging me further down into a sloshy abyss. I really needed to get home.

“Eric?” a voice called, and I tried to focus on where it was coming from. Was I hallucinating? Had I passed out and this was all a dream? Because it sounded a lot like Jasper. “You’re drunk.”

“I am,” I agreed, nodding, which made my head swim, and I grimaced, bracing myself against the window behind me.

The blurry figure that looked a lot like Jasper said, “Come on. I’ll drive you home.”

I felt him take my elbow and let him lead me to his car parked at the curb. “Why would you do that?” I asked, out of curiosity more than anything.

He sighed, helping to guide me into the passenger seat. “We were friends once, weren’t we?”

“Friends. Right,” I snorted. “Does your boyfriend know you’re taking me home?” It came out snidely, but he didn’t take the bait.

In the time it took him to walk around to the driver’s side, I drifted off to sleep for a second, surrounded by his familiar scent, like paper and ink and hazelnut coffee. I jolted back to alertness a few seconds later when he opened his door and climbed in. In a brief moment of clarity, I gaped at him. He

was so damn beautiful. “Jasper? I’ve missed you.” I hadn’t meant to be so honest.

He gripped the steering wheel hard, refusing to look at me, then put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. “What’s your address?” he asked like I hadn’t said anything.

I told him where I lived, then sat back and watched him. He was still the same man, though I could feel the changes. He was no longer so fresh-faced and eager, confident in his choices. He was weary, his shoulders bunched up. When I thought about rubbing his back to help ease that tension, I had to remind myself that he was taken. That he belonged to someone else. Someone else got to give him back rubs, got to kiss him, touch him, and make him gasp. Got to dry his tears, sleep next to him, take care of him.

“I heard you that day, you know,” he said, like he was starting a story halfway through. “You’d texted me to tell me you’d passed your exams. I was so proud of you.” He laughed softly, and I could’ve sworn his eyes shone with tears. “I was looking forward to celebrating with you, but then I found you out by the football field with your friends.”

Dread sank into me like a cold stone in my stomach. A memory resurfacing... “No,” I said firmly, as if I could rewrite history.

Jasper nodded. “Laughing about what a loser I was for thirsting after you, thinking I had a chance.”

“Nooo,” I moaned, gripping my hair and pulling until I felt the sting, hoping it would sober me up. All these years I’d

been searching for him, and not once had I considered why he didn't want to be found. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. I was an idiot. You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Obviously." He nodded, but it didn't look like he cared about my excuses. Instead, his lips thinned out into a hard line. "I was so damn hurt. What a loser I was to think I'd meant something to you. That was why I didn't tell you when I found out I was pregnant."

"I—I just—what?" The words took a second to sink in, and even then, I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly. "Pregnant?" The world around me was spinning, and I closed my eyes, trying to find center.

"I should've waited until you were sober to do this." I opened my eyes and looked across the car at him. He shook his head. He still hadn't even glanced at me. Why wouldn't he look at me?

My breath came out as a gasp through my tightening throat. "Did you... the baby... you had them?" Was that the right question to ask? The thought that he might've had an abortion without telling me, that I could've become a father just to lose them, nearly broke me.

Jasper finally peeked at me, taking a measure of my reaction. "Yes. His name is Cameron."

"Cameron... I have a son?" My heart soared, even as the rage ignited, both extremes dulled by the alcohol. Jasper's expression was guarded as he waited to see what emotion came out on top.

It was all too much, the thoughts and emotions swirling around in my hazy mind. I needed to get out of this car, needed to pace. Thoughts were bouncing around inside my head, and they were all too slippery for me to keep hold of anything coherent. “Y-you kept my son from me?” I gritted out. But could I blame him? He thought I’d used him, that I’d treated him like shit, like he was nothing more than the punchline of a joke. Gods, why the fuck did I say all that bullshit? I didn’t feel that way at all! Why did I ever care what those guys thought? All this time, I could’ve been with the man I loved, as a family, with our son!

But then I thought of that jackass tonight with his arm around Jasper, talking about my child, *their* child, and instead of all the things I should’ve said, I blurted, “How do you know he’s even mine?” I regretted the words as soon as it was too late to take them back.

Jasper’s face crumpled, and the tears he’d been holding off spilled over. He dashed them away with the back of his hand. “There was never anyone but you, but if you can’t take my word for it, you’re entitled to a paternity test.”

My heart ached. I’d caused him so many tears, too many. “No, that’s not necessary. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it,” I said. It seemed I had a bad habit of saying things I didn’t mean. None of my apologies meant anything if I never tried to do better.

I turned to look out the window and saw I was almost home. The houses in this neighborhood were all two-story manors,

with too-green grass cut exactly two inches high. The windows were all dark. What time was it?

Jasper pulled the car into my driveway but left the engine running. His tears had slowed, but I hated how broken he looked. This was what ten years of regret looked like. We'd both made mistakes, but maybe it wasn't too late to set things right.

With my hand on the door handle, I said, "I'd like to meet him. If that's all right."

"Of course." After a second, he leaned across to open the glove compartment, and I was hit with a fresh wave of his scent. The longing I'd always felt for him had intensified, and I nearly reached out to draw him into my arms. He pulled out a pen and took my hand, writing on the back of it. The contact sent a jolt through me, straight up my arm, all the way to my heart. My pulse picked up.

"Here, this is my number. Call me tomorrow or... whenever." He paused, his small hand, long, slender fingers so delicate in my thick, calloused grip. "I don't want your money, you know," he whispered. "That's not why I'm telling you."

"I know." And I did. I had no doubt in the man he was. Even a decade later, I knew he was still kind-hearted and virtuous. I reluctantly withdrew my hand from his, already missing his heat. I had so many questions, but now wasn't the time. I needed to sober the hell up. "I'll call you tomorrow," I said. "Just promise me you'll pick up this time."

He smiled sadly. "I promise."

Jasper

THIS WAS OFFICIALLY THE scariest thing I'd ever had to do. I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants and took a slow, deep breath. It did nothing to calm my racing heart.

Part of me had been hoping he would never call. Maybe Eric was too drunk to remember what I told him. Maybe he would wake up this morning and see the phone number written on his hand, and he would think it was from some random hookup. He would wash it off and never think of it again. Or maybe he *would* remember, and he still wouldn't call, thankful he'd dodged this bullet.

Except... first thing this morning, my phone rang.

I had picked it up with shaking fingers. "Hello?"

"Hey." Though he'd said it with more softness and uncertainty than I'd ever heard from him, Eric's voice sent a familiar thrill through me. It brought to mind my giddy teenage heart.

“Have you changed your mind?” I’d asked, bracing myself for disappointment. “I won’t judge you if it’s too much.”

“No!” he’d said quickly. “It’s... well, yes, it’s a lot, but not too much. I’d still really love to meet Cameron. If that’s all right?”

He could’ve pushed if he’d wanted to. He could easily afford a good lawyer and take whatever he wanted by force, but instead, here he was asking for my permission to meet his son. And he sounded nervous as hell.

“Of course it’s all right. I’ll talk with him today and make sure he’s okay with it. Can I call you later?”

“Yeah, please do.”

Which brought me to the hardest discussion I’d ever had to prepare for. Even more terrifying than telling Eric he had a son, I had to tell Cameron about his father.

“Hey, Cam?” I knocked on the doorframe and peeked around the open door. Cam was sitting on his bed, propped up against the headboard, a book open against his bent knees. “Have you got a minute? I was hoping we could talk.”

“Is this about finally getting a cell phone?” he asked eagerly, his eyes lighting up as he stuck a bookmark between the pages and tossed his book aside. He sat up and clasped his hands together. “I’ve been really good, right? I did all my chores just like we talked about. I kept my room clean—”

Geez! This was already spiraling out of control. I stepped into the room and held a hand up to stall the conversation.

“Whoa, slow down! No, this isn’t about a cell phone.”

Cam sagged back onto the bed, rolling his eyes with as much exaggeration as possible, before blowing out a dramatic sigh. “Then no, I don’t have a minute.”

“Hey! Rude,” I mock scolded, but neither of us meant it. The corners of his lips twitched, and I bit down on my own smile as I plopped down beside him on the bed. He was actually a really good kid. I got lucky. Being a single parent was tough, but I’d had a lot of help along the way. Cameron was a mixture of my determination, my mom’s kind heart, and my dad’s sense of humor.

I wondered what parts of him had come from Eric...

My smile dropped, and Cam noticed straight away. He was such an empathetic kid. He sidled up to me and leaned his head on my shoulder. “What’s wrong, Dad? Is Nana sick again?” he asked weakly.

“No, no! Nana’s fine, bud,” I quickly reassured him, kissing him on the forehead. “I actually wanted to talk to you about your alpha father.” My throat felt too tight, making it hard to breathe and even harder to talk. If I weren’t already sitting down, I was sure my knees would’ve given out.

Cam peeked up at me curiously. “But you never want to talk about him.”

I nodded, staring at my hands clenched in my lap. “I know, but... I saw him last night. At the reunion.” I could feel his whole body tense up beside me.

“You did?” he asked, and I swore he was holding his breath. He’d asked questions about him over the years, because of course he did; he was a kid, and kids asked questions. And I had never lied to him about where he came from, but I’d always been vague and distant.

Guilt stabbed me hard through the chest. “I screwed up, Cam,” I admitted. “I told myself I was protecting you, but I think I was just trying to protect myself.” It wasn’t until a tear dripped down onto my shirt that I even realized I was crying.

“Don’t cry, Dad,” Cam said, wiping my cheek. “It’ll be okay.” He said it with the confidence of a child who’d never experienced anything worse than a papercut.

I braced myself. “I first met your father in high school.”

“Was it love at first sight?” he asked, trying to tease me and make me laugh.

Chuckling, I said, “Heck no! We were total opposites, like oil and water. He was one of the popular kids—he was strong and handsome, star quarterback. And I was... *not* popular. We had absolutely nothing in common.”

Cam looked confused. “Then, what happened?”

“Well, he needed help passing his final exams, so our teachers paired him up with me as his tutor. We started spending a lot of time together, and I found that we had more in common than I ever would’ve imagined. We liked the same music, the same movies. And I guess I decided he wasn’t so bad after all.”

“You fell in love with him?”

While I’d been protecting myself for the past ten years by denying my feelings for Eric, my son—*our* son—deserved the truth. “Yes,” I said raggedly. “I loved him very much.”

“But... then why isn’t he here? He didn’t want me?” This was every child’s fear, that their parents didn’t love them unconditionally.

“No!” I said quickly, cutting off that line of thought. “I—I never told him about you. It was me he didn’t want, and it hurt my feelings. And when I found out I was pregnant, I decided I didn’t want him in our lives. He was going off to college, headed for a career playing football. He got stronger, more handsome, and even more popular—he got famous. I guess... I just assumed...” I covered my face with my hands. “I’m so sorry,” I sobbed. “I never should’ve kept you apart.”

Cam tried to peel my hands away, but I couldn’t look him in the eye. I didn’t know how to make this better. My tears were flowing freely now, coating my palms. “Dad,” Cam said firmly. “Do you remember what you told me when I stole that gum from the Q-Cup?”

His question startled me. I remembered it well. It was a few years ago. He’d felt so guilty about stealing the packet of gum from the corner store that he’d come to me crying, admitting what he did. I’d given him a hug, and we walked down the street together to pay for it and to apologize to the shop’s owner. But I couldn’t remember what I’d told him that might apply to my blunder. I lowered my hands and looked at my

son, so patient and kind. He could've been mad at me, but instead, he was smiling softly.

“You told me that I was human, Dad, and that humans make mistakes. As long as we learn from them, that’s what really matters.”

“I said that?” I asked, and he nodded. “That sounds like some good advice.”

He nodded again, chewing on the inside of his cheek in thought. “When you saw my father last night... did you tell him about me?”

“I did,” I admitted. “And he wants to meet you.”

“He does?” Cam’s eyes lit up a little. “When can I meet him? What’s his name?”

“Your father’s name is Eric Van Leer.”

His mouth popped open in a round O. “Like, the new quarterback for the Comets?”

I gaped at him. “How do you know that?”

Cam shrugged. “When I go over to Nana and Poppy’s house, sometimes I watch football with Poppy, and he teaches me about the game.”

“Uh-huh...” I took a steadying breath. I never told my parents who the father of my baby was, but they weren’t stupid. Eric was always over at our house for study sessions, sometimes staying for dinner. There was no way they hadn’t

made assumptions. This whole time, they'd been letting Cam have little peeks of his father. My heart gave a little flutter.

And then, the questions began. "What's he like? Will I go live with him part-time, like my friend Mikey? His parents are divorced, and his alpha dad has a pool. Do you think Eric has a pool? Do I have to call him Papa?"

I did my best to answer his questions. "I don't know about the living arrangements, but we'll talk about it and see how you feel. You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with. Eric's house is really big, but you'll have to ask him about the pool. You don't have to call him Papa, but it'll be up to you if you change your mind after you get to know him. As far as what he's like... I-I guess I don't really know anymore. I'm not the same person I was ten years ago, and it's a good bet that he isn't either. You and I can get to know him together. What do you say?"

He nodded, his grin wide and unguarded.

I kissed the top of his head and ruffled his hair. "How about some lunch? Grilled cheese?"

"And tomato soup?" he asked hopefully.

"Is there any other way?"

I left him there to think things over, and I knew he would probably come up with a whole slew of questions for me. I hated that I wouldn't have all the answers.

As a parent, I did my best to raise my son to be strong and independent and confident, but mostly, to be a good person.

And by keeping Eric from him, I had set an awful example of selfishness and betrayal. The fact that Cam wasn't mad at me right now meant that he was a better person than I was.

I only hoped that it wasn't too late to help them build a relationship.

Eric

JASPER HAD TEXTED HIS address last night, so I entered it into my GPS and drove across town. Skirting around the downtown area, I ended up in a cute neighborhood tucked into a bend in the river, with tall trees lining the streets and schools and greenspaces. It was nice, a great place to raise kids, but... not fancy, by any stretch of the imagination. I had kind of assumed that a doctor would have a larger home in one of the new neighborhoods that had been popping up.

“Your destination is on the right,” my phone informed me.

Sure enough, when I scanned the house numbers, I found 720, as instructed. I pulled up along the curb and turned off the car. It was a nice little bungalow with a porch and large bay window, but it still wasn't anything like I'd imagined for Jasper. There were weeds growing in the shaggy lawn, and I wondered why he didn't pay someone to maintain it for him. It was clear he didn't have the time to do it himself. Why wasn't his boyfriend helping out around the house? Pfft, he was probably a doctor too. They would've met at the hospital,

fallen in love over some patient on the operating table or something.

I blew out a long breath. “I’m here for Cameron, not Jasper,” I reminded myself aloud, my voice muted by the leather upholstery. It would be painful to see Jasper and his boyfriend together, but hopefully they weren’t all lovey dovey all the time. Barfing in disgust wouldn’t give Cameron a good first impression.

Forcing myself out of the car and up the sidewalk, I was doing fine until I got to the front door. Then I froze, fist hovering in the air, raised to knock. I broke out in a cold sweat. What the hell was I doing?! I had a son, nearly ten years old already. It wasn’t like a baby who would forget that I was a stranger, then grow to love me over time. A nine-year-old was old enough to form their own opinion. What if he hated me? Shit. I should’ve brought him a present—or lots of presents, for all the missed birthdays and Christmases.

Shameful as it was, I was considering making a break for it. I could text Jasper that I was running late, then run to the store quickly. Kids liked video games, right? I could get him a new console maybe. I hesitated too long, though, and the door swung open.

Jasper was standing there, and just like at the reunion, my heart stuttered at the sight of him. He was truly beautiful, his blue eyes like depthless pools I found myself happy to drown in. “I was watching you from the window. Getting cold feet?” he asked, nibbling on his bottom lip.

I chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, just a bit.”

“Good, me too,” he admitted, which made me feel a little better.

“Glad to know I’m not the only one who’s a nervous wreck.” I felt awkward with nothing in my hands, so I shoved them into my pockets.

Jasper stepped aside and ushered me into their home. There was a pile of shoes at the door, not at all organized, and lots of jackets and sweaters hanging from hooks on the wall. There was a lived-in feel I liked; not at all like my place, with its bland white walls, sparse furnishings, and sterile new-house smell I hadn’t been able to get rid of since moving in a few months ago.

“I, uh, told Cameron to give us a few minutes first. He has a lot of questions, and... well, so do I. I don’t know how to do this whole co-parenting thing. If that’s even what you want? No pressure.” Jasper sighed and gave a little adorable shrug. “How about we just start with coffee?”

“Sure, thanks.” As if I needed the extra caffeine right now. I was wired as all hell, but at least it would give me something to do with my hands.

Jasper led the way to the kitchen. It was tiny, with hardly any counterspace and a two-seater table tucked in one corner, and there was soapy water in the sink, like he’d been doing dishes before I got here. There was no sign of a dishwasher. He poured me a mug from the coffeepot and passed it to me.

I laughed lightly as I took in the nutty aroma. Hazelnut, just like he used to drink. “You haven’t changed at all, have you,” I teased.

He looked at me strangely, almost sad. “You’re probably right.” He gestured toward the table. “Have a seat.”

As I settled into the chair, my eyes were drawn to the fridge, where artwork and photos were stuck with magnets. “Is this him?” I asked, though I already knew. He looked just like I did at his age. I was shocked by the sudden yearning I felt. I wasn’t there for any of these pictures. While I’d been busy with college parties and football games, traveling and partying and playing hard, Cameron had been here. I hadn’t even known something was missing from my life until this moment.

“It must’ve been hard,” I said softly, looking across the table at Jasper, “raising him while going to medical school. And I’m sure you must work long shifts at the hospital. I hope your boyfriend helps out.”

His face scrunched up. “Huh? Oh, you mean Brent. No, he isn’t my boyfriend. He isn’t anything, really, just a coworker who doesn’t understand boundaries.” My jaw must’ve dropped at this piece of information, but Jasper wasn’t even looking at me; he was staring down into his mug. “And, um... confession time, I guess. I’m not a doctor either. The, uh, timing was never right to put in those kinds of hours, between raising Cameron and then my mom got sick. I work at an animal hospital, though, so it’s... almost the same thing.” He was blushing right to the tip of his ears.

“Oh. You’re a vet?” I asked, mostly so I didn’t blurt out something idiotic, like, “*So you’re telling me you’re single?*”

“Um, no. That would be my older brother. It’s his clinic. I’m just his assistant.” He seemed embarrassed by that fact, and he tried to cover it up quickly by saying, “It’s actually kind of perfect, because it’s flexible hours, and he doesn’t mind if I bring Cam to work with me sometimes when my parents can’t babysit.”

“M-maybe I could... you know, babysit him for you—when I’m in town, that is. It probably isn’t called babysitting if he’s my son, right? That’s just parenting.” I shook my head, laughing softly. “That still feels so weird to say.”

Once upon a time, I’d been pretty good at reading Jasper, but now, he was filled with new emotions, and I watched them play over his face. I tried to get a hold of what they were, but it was pointless; we’d been teenagers without real-world problems. Now, his number-one priority was protecting his son—even if that meant protecting him from me.

“Sure,” he said after a long pause. “We’ll have to talk about your schedule and... ours.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll just go get Cam, I guess.” He stood from his chair suddenly, slopping the hot coffee over the rim of his mug, and he yelped as it scalded his hand.

I reached for him without a second thought. “Are you okay? Here, put it under cold water.” I took him by the wrist and dragged him over to the sink, turning on the faucet and directing his hand under the stream.

For all the years I'd dreamed of him, now Jasper was right here, his body close enough to feel the heat coming off him, to smell his scent. I slid my grip from his wrist to his hand, water pouring over our joined hands, cooling my heated flesh. My thumb caressed his palm, and his breath stuttered. "What are you doing?" he asked shakily, trying to pull away, but I tightened my grip.

"Just making sure you're okay." I brought his hand up, inspecting for blisters, while also just enjoying the opportunity to touch him like he once let me, brushing my fingertips over his soft skin.

"Dad, are you okay? I heard you yell." Cameron peeked around the corner into the kitchen, and I dropped Jasper's hand and stepped back.

Jasper gave me a tight smile. "Yeah, I'm okay, bud. Just spilled some hot coffee. Thanks for checking on me."

"Hey, Cameron," I said, awkwardly waving. "I'm Eric. It's nice to finally meet you." I winced. "Too formal? That was too formal. Sorry. Let me try again." I wiped my wet hands on my pants. Cameron was watching me, his eyebrows raised, and it was making me panic. "Hey! I'm your dad. Put 'er there." I held my hand out for a shake, then changed directions and held it up for a high five instead. "Shit, I'm so bad at this. And now I'm swearing in front of you. I'm so sorry!"

I slapped a hand over my mouth to stop myself from saying anything else, then turned pleading eyes on Jasper, begging for help. My son hated me already, I just knew it.

“Relax,” Jasper said, laughing at me. “You can talk to Cam like you would to me.” I highly doubted that, considering how I felt about Jasper. He walked over to our son and pulled him into the room. “Cam, this is Eric. Eric, Cam. Why don’t you guys have a seat and hang out for a few minutes. Are you hungry? I can make sandwiches.”

“I can do that!” I was quick to offer. Wow, making my first meal for my kid.

Cam headed over to the fridge. “I’ll show you where we keep everything.”

“Great,” Jasper said, wearing one of those indecipherable smiles again. “I’ll just... hang out in the living room then. Call me if you need anything.” He seemed to hesitate for a second, then left the two of us alone.

Cameron pulled a jar of jam out of the fridge and put it on the counter, then dragged one of the chairs over so he could reach the higher shelves in the cabinet. “Do you like peanut butter and jam?” he asked me.

“It’s my favorite,” I told him, though it had been far too long since I’d eaten something so simple. The team’s dietician encouraged a strict diet, lots of organic vegetables and lean proteins, something about reducing risk of injury. But in this moment, as my son passed me a bread bag and a knife, I couldn’t give a damn about the diet. I just wanted to eat with my son.

“Here, you spread the peanut butter first, and I’ll do the jam.” He pointed at the cupboard to my right. “The plates are

up there.”

I grabbed us each a plate, and we got to work on making the sandwiches. I wanted so desperately to get this right, but what did I know about kids? I’d always assumed whenever I finally got around to starting a family that I would start with a baby, and I would learn from there. “Uh, so... what kinds of things do you like?” I asked, trying to fill the silence. I should’ve come up with topics beforehand. I was drowning here.

Cameron made a face. “I dunno... stuff. Like, comic books and sports and baking. Lots of stuff.” He paused mid-jam-spread. “This is weird,” he said bluntly.

I laughed. “Fair enough. It’s a bit weird for me too. I promise it won’t always be, though. We just need to get used to each other.”

“I know. I guess I just wish I met you before. Like, ten years ago.” He shrugged like it was no big deal, but I could feel the weight of the missing years between us.

My heart gave a painful squeeze. “Me too. Don’t blame your dad, though, okay? It was my fault.”

“Why? What did you do?” he asked, peeking up at me.

“I said some things that weren’t very nice. And I really wish I hadn’t, cause I didn’t mean them.”

He frowned, either angry or disappointed, and it brought a fresh wave of guilt. “That wasn’t very nice of you.”

I offered him a pained smile. “No, it wasn’t.” I grabbed the other chair and brought it over so I could be closer to eye level

with him. “Your dad is so amazing to give me another chance to get this right, and I promise I’m going to make it up to you—to both of you. How does that sound?”

He thought that over, and his pensive look was just like Jasper’s that it nearly took my breath away. Finally, he nodded. “Okay. It’s a deal.” And he held out his hand for me to shake on it.

7

Jasper

KEL WAS WATCHING ME with rapt curiosity, his chin propped in his hand, elbows resting on the desk in front of him. “Oh my gods, did he really say that? That he would make it up to the both of you?” He held his hand to his forehead like he was going to swoon. “So romantic.”

“Shh!” I hissed, peeking over the counter to make sure nobody in the waiting room was listening in on our conversation. Thankfully, the mournful yowl of the Persian, Mr. Frisky, locked in his carrier was drowning out our words. “I mean, I think that’s what he said, but it was hard to hear him clearly from the next room.”

What I didn’t tell him was that I was leaning so far out of my chair in order to eavesdrop that I nearly fell over onto the floor. I had intended to leave them alone to get to know each other without my interfering. I didn’t want to be a helicopter parent, but at the same time... well, I was also used to being Cam’s *only* parent. I’d never had to discuss parenting decisions with anyone before. Bedtime schedules, rewards and

discipline, doctors' appointments and vaccine schedules. What if Eric insisted on only feeding our son organic vegetables or enroll him in a bunch of sports? I couldn't afford that.

I'd also never had to share Cam before, and I didn't particularly like it. I never thought it would be so hard.

"So," Kel continued, making a gimme motion with his hand, like I was supposed to hand over all the spicy details. "What's next? Candlelit dinners and walks in the park?"

I snorted. "Yeah, right. This has nothing to do with me, Kel. He's only here for Cameron. Nothing more."

"Mm-hm," he murmured, spearing me with a look. "You can swear that until you're blue in the face, but I know there's more to it than that. I've seen the way your eyes go all soft and gooey when you talk about him. There was something between you two once. There could be again."

I shook my head sharply. "No, never. Nothing has changed since high school. We are total opposites with nothing in common. He's still the popular jock, rich, famous, drop-dead gorgeous, with tons of omegas throwing themselves at him, and I'm still me," I said, gesturing at myself. "Geeky, awkward, and a total buzzkill."

"You're selling yourself short," Kel insisted. "You're mega hot." I shook my head at him, but his attention flitted over my shoulder. "Right, Brent? Tell Jasper he's hot."

Shit, please don't. How much of that did he hear? I sat up straight in my seat, dread skittering through me.

Instead of answering, Brent said, “Kel, Dr. Mayle is ready for Skittles. Could you bring him back?”

Kel’s gaze moved back and forth between me and Brent, and I knew he could sense the weird tension between us. He would undoubtedly interrogate me about it later. “Sure...”

While Kel went to bring Skittles the dalmatian back to my brother’s exam room, I tried to act like I was busy typing up invoices in the computer. I could still feel Brent behind me, though, hovering.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, he cleared his throat. “So, what, are you, like... into that meathead now?”

My fingers jerked, typing a bunch of random letters into the form, and I hit the backspace key. “My personal life is none of your business, Brent. Remember? We talked about this.” But his question filtered through my brain anyway. Was I into Eric? The truth of it was that I’d never been *out* of Eric. Even though I’d been hurt beyond belief at his rejection, there was a part of me that had always clung to what was.

I liked to torture myself sometimes, by watching Eric’s interviews after a game. His hair disheveled and sweaty from being inside his helmet, his cheeks flushed, his eyes still bright from the adrenaline. And then after Cam was in bed, I would drink a massive glass of wine and cry myself to sleep.

Brent snorted out a huff of frustration, and he came around and sat on the desk to my right, his thigh brushing against my arm. “He betrayed you, Jasper, and he’ll do it again. You can’t trust him.”

“And what would you have me do, Brent? Deny him access to his son, so that he can drag me through a lengthy and expensive custody battle?”

“You never should’ve told him about Cam in the first place,” he muttered, crossing his arms over his chest.

I slammed my hand down on the desk to cut him off, my cheeks flaming, before I realized a few people in the waiting room—as well as a cat, a dog, and a parrot—had turned to look at the scene unraveling. I lowered my voice and hissed, “No, Brent. I should’ve told him the second I found out I was pregnant. It was his right to know. It’s me who screwed up, okay? I did.” I heaved a breath, clenching my shaking fists. “And Eric is a good man. He’s nice to Cam. This is a good thing.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but thankfully, Kel appeared in the doorway behind him. “Seriously, Brent, lay off already.”

“I’m just trying to help,” he said in his defense. “Jasper doesn’t have an alpha to watch over him.”

Kel scoffed. “You think he needs someone to protect him? I guess you haven’t seen Jasper go all omega-daddy bear before. Trust me, he can take care of himself. He won’t make any rash or dangerous decisions when it comes to Cam. That boy is his world.”

My chest warmed at my friend’s description of me; it made me feel stronger and less like a total failure.

“Besides,” Kel continued, smirking, “Jasper has been abundantly clear that he doesn’t want to discuss his personal matters with you, but if you’re so keen on office gossip, I would be more than happy to talk to you about my imploding marriage to a workaholic.”

Brent frowned and shook his head. “No, it’s all right. I think I’ll—”

But Kel was already digging into the well of frustration inside him. “Do you know that he called to say he’d be working late like four days last week? One night he didn’t even get home until almost midnight. And then he went back in on Sunday. Sunday! Can you believe it? He missed Sarah’s soccer game. She scored a goal, but she wasn’t even excited about it because her daddy ditched the game. Again.”

Brent was getting flustered as he tried to squeeze past Kel to get out of the small office. “Um, I’m sure I don’t—”

“And he hasn’t wanted to have sex, like, at all. It’s been over a month since he touched me. I swear, my sphincter is tightening up. I’m practically a born-again virgin, which I didn’t even know was possible after giving birth. Cause, you know, that stretches everything out of shape.”

“Oh... okay, I just... What’s that, Dr. Mayle? Right, yes, I’ll be right there. Coming.” Without a backward glance, he retreated down the hall and disappeared into a random exam room.

Kel winked at me, and we both broke into giggles. “Thanks,” I told him. “The guy just can’t take a hint.” I rolled my eyes.

“Forget hints; he can’t take *facts*. I’ve told him no outright on multiple occasions.”

“I wish my husband were that tenacious,” Kel grumbled moodily.

There was a lull in the symphony of yowling, and my sigh seemed loud in the brief silence. Kel eyed me sadly. “What is it, Jasper? It’s not just about Brent, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.” I eyed my friend, debating how much I wanted to admit to, but the truth was pressing in on me from all sides, and if I didn’t let it out, I was likely to go completely bonkers and start howling like that husky in room two. “When I first heard that Eric was being traded back home, I felt something I hadn’t allowed myself to feel in a long time.”

“What’s that?”

“Hope,” I whispered, embarrassed about the admission. “Even though I told myself that he despised me, and nobody would blame me for hating him... it didn’t stop me from scanning the faces of every man I passed on the sidewalk. Even though I knew the chances of him slumming it in my neighborhood were slim, I still watched, waiting, holding my breath, knowing that I would see him eventually. It had to happen, I just knew it.” My mouth was dry, and I tried to swallow but my throat locked up. “And now...” I made a little whimpering sound and looked at Kel, pleading for him to understand, not to make me say it.

“That hope has turned into something more,” he said, and I nodded.

My vision swam as tears began to collect on my lashes. “There’s never been a time when I didn’t want him, and I hate myself for what I did to him.” The tears spilled over, and I sniffled loudly and wiped them away with the back of my hand.

Kel’s brows scrunched up in thought, his mouth turned down at the corners, and he sagged back, propping his hip on the edge of the desk. “Look, my husband and I aren’t exactly a model example of what a healthy relationship should look like. My marriage is a total wreck, but... I still love him.” He chuckled sadly, offering up a shrug. “I’ve had my mom nagging in my ear for years about how I should just leave him already, but I can’t bring myself to do it. And you know what?” Kel tilted his chin up defiantly. “Our marriage is nobody’s business but ours. Don’t listen to what Brent says. His opinion doesn’t matter.”

He pulled a tissue out of the box behind him and passed it to me. “If you want him, even after he insulted you, that’s okay. No judgment here. Even if you and Eric aren’t technically together and you’re just doing the whole co-parenting thing, that’s still a kind of relationship. It’ll take work, and it’ll probably be damn hard sometimes, but I know it’ll be worth it. For you, for Eric, and most importantly, for Cameron.”

“Yeah...” I said vaguely, wiping my cheeks dry.

Kel gave me a soft smile before heading back to work. “Just don’t let him break your heart, okay?”

I think it’s too late for that...

Eric

“THIS IS THE BEST day ever!” Cam gushed as he and his dad walked in through the stadium’s front doors, pumping a fist in the air. As soon as he saw me, he ran across the lobby, his footsteps echoing off the concrete. The place was empty, but soon, fans would start arriving for the game, and this place would turn into a madhouse. “Hi, Eric!”

“Hey, Cam. I’m so glad you could come watch me play today.” As Cam came up even with me, I paused briefly before offering a high five, and he jumped up to slap my palm. We weren’t on hugging terms yet, but I knew we would get there.

Then, reluctantly, I allowed my eyes to move to Jasper. I tried to keep it friendly, polite... *tame*. But I somehow found my eyes roaming every inch of his body, starting at his feet, before trailing up, lingering on all my favorite parts—the crease of his hip, the dip of his sternum, the long, smooth column of his throat. I felt this draw to touch him, as surely as I always had. It was like he had his own gravitational field dragging me in, and I could only do so much to resist it. There

was no way he didn't feel it too, right? "Jasper," I rasped before clearing my throat. "Glad you could make it."

"Sure. Yeah. My p-pleasure," he said awkwardly, blushing lightly as he stuttered on the last word. Pleasure was something that had existed between us before. He wouldn't quite look me in the eye.

Cam couldn't stand still; the kid had so much energy! "I can't wait to tell my friend Chris that my dad is famous! He's always bragging that his dad is a cop, but a football player is *way* better!"

Jasper's smile looked strained. "Hey, you used to think my job was pretty cool. You always love coming with me to play with all the puppies and kitties."

"Well, yeah, but it's not the same," Cam said, pouting. But then he looked carefully at his dad. He seemed to realize Jasper was feeling a little sensitive about the topic, and he wrapped his arms tight around his waist. "You're right, Dad. Your job's awesome too."

"Yeah, yeah," Jasper teased, ruffling Cam's hair. "It's fine. I can't possibly compete with all this." He waved around at the stadium—and I had to admit, it was a pretty impressive building, with polished concrete floor and walls tiled in a mosaic pattern in the team's colors of red and gold. There was lots of natural light from skylights above.

"Is this your first time here?" I asked them.

Cam answered for the both of them, “Yeah, my dad doesn’t really like football. It makes him sad.”

Jasper looked shocked by his son’s answer. “I-I don’t mind football,” he said, but I noticed he hadn’t denied that it made him sad.

My heart broke for him. I had a pretty strong suspicion that it was my fault, that it wasn’t football that upset him, but me. “Well, Cameron, maybe together we can change his mind about the sport,” I said, putting my hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Yeah, let’s do it,” he agreed, grinning up at me. He was tall for being not quite ten years old, and I was curious to see if he would have my height. If he was interested, I could teach him how to throw a football, and the thought made me excited. It was crazy to think there was a mini me.

For a beat, none of us said anything. My shirt was getting damp with sweat, and I tugged the fabric away from my body, searching for a draft. I tried to catch Jasper’s eyes, but he stared stubbornly at his feet. I didn’t like this distance between us. We used to be closer, and now, I felt totally untethered, like I was floating in an ocean with no land in sight, and Jasper was the life raft. Without thinking, I took a step toward him, and his head jerked up to look at me. There were so many things I wanted to say to him, confessions, secrets to divulge. Instead, I swallowed hard and turned to Cameron. “So, do you want a tour?”

“Okay!” Cam said.

“Maybe I should just leave you two alone, you know, to do some bonding.” Jasper started backing away. “I’ll just wait here.”

I panicked. I wasn’t ready to be alone with my son, unsupervised. What if we ran out of things to talk about? What if he asked me a question I didn’t know the answer to? “Don’t be ridiculous,” I said quickly, catching him by the hand before he could get too far. His skin was warm and soft against my calloused palms. “It’s not every day you get offered a behind-the-scenes look at the stadium, and with your very own private tour guide.” I tugged him gently, silently begging with my eyes, until he followed, seeming to understand what I needed. I let my fingers linger for a few seconds longer than necessary, before forcing myself to drop his hand.

The security guard let us past into the restricted area, and I pointed out the various rooms as we wandered the halls. There really wasn’t much to see besides a lot of office space and meeting rooms, but there was a certain air of mystery behind locked doors, and Cam seemed excited enough. “We’ve got a gym where we can work out, tubs for ice baths, our very own physiotherapist, a massage therapist... and of course our showers and changerooms.”

Cam suddenly blurted, “Hey, Eric! Can you come to career day at school?”

I nearly said yes straight away, but then I caught sight of Jasper’s reaction—the tick of a muscle in his jaw, a tightening at the corners of his eyes—and my smile slipped a little. I

didn't want him to feel like I was replacing him. He was his omega dad, after all. Nobody was more important than that, but I was like a shiny new toy. The novelty would wear off soon, and maybe then I could just be his pops. "Maybe," I finally answered. "I'll talk to your dad about it, 'kay? I might be playing a game out of town that day. I don't want to make any promises I can't keep."

When Jasper gave me an encouraging smile, I knew I'd given the right answer.

Our tour was soon over, and just in time, because the game would be starting soon, and I still needed to warm up. Jasper had been quiet, and I wanted to make sure he was okay. We were really plowing full steam ahead with this parenthood thing, and that had to be tough for him.

"Hey, Cam," I said, pulling out my wallet. "The concession stand is opening, and there's no line yet. Why don't you go get you and your dad some snacks before finding your seats. My treat."

Jasper looked like he was going to argue for a second, but then he pinched his lips shut, and Cameron took the cash I handed him, then jogged over to the counter.

Before I could ask Jasper what was wrong, he turned toward me and out of nowhere asked, "Why don't you hate me?"

I frowned down at him. "I could never hate you, Jasper. Never." Before I could stop myself, I reached up and swept his hair lightly back from his forehead. I half expected him to slap my hand away, but instead, he closed his eyes in a long blink,

leaning in and breathing deeply. I trailed my fingers down his cheek before dropping my hand at my side. “I know it couldn’t have been an easy decision. I put you in an impossible position. And honestly, as much as I regret the lost time with you and Cam, I think you made the right choice.”

Jasper’s forehead creased in confusion, his eyes searching mine. “You do?”

“Yeah. I would’ve made an awful father.” He scoffed like he didn’t believe me, and I hurried to explain. “Seriously! It’s... it’s hard to admit, but honestly, I was a selfish asshole ten years ago. My mom wasn’t in the picture growing up, and my dad did the best he could, but he wasn’t exactly the best role model. I had everything handed to me all because I was good at football. I was spoiled and entitled, and until my college coach set me straight, I really had no clue about responsibility or discipline. So, if you’d told me... if I’d suddenly had my life upended by a baby, I probably would’ve ended up resenting you—and Cam. As horrible as that sounds, it’s the truth. But because I had a chance to grow up, I can finally be the father Cam deserves.”

He looked up at me with an expression of infinite sadness and placed a palm on my chest. “I don’t believe it for a second. I know you, Eric, and I think you would’ve been great.”

I trapped his hand with mine on my chest and said gently, “I think the real question we need to ask is... why don’t *you* hate *me*? I seduced you, and when it predictably ended in

pregnancy, I wasn't there for you. When my so-called friends made fun of you, I didn't back you up like I should've. You missed out on the life you had planned, all because of me. I'm a little surprised that you're willing to give me this chance to be Cam's father. I haven't done anything to earn it."

His fingers tightened, gripping my shirt in his fist, and he laughed lightly. "I tried to hate you, but it didn't stick."

"Must be the dimple," I replied, then I gave him one of my winning smiles, letting my dimple do the talking, and Jasper licked his lips, almost as if he was thinking about leaning in for a taste.

I felt like he was dragging me closer, and I rested my free hand on his hip, squeezing lightly. "So, we don't hate each other. That's good..." I said, my voice gravelly.

I hadn't even realized how close we'd gotten until Cam came running over, and we pulled apart. I felt cold suddenly, without him in my space. "What'd you get, buddy?" I asked, distracting myself by checking out the armload of snacks he'd brought back.

"I got cotton candy and chips and gummies and two hot dogs! Here, Dad, I put extra onions on yours."

"Oh... thanks," Jasper said, peeking at me from the corner of his eye, "but that seems like a lot of food for the two of us. How much did all that cost?"

"Eric gave me enough," Jasper insisted. "I told the guy I was Eric Van Leer's son, and he threw the candy in as a freebie. He

said you're his favorite player in the league."

Jasper looked severely uncomfortable. "Maybe you should double-check with Eric before telling people you're his son. He probably needs to do a press conference or something."

"Nah, it's all good," I insisted. "I told the team's PR team. They'll handle it." I wasn't ashamed of my son or of where he came from. I knew there would be questions about why I wasn't in his life right from the beginning, but I would own up to my mistakes. I refused to let Jasper take all the blame on this.

As Cam tried to juggle everything, Jasper took the hotdogs from his hands.

"Why don't you guys go find your seats. I made sure they're down close to the field, right at the 50-yard line. You'll have a great view."

While Cam ran ahead, Jasper paused. "Thanks for the tour. You were right, it was not to be missed. Have a good game," he told me.

"Thanks. I'll text you later." I lingered just so I could watch him walk away, his tight ass practically a crime in those jeans of his. Fuck. How was I supposed to stay focused on the game when I knew he was watching me from the stands? That my *son* was watching? My stomach gave a slow roll, nerves firing.

"Get your head in the game, Van Leer," I muttered to myself before turning on my heel and heading for the changeroom. It

was just a game like any other, and I hoped this would be the first of many to have them—my family—watching.

Jasper

HOW THE HELL DID I get here?

I looked around at the stadium, rows upon rows of seats filled to the brim with excited, chattering fans. Face paint, foam fingers, and a hell of a lot of beer. The air was electric with the intensity of the crowd, even though it was still early in the season, and even I was not immune to the impact. My whole body felt like it was buzzing with adrenaline.

“Dad?” Cam said, patting me on the leg to get my attention. “Hey, Dad.”

“Yeah?” I brought my attention back to him. He had orange powder from the chips on his lips and fingers, and when I looked down to where he’d patted me, I saw my pants now matched. I passed him a napkin and tried to brush off my pants, but it was a lost cause.

“Are you and Eric going to get married?” he asked.

“What?!” I sputtered, jerking suddenly and spilling my drink down my other pantleg. “Shoot,” I grumbled, patting with

another napkin.

Cam continued without noticing, “Well, you said you used to love him, right?”

“Uh-huh...” I never should’ve told him that.

“And you get all weird when he’s around.”

“I don’t get weird,” I disputed. “I get awkward. There’s a difference.”

Cam made a face. “I don’t get it.”

I sighed and leaned closer. It was a loud place for this kind of serious conversation, but I needed to nip this idea of his in the bud before it got out of hand. “No, Eric and I aren’t getting married. It’s been a long time since we knew each other, and feelings change.”

“But Eric is back now. Don’t you want to love him?”

It was natural for a child to want their parents to be together, but it was a dangerous thing for him to hope for. The divide between me and Eric was still too great. “Cam, this isn’t about me at all. Eric is only here for you, you know? He wants to get to know you, to be the best dad he can for you.”

“Oh, I know.” He nodded, but there was still this little twinkle in his eye that worried me. “But I wanted you to know that it’s okay with me if you do get married. I like Eric. He’s nice, and he makes you smile more.”

I paused in my denial. “He does?” I hadn’t noticed.

“Uh-huh. You were even humming when you made breakfast this morning.”

I always did my best to stay upbeat for Cam’s sake, to smile and have fun with him; he didn’t need to know when I was stressed about money or my mom’s health, or lonely for an alpha’s touch. I wanted Cam to have the happiest childhood, but it seemed I hadn’t been doing as good a job at masking my feelings as I thought I was.

Our conversation was cut off by the rise in music. An announcer came over the loudspeaker, and the excitement level in the stadium kicked up a notch. It only got more intense when the opening lineup was announced, starting with their quarterback, Eric Van Leer, and I found myself standing and clapping with the rest of the crowd as they showed their appreciation. Cam jumped up and hooted.

And *wow*, those pants.

The fanfare for the players as they came out onto the field was over the top, their images displayed on the jumbotron. The cheerleaders were waving their pompoms, strobe lights flashing, and the fans went insane. I couldn’t hear a word Cam was saying, so I just kept smiling and nodding. I had to hope I wasn’t agreeing to anything that would come back to bite me on the ass. With my luck, I was probably admitting I was still in love with Eric.

The Comets won the coin toss, and they decided to play offense first. And just like that, the game was on.

I was honestly expecting to hate this. The heat, the noise, sitting on a hard plastic seat for hours. I had assumed I would be gritting my teeth until it was over, but I was willing to do it for Cam's sake. But I was soon surprised to find that it was actually kind of... fun. I knew the basics about the sport—tackles and four downs and a confusing scoring system—but it seemed that Cam had been learning more from his poppy than I could've guessed. Cam pointed out the important players and explained the differences between their positions. Linebacker, runningback, wide receiver, tight end.

Even the halftime show was fun. It wasn't long enough to do much, but they actually brought out a bunch of dogs to race and show some tricks. I'd only ever seen the Super Bowl halftime show before, but I decided I preferred the dogs.

The last quarter seemed to take a lot longer than the others, time slowing to a crawl as the clock ran down. The score was close, and both teams were using up their time-outs, trying to strategize. It all came down to the final play of the game.

The players got into position at the line of scrimmage, and I sucked in a breath and held it. In the blink of an eye, the ball was hiked back, then passed to Eric. The wide receiver zigzagged down the field, but I couldn't look away from where Eric was waiting for a clear path to throw, waiting as long as he could for his teammate to get into the open.

“Throw it,” I muttered, my hands clutching my thighs in a white-knuckled grip. “*Throw it!*”

And in these fantastic seats Eric got for us, I saw it all happening in vivid detail, my heart in my throat. A linebacker managed to break through the guard. Eric saw him coming, and still he hesitated, arm poised for the throw. He took a step, then another, and a fraction of a second before he was tackled, he snapped off the ball. It sailed through the air in a perfect spiral.

I didn't care if it was caught or not. Whether they won was not my concern. The only thing that mattered was Eric. He didn't even have time to brace for the hit. The ball had left his hand, but it was too late for the linebacker to brake, and he slammed into Eric's shoulder, plowing him straight into the ground. Even wearing all that gear, the weight of it coming down on him would crush him. Eric's head snapped back, bouncing off the field, his helmet protecting him from the worst of it.

The whistle blew, and the crowd went nuts. I was vaguely aware that we'd won, but that wasn't my focus. I was on my feet, breath held, waiting for Eric to get up.

The linebacker climbed off him and offered him a hand up, but Eric stayed where he was. He was moving, but not much. His teammates paused in their celebration and came over to check on him, forming a circle around him and blocking my view. A medical team ran onto the field from the sidelines.

I might've whimpered. "He'll be okay, Dad," Cam said, standing at my side, but the way he was squeezing my arm, I knew he was worried too.

A sort of somber pall seemed to settle over the crowd, a collective held breath, dulling the shine on the team's win as they waited to see if their quarterback would be okay. As close as we were in the tenth row, I was frustrated I wasn't closer. I couldn't see anything! I looked around for a way to get down to the field, even though I knew it wasn't logical. Of course I wouldn't be allowed down there. Security would likely flag me as a stalker fan or something and tackle me next.

I could see movement from between the players' bodies, and then they parted, and Eric stepped through. The crowd started clapping for him, and I collapsed into my seat, my breath leaving me in a relieved groan. Eric was walking on his own, which seemed like a good sign, but the medical team were keeping stride with him, one man with a hand extended, as if prepared to grab him in case he collapsed.

Eric's helmet was off, his hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. He tilted his chin up, searching the crowd, and his gaze locked on mine. He nodded, wearing a grim smile, and waved, and Cam waved back. They disappeared through the gate into the back of the stadium, and I pulled out my phone. Would he call me? He wasn't my alpha, but as the father of his son, did that give me the right to at least text him and make sure he was okay?

The crowd was already filtering out toward the exits, but I wasn't sure I could walk yet, my legs still weak and wobbly. "Let's just wait for the crowd to clear out a bit first, okay?" I said, making up an excuse so I could catch my breath.

“Can we come back for the next game?” Cam asked excitedly from his seat beside me. “That was awesome!”

Oh gods, I don't know if my heart can handle this again.

Eric

DR. FRATER SHONE THE penlight in my right eye, followed by my left. “Headache? Dizziness? Double vision?”

“Nope,” I said. “I told you, I’m fine.” It wasn’t entirely true. The tackle had knocked the wind right out of me, and I was still reeling a little, but I knew the signs of a head injury. I was just a little... shaken up, that’s all.

“It was a hard hit, Eric. Are you sure I can’t convince you to go to the hospital and get checked out?” He sat down in his chair, watching me closely. “It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

I hopped down from the table, keeping one hand on the surface behind me to stay steady. If I gave even one wobble, he would be calling an ambulance. “I promise, Doc. I’m okay. I’m sure I’ll have one hell of a bruise tomorrow, though,” I said with a chuckle, rotating my shoulder to keep it loose. My ribs were screaming.

Doc crossed his arms over his broad chest. He wasn’t laughing. “No confusion, foggy thoughts?” I shook my head

and waited, because I knew he wasn't finished with me yet. He was listening for slurred speech and incoherent thought patterns. "Coach said something about you having family in the stands today? Why don't you tell me about them."

And as stubborn as I was trying to be, my lips tugged into an involuntary smile. "I found out I've got a kid. His name's Cam."

Dr. Frater grinned back. "Hey, congrats, man. Kids are the best. How old is he?"

"He's ten, and he's got more energy than I know what to do with. Do you have any kids?" I asked. I was new to the team, still trying to get to know everybody.

He seemed to close up at the question, though, and got up from the chair. "Hey, don't try to make this about me. I'm the one asking the questions, and you're the one giving the answers." His eyes homed in on mine. "Are you sure you're good? Not just putting on a brave face for your kid?"

I raised my right hand up, three fingers raised in a salute. "Scout's honor, I'm good to go. I'll rest up tomorrow and take it easy this week."

He dragged his cap on over his unruly hair, the flyaway strands sticking out from under the brim, and he slung the strap of his bag over his shoulder. "All right, go have a shower, grab some dinner, and call me if anything doesn't feel right. Any time of day or night. Yeah?"

"Sure thing."

I was more than grateful to be headed for the locker room. I needed a long, hot shower. Most of the team had already cleared out, but when I walked in, a few of the stragglers patted me on the back and asked how I was feeling. I brushed all their worries off, but in truth, I was feeling it. I was getting too old for this game.

The average quarterback made it less than five years in the NFL, and that was higher than some of the other positions where they took a lot more knocks. It was a hard job—hard on our bodies, on our hearts and our brains. And I loved it, but I knew realistically that I wouldn't be able to keep it up forever. I hadn't decided what I would do next as far as a career went, but I intended to spend as much time with Cam as possible to make up for lost time.

Peeling off my gear, I dumped it at my locker and grabbed a towel before heading for the shower. I cranked the spray as hot as I could stand it, then stepped in, letting the heat soak into my aching body.

“Hey, QB, that was some hit. For a second, I thought we'd be bringing out the stretcher,” someone said.

I wiped a hand over my face and cracked my eyes open. It was Schuster, the team's center. His hair was still damp from his shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. He was smirking at me, like he was holding on to a secret. “Yeah,” I muttered, turning to face the spray. “Not this time.” I wasn't sure what it was about Schuster that really bugged me, like I couldn't believe a word that came out of his mouth.

“Can’t say I blame ya for being distracted,” he said in an offhand way. “I would be too.”

Something about his words didn’t sit right with me, and I glanced back at him, that damn smirk still sitting on his lips. “What are you talking about? I wasn’t distracted.”

“Yeah, sure. But I’m just sayin’, I get it, with your kid watching the game and all. It must be a lot of pressure.”

I watched him warily, licking the water from my lips, waiting for the punchline.

“I saw you waving at him. That was him, right?” His grin turned wolfish. “And that was your omega with him? His name’s Jasper, right? Oh, wait. No, he’s not yours, is he?” My insides clenched, fire burning through my veins, my pulse pounding in my ears. “Missed your chance with him, I guess. Wonder if he would give me a chance next...” He reached down and adjusted himself through the towel, his insinuation clear.

“What the fuck, Schuster,” I growled, slamming off the shower and rounding on him.

He backed up a step, cackling. “Just kidding, man! Consider it a little friendly hazing for the new guy on the team.”

Except there was nothing friendly about the fury pulsing through me. I pointed a finger at his chest. “Whatever, Schu. Watch your mouth, or I’ll have to teach you some manners.” He laughed it off, and I glared at the back of his head as he retreated to his locker. It didn’t matter that Schuster was

younger or that he had a good forty pounds of muscle and three inches of height on me. He would learn to keep my family out of his thoughts, and if he wouldn't listen to my words, then he would be listening to my fists.

I forced myself to return to the shower, switching to cold water to cool off my temper. I welcomed the needling sting on my flushed skin and braced my palms flat against the tiled wall. I hadn't considered how this would feel. I'd spent so long imagining Jasper back in my life, but in that image, he'd always been right there at my side. It seemed impossible that he could be in my life but not be mine. It made no sense. And even as I tried to talk myself into this whole co-parenting thing, told myself to be mature about it, to respect Jasper's wishes, my body wasn't listening to logic. Every fiber of my being wanted him—and not just in my bed.

And now, announcing to everyone that he was the father of my son, it was like there was a target on him. The press would be hounding him for questions, wondering why he was only showing up now, ten years after the fact. They would accuse him of things. And I was supposed to believe it wasn't my role to protect him?

Fuck, this is bad.

I needed to talk to Jasper about all this, maybe convince him to move to a gated community, enroll Cam in a private school. I didn't want Jasper to regret telling me about Cam in the first place.

With a towel around my waist, I dried off my hair and grabbed my clothes off the hook in my locker. My phone gave a trill, Jasper's ringtone, and I quickly fished through my jeans pocket and pulled it out, seeing a video call coming through. I answered without thinking, not taking note of my state of undress until I saw myself on the screen, about half a second before Jasper's jaw dropped.

His cheeks flushed pink, and he looked away from the screen. "Oh! Shoot, sorry. I can call you back after— I shouldn't have called." His eyes flicked back up, and I could already feel him slipping away.

"No, it's all right," I told him quickly; anything to keep him here with me a little longer, even if it was over a screen. "I don't mind as long as you don't," I said gesturing to my chest, and I noted with satisfaction that his gaze dipped lower, following the path my hand drew for him, and he licked his lips. "There's nobody left in the locker room, so we can talk. Is Cam okay? I hope I didn't scare him."

"No, Cam thought the game was awesome and can't wait to go back. It was me you scared." He laughed as if he was kidding, but there was a shakiness to his voice that belied his attempt at remaining casual. He swallowed hard and then sighed, his eyes turning sad. "I just needed to see with my own eyes that you're in one piece. That was... hard to watch."

I nodded. "Knocked me a little loose, but I'll be fine."

"Is it always like that?"

“No, but... it does happen. I feel like I should warn you. It’s not the worst I’ve been hit, but things can always go sideways. We wear helmets and padding for a reason, after all.”

“Of course,” he said softly.

My mouth quirked to the side. “Have you honestly never watched me play? That hurts, Jasper.” I laughed, overplaying how wounded I felt, but it bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

He shrugged bashfully. “Sorry. You know, I tried watching you back in high school, but I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want to watch you get hurt.” That was more of an admission than I’d hoped for, and I clung to that with everything I had.

“Well, if you’ve been avoiding watching me play, that you care too much is an acceptable reason, I suppose,” I teased, letting him off the hook, and I loved the way he bit his lower lip to keep from grinning.

Jasper shook his head. “I promise I’ll get better at this. I just need some practice.”

“Or maybe I’ll just have to try harder not to get hit.” We shared a smile, and there was a long pause. I knew he was about to let me go, now that he’d confirmed I wasn’t injured. “Hey, can I take you guys out for dinner?” I asked before I lost the chance.

“Oh, that’s not—”

But before he could say no, Cameron ran into the room and leaped onto Jasper’s back and said, “Yeah! Can we go for

pizza?”

“Were you eavesdropping?” Jasper asked Cam. I would have to thank my son later, since he and I seemed to be on the same page. Maybe he could be my wingman.

“You got it, my man,” I told Cam. “Be ready in half an hour. I’ll pick you guys up.” Part of me realized, as I took in Jasper’s struck look, that I was bulldozing him into dinner, but the other part of me didn’t care. I wanted to be with them—whether that was just today or the next year or an eternity—and I would do whatever it took to convince Jasper to give us a shot.

Jasper

ERIC'S HOUSE WAS LIKE something out of a dream—except I didn't think my imagination was this good. It was bright and open, with lots of natural light and hardwood floors. The kitchen had brand-new stainless-steel appliances and granite countertops, and there were double sliding glass doors leading out to the deck. And yep, sure enough, a pool. Cam was sure to be excited.

“This is... incredible,” I finally said, grudgingly. I didn't want to like it. It certainly made my house look like a total dump in comparison, but I couldn't compete with this, and dammit, I was jealous.

I was here under the pretense of making sure the house was safe for my son, but really, that was just an excuse to snoop. I'd never had a single doubt about his living arrangements. Eric probably had cleaning staff, a landscaper, and a personal chef, not to mention plenty of security. With a place like this, Cam would never want to come home.

My last hope had been that it would be sterile and impersonal, but Eric was clearly making an effort. There was a soft blanket thrown over the back of the leather couch, and a few decorative cushions in colors that matched the paintings on the wall that I recognized were by a local artist, Shane Howe. He'd even put up some framed pictures of us from the game the other day.

I saw him watching me from the corner of my eye. "Yeah? I'm glad you like it. I hadn't done much with it since I bought the place, but I wanted to make it more of a home for when Cam comes over. Did you want to see his room?"

"Sure," I said glumly.

It was hard to look at Eric like this, relaxed and on his home turf. He was wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and a dark green t-shirt that was just tight enough to hug his chest and shoulders. I could see a bit of ink peeking out from under one sleeve, and I was tempted for a moment to reach over and lift the fabric so I could see what he'd deemed important enough to mark his body with it permanently.

He moved toward me, bringing the scent of laundry detergent and a slightly spicy aroma I recognized as him. This was too much like old times. It reminded me of study sessions turned make-out marathons. Even though I was his tutor, he'd taught me more than I ever taught him. But on the wave of lust I felt, there came the inevitable sting of betrayal. I didn't think I would ever be able to feel one without the other, as entwined as the two emotions were.

My skin warmed when I felt Eric's hand skate over my lower back as he gestured toward the hallway. "Last door on the right."

My breath stuttered past my lips as I tried to regain control of my body. "Uh-huh," I muttered, walking faster to put some distance between us. Even without the point of contact, though, my skin was still tingling.

Gods, what was wrong with me?! I wasn't some naïve, lovestruck teenager anymore, but he was awakening all these feelings I thought I had grown out of long ago.

I froze, standing in the doorway of Cam's room. It was nice. No, that wasn't quite right. *Nice* was not the word to describe it. It was more *extravagant*. The bed was twice the size of the one he had at my place, with a soft gray bedspread and too many pillows. Light poured in from the tall windows, offering a view of the massive backyard, which Cam could admire from the cushioned window seat. There were shelves along one wall filled with books, but my eyes were dragged to the wide-screen TV mounted to the wall.

My lips pursed in annoyance. This was exactly what I was worried would happen. These were the kinds of decisions parents were supposed to make together, but Eric hadn't even asked. It felt like I was stepping into a warzone, where Eric could buy our son's love, and what I wanted didn't matter anymore.

"What?" Eric asked, watching my reaction. "What did I do wrong?"

“It’s nothing,” I claimed, trying my best to wrestle with the warring jealousy and irritation.

He took me by the shoulders and turned me around to face him. “It’s not nothing. Tell me.” When I pinched my lips shut and looked away from him, he moved one hand to my jaw and tipped my chin up. “Jasper, please. Cam was your son first, and you’ve done such a great job raising him. You’re the professional in this, and I’m nothing but a rookie. I’ll never learn unless you teach me.”

I drew in a deep breath and blew out a sigh, my resolve softening. “It’s just...”

“Yeah?” he coaxed.

“I wouldn’t put a TV in his room at this age. It’s important that we encourage him to be social and interact with his family and friends, but if he has a TV in here, he might never leave his room. And he’ll never do his homework with that kind of distraction.” I glanced back at the comfy-looking bed. “Hell, I wouldn’t leave if it were my room.” I gave Eric an apologetic smile, but he nodded.

“I totally get it. It makes sense. Consider it gone.”

“Thanks,” I whispered. I knew he was trying to make this as easy for me as possible, but it was still a lot of change to get used to. I eased out from under his hands and made my way back to the kitchen, pulling open the fridge to see what kind of food he had.

I felt Eric behind me, but I tried to ignore the way he made me feel. “Cam can be a picky eater about some things, so I’ll make you a list of some of his favorite meals and snacks.”

“Sounds great.”

When I closed the fridge and turned back to face him, Eric was leaning back against the island, arms crossed over his chest. “So, do I pass the inspection?” he asked, smirking.

I let out a snort. “You know you do. It wasn’t really a concern.”

“Then why did you want to come and check it out?” His lips spread in a slow, lazy smile. “Was it so you could get me alone, all to yourself? All you had to do was ask, baby.”

Rolling my eyes, I went to move past him. The kitchen suddenly felt too small for the two of us. “You’re so full of yourself. Do omegas really fall for your lines?”

He snagged my arm on the way by, his smile falling a little, and he turned serious. “There are no omegas, Jasper.”

My breath caught. He looked so... earnest. So real. But he couldn’t possibly be saying what I thought he was saying. “What about that model you were seeing?”

He shook his head. “Remy was only ever a friend.” His grip on my arm tightened, then he slid his hand down to mine and tugged me closer. “I dated a couple guys over the years, but nothing serious. You?”

“Uh... yeah, same.” Between raising my son, juggling classes then work, I hadn’t found the time to commit to a

relationship—but I found myself suddenly trying to rearrange my schedule.

“It’s always been you, Jasper,” he whispered.

Eric reached up, slowly enough that I could pull away if I wanted to, but I couldn’t seem to get myself to retreat, to push him away, to stop him from whatever it was he was about to do. It was déjà vu from when we were just eighteen.

And I still wanted him, even after all this time.

His lips felt familiar as he pressed them to mine, warm and firm, in a chaste kiss. It was totally innocent at first, but then I opened for him without planning to. He trailed his tongue teasingly along my bottom lip, dipping into my mouth gently, testing the waters. And when I moaned, he took that as confirmation and deepened the kiss. His arm snaked behind me, his hand flat across my lower back dragging me in, and I came up against his hard body.

I didn’t know how it happened, but I found my fingers sliding up his chest and around his neck, gripping his short hair. I couldn’t think straight, couldn’t get enough oxygen. Heat surged through me, and my cock thickened, slick dampening the back of my underwear. When I felt his erection grinding into my stomach, I gasped, my thoughts clearing just enough for one message to get through.

This isn’t right.

My head swam, and I groaned in frustration, putting my hands flat on his chest and pressing away. He loosened his grip

on me, and I took a step back before it could get even more out of hand, his hands slipping down to my hips.

“I-I can’t. *We* can’t. We aren’t teenagers anymore, Eric. We have a son, and I don’t want to complicate things any more than they already are.”

His grip tightened briefly before he peeled his hands off me and stepped back. “Okay. I understand.” He took a deep, bracing breath then ran his hand over his face, and it was like a mask descending over his features, turning colder, harder. “All right. I’ll be in Florida for a game this weekend, but maybe Cam could stay with me for a few days next week? I can pick him up from school.”

“Oh. Um, sure. I’ll, uh, add your name to the school’s list of approved guardians.” He’d switched gears so quickly I was getting whiplash. Was I so easy to let go? Clearly, he’d been exaggerating his feelings for me if he was so unaffected.

“Great. And maybe we could sit down and work out a schedule for shared custody. I’m sure we can work together on our own, but if you would prefer we have a contract, I’ll pay for the lawyer.”

“A lawyer?” My brain was still addled from the kiss. Things were moving too quickly. We’d been careening down the highway, and suddenly we were taking an exit ramp on two wheels. What the fuck was going on?

This felt too familiar all of a sudden. My mouth went dry, and acid coated the back of my tongue. “Is that why you kissed me? So you could manipulate me?” *Just like old times.*

“What?” Eric frowned. “No, of course not.” He tried to reach for me, but his hand closed on air as I stumbled back.

My pulse was pounding in my temples, my vision going fuzzy at the edges. “I have to go,” I mumbled, spinning on my heel and heading straight for the door.

“Jasper, wait!” Eric called after me. “Let’s talk about this.”

“No need. I understand perfectly. You haven’t changed a bit, and maybe neither have I.” My eyes burned with tears. “You know what? You’d better give that lawyer a call,” I tossed over my shoulder on my way out the door. I could be an adult about this, but I wasn’t so sure about Eric anymore. I needed to protect my rights—and maybe my heart, too.

Tears were building in my eyes as I ran down the sidewalk and climbed into my car, and I backed down the driveway without a second glance at where Eric was standing in the doorway, watching me leave. I would give Eric shared custody of his son because that was his right, and Cam deserved to know his alpha father.

But I refused to be part of the deal.

Eric

CAM ANSWERED THE FRONT door wearing a massive grin. “Hi, Eric! I’ve got all the ingredients out on the counter, plus the biggest mixing bowl I could find. You get to wear Dad’s apron, okay?” He grabbed me by the hand and pulled me straight through to the kitchen. I just barely managed to close the door behind me, then hopped as I toed off my shoes in the front hall on the way by.

“What are we making?” I asked, trying to be discreet as I took a surreptitious look around the small house, but there was no sign of Jasper. I found it hard to believe he would’ve left Cam at home by himself, though.

“Banana cake. The recipe says to add walnuts, but I don’t really like them, and Dad says it’s okay to change recipes a bit, as long as the main ingredients are the same. The... radios?”

“I think you mean ratios,” I corrected him. “That means the same amount of wet and dry ingredients, the same amount of oil or butter.” I took another peek around the corner into the living room. “Where is your dad, by the way?”

“I dunno. He went to his room when you knocked on the door. Said he had stuff to do.”

Stuff. In other words, he was avoiding me.

It had been two days since our little misunderstanding. I refused to think of it as a fight because I really just needed a chance to explain, and I was sure Jasper would get where I was coming from. Meanwhile, he'd been restricting our communication to texts, and even then, his answers had been brief, no more than one or two words. He was mostly just passing on Cam's messages for me, and any time I tried to talk to him about us, he refused to reply. I was desperate to hear Jasper's voice, to see his smile. That kiss was replaying in my mind in a nonstop loop, and I refused to believe this was the end. I needed to fix this. I hadn't meant to give him the wrong impression. I was just trying to respect his need for personal space, but it came across all wrong, and now he thought I was trying to use him.

Cam passed me the apron with a beaver on it, that proclaimed “Dam Good Cook,” and I obediently put it on. I'd never been very good in the kitchen, so I hoped my son took more after his omega dad. “All right, put me to work. What do I do first?”

“Here,” he said, sliding a measuring cup over. “You can start scooping the flour into the bowl.” Cam climbed onto a chair beside me. He didn't really need the extra height, but it brought him even with me so we could stand shoulder to shoulder.

He was really good at this, and I found myself enjoying our time together. Cam was goofy and smart, and he showed how patient he could be while teaching me how to bake. My dad had always been more of the order-in variety, since he worked long hours, and nobody had ever taken the time to show me how to use a kitchen for anything beyond the basics.

Cam, with a smear of flour across his cheek, gave me the next instructions. “Okay, now we’re going to use the mixer to make sure the batter is nice and smooth.” He locked the metal bowl into place under the beaters. “Now, plug your ears.”

“Why?” I asked, thoroughly confused.

“The mixer gets a little loud,” he said, completely straight-faced. Then he grabbed a pair of thick black headphones, the kind that would normally be used for listening to music, from where they’d been sitting next to the fruit bowl, and he pulled them over his ears.

I laughed, thinking he must be joking, but I stuck my fingers in my ears anyway. I’d never heard of someone needing ear protection in the kitchen before. But then he pushed the start button, and my laughter was cut off by a high-pitched whine that only got louder as he turned up the speed.

“What the fuck?” I blurted before I could stop myself, but luckily, Cam couldn’t hear the swear over the offensive sound.

He got to work scraping down the sides of the bowl with a spatula as the mixer ran, and after a minute or two, he turned off the beaters and set his earphones aside.

“Uh, Cam, I don’t think that’s a normal sound for a kitchen appliance.”

“I know, but my dad says it still does the trick, so we should just use it until it doesn’t work anymore. He says electronics shouldn’t be disposable.”

I nodded, trying to keep my face straight. While I could appreciate the sentiment behind the life lesson, this seemed a little ridiculous. I suspected there was more to it than what Cam knew, and maybe money was a little tight for Jasper. If I’d known about Cam sooner, I could’ve been helping out with child support this whole time.

“You know what?” I said, tipping the bowl up so Cam could pour the batter into the lined tins. “Maybe I could buy your dad a new mixer. Do you think he’d like that?”

“Like a present?” he asked, looking up at me with a weird expression on his face.

“Yeah, I guess.” I shrugged like it was no big deal, even as a plan began to take shape in my mind. I’d always wanted to take care of Jasper, and even if he wasn’t willing to let me back into his life entirely, maybe I could still provide for him in some small way.

Cam’s eyes got this faraway look like he was thinking it over, then his smile widened slowly. “Yeah, I think he would like it. And you know what else he needs? A cell phone.”

I frowned. “Doesn’t he already have a cell phone?”

“Well, yeah, but I meant for me. That way you and I can talk anytime we want, and we can text when you’re coming to pick me up from school.”

“Hmm, that’s not a bad idea. What does your dad have to say about it?” I didn’t want to step on Jasper’s toes when it came to major parenting decisions. I saw his reaction when he found that TV on Cam’s wall, and a cell phone seemed like it was in the same ballpark.

Cam was shaking his head, though. “We talked about it, but he can’t really afford it, and he’s pretty touchy about money stuff. You know he’ll just say no if you ask.” While that might’ve been true, it didn’t sit right with me.

“Well…” I began carefully, “you do have a birthday coming up. How about I’ll think about it.” I wouldn’t make any promises until after I could talk to Jasper about it.

“Ooh, yeah! My birthday! Can we have the party at your place?” Cam’s eyes lit up with excitement. “It would be so cool! I guess it’ll be too cold for a pool party, but we could use the hot tub and get pizzas and watch a movie in your entertainment room in the basement.”

I had to admit, that did sound pretty fun… “Uh, it would be okay with me, but we should check with your dad.” I looked over my shoulder, searching for Jasper again. Where was he when I needed him? I really felt like I was out of my depth here.

“Are you kidding? It would be a huge help for him! He’s always super exhausted after a party because he tries to do it

all himself. If we had it at your place, he wouldn't have to stress out so much.”

Yep, that seemed like Jasper. But if I could take care of the food and the cake and the cleaning up afterward, he wouldn't have anything to worry about. All he would have to do was show up, and I would take care of the rest. “I like the way you think,” I told Cam.

I grabbed a cloth and started wiping down the counter, while Cam hopped off the chair. “He told me he used to love you, you know,” he said quietly as he pulled open the oven to slide the metal pans onto the rack. It made me nervous watching him, but he seemed so comfortable doing it, it was obvious this wasn't his first time baking.

“Your dad? He did?” My chest felt tight, and my heart skipped a beat. I couldn't believe everything I'd missed out on, all because I was a teenage idiot. “What else did he say about me?” I tried to ask casually.

Cam shrugged, setting the timer. “Not much, but I know he's lonely.”

“H-he is?” I stammered, unsure of what to say to that. “How do you know?”

“I dunno, I just do. Sometimes when he thinks nobody's watching, he gets real quiet, and his eyes go all sad.”

Jasper was such an amazing catch, and yet, he'd been alone all this time. It made no sense to me. Plenty of alphas didn't mind if a guy had a kid. But maybe it was more than a lack of

opportunity... A tiny spark of hope came to life inside me. I'd been lonely too, but it was because nobody could compare to the picture-perfect life I'd imagined having with Jasper. Was there a chance he felt the same way? Didn't we owe it to ourselves to find out?

"Did you love my dad too?" Cam asked, watching me closely, as if he'd be able to tell if I was lying. But I wasn't about to lie to my kid, and I didn't want to lie to myself either.

"Yeah, I did..." I leaned in. "Can I tell you a secret?" He nodded and tilted his head to listen closely. "I never stopped loving him, but don't tell him I said that. I don't think he's ready to hear it yet."

Cam beamed up at me for a second, but then he pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes at me. "My dad deserves somebody who will take care of him and who will make him laugh. He needs someone who can help do the laundry and the dishes, and who can reach the top of the walls when he decides to paint the living room. He likes cuddles, but you can't be a blanket hog. Do you think you can do all that?"

I felt like I was in a job interview for the most important opportunity of my life, and I would only get one chance at this. "Yeah, I think I can handle that."

"Do you snore?"

"Not that I know of."

He paused, considering me, and I held my breath as I waited for the verdict. "Okay," he said with a sharp nod, like he'd

reached a decision. “I’ll help you.”

I wanted to laugh but thought I’d better not. I would need all the help I could get, and Cam was the perfect ally. “That’s great! I could really use a man like you on my side,” I told him. “Is there... I mean, has there been anyone else who wanted to date your dad?” I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer, but if Jasper was seeing someone, I couldn’t make things awkward. Maybe that kiss hadn’t meant anything to him. Maybe it was just for old time’s sake, and then he felt guilty immediately after.

Cam rolled his eyes. “There’s a guy at Dad’s work who’s always hanging around. He’s okay, but I can tell he doesn’t meet the requirements.”

“Mm, Brent. You’re right, he looks like a blanket hog.” I knew exactly who Cam meant, and I had to fight not to let my hands form fists. Brent would keep his hands to himself if he knew what was good for him.

Jasper was mine. Maybe not officially, but it was only a matter of time. And now, with my man on the inside, I couldn’t fail.

Jasper

I WELCOMED THE STERILE tiled floors and front-faced aisles of the grocery store as the impersonal space it was. I needed to take a breather, and since I couldn't seem to do it at home or at work, then I would take it wherever I could get it.

Wandering down the cereal aisle, I tried to focus on the week's meal plan in an attempt to figure out what I needed to buy, but I couldn't seem to get past breakfast. Oh well, nobody ever died from eating cereal for dinner.

I reached for a box of our usual flakes, but paused when my eye caught the colorful cartoon mascot on the box beside it. I could too easily remember Eric lying on his back on my bed, tossing the O's into the air and trying to catch them in his mouth. He'd been procrastinating from studying bio, but it turned out we'd found more interesting ways to teach him anatomy...

"Shit," I muttered, grabbing a box of cereal at random before fleeing from the memory at a jog, the shopping cart's front wheel issuing a squeaky complaint before wobbling me off

course. I just barely braked in time to avoid crashing into a display of granola bars.

I really needed to screw my head on properly, but nothing was the way it used to be. When it was just me and Cam, I knew what to expect. But lately, Cam had been acting extra weird. He didn't seem unhappy, just really... intense. Like, he insisted we watch Eric's game in Florida on TV, and when I got up to grab a snack, he told me I couldn't leave because I might miss something, and he even made me wait until commercial breaks to run to the bathroom. Then on Wednesday, he'd asked me to pick him up from school when I knew for a fact Eric was already doing it. It was like my son was trying to fill my world with all things Eric, and it was getting nearly impossible to avoid the man.

After wandering around the grocery store for half an hour, I looked down into my cart and was shocked by the bizarre assortment of food staring back at me. Besides the cereal, I had peanut butter, cheese puffs, ham, bananas, ice cream, extra-garlic pickles, and a club-pack bag of chocolate chips. I quickly grabbed a few of our essentials and headed for the checkout.

"Whatever," I huffed, beyond caring. I hadn't really needed to do grocery shopping anyway, it was more an excuse to escape. My parents were having some quality time with Cam back at the house, and I felt like I couldn't breathe with all the questions my mom was asking about Eric.

At the checkout, I started unloading my groceries onto the conveyor belt, when I turned and came face to face with Eric—or his dimpled smile, anyway. “*Grrr!*” I snarled at the magazine sitting in the rack, relying on being an impulse buy for customers on their way out. The headline read: “Meet Eric Van Leer’s Secret Mini-Me.” I didn’t want to buy the damn thing, didn’t want to read all the fan gossip about America’s favorite quarterback, but I needed to know what they were saying about Cam, so I snatched a copy of Chatter Magazine and threw it on top of my groceries before quickly paying.

I paused just outside the store’s exit, grabbing the magazine out of the bag and flipping through it until I got to the article. They had a full-page spread of pictures, mostly of Eric, but a few of him posing with Cam. They’d even managed to find one of me and Cam together. Why wasn’t I told about this? Didn’t they need my permission to print these?

As I scanned the article, I grew more and more angry, my stomach churning. I felt like I was going to be sick. It talked about Eric’s rough upbringing, about how his mom’s abandonment at an early age had left him vulnerable to being taken advantage of. The author didn’t outright call me a gold-digger, but the insinuation was there. They made it very clear that I wasn’t someone important to Eric, just someone from his past, and that the timing of me coming forward when he was traded back to the city was simply too perfect. I could already imagine the gossip, about how I was trying to land myself a rich husband and using my child as a ploy.

“Assholes!” I spat, throwing the magazine straight in the trash. My son was going to hear about it from someone at school. I couldn’t protect him from this. What would he think of me? I felt... dirty.

The sky above, dark and foreboding, was a perfect reflection of my mood, and as I pushed the cart through the parking lot toward the car, sleet began to flick down in a light patter. I was almost to the car when I finally looked up, and I jolted.

Eric was leaning back against my car, waiting for me, his arms crossed casually over his chest. He gave me a cautious smile, and I scowled straight back.

I resumed stomping up to the car, nearly colliding into him with the shopping cart. “What are you doing here? Are you following me?”

His expression smoothed out in feigned innocence, and his eyes flitted away. “Of course not. I just... needed some milk, and I was on my way to...” *Yeah, right.* He had nothing. He was a horrible liar. He needed to learn how to get his story straight before getting himself into a jam like this.

“Uh-huh, sure. Well, then I should let you get to your shopping. If you’ll excuse me.” I jerked the back hatch open and started to unload the bags from my cart into the trunk.

“Here, let me help you,” he said, taking the bags from me. “I know you’re not my biggest fan right now, but we need to talk about Cam’s birthday.”

I huffed. While it reeked like an excuse to corner me, he was right, we did need to talk about it. “You have until we finish loading these groceries in the car, but I have ice cream in here, and I don’t want it to melt.” Was it my imagination, or was he moving as slowly as possible?

“So, Cam asked me if he could have his party at my place, a sort of pizza party-slash-movie marathon. Are you okay with that?”

“Sure,” I mumbled. “It’s up to the birthday boy what he wants to do. As long as you don’t mind a bunch of ten-year-olds running around your house, have at it.”

His fingers brushed mine as he took a bag from me. “And you’ll be there too, right? You could invite your parents and brother?”

“Oh, that’s...” It was nice of him to suggest, but I wasn’t sure how to handle him being nice. Not when I was clinging so tightly to the idea of him being a manipulative asshole.

He sighed, refusing to put the final bag in the trunk, but there was no putting it off. He finally stowed it, but when he reached up to close the hatch, he paused. “I got you something.”

“Y-you did?” It wasn’t my birthday, and it was still over a month until Christmas. “You didn’t have to buy me anything.” In fact, I wished he hadn’t.

“I know.” He hiked a thumb over his shoulder. “It’s in my truck. If I go get it, will you drive away without me?”

I chuckled. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

His full lips quirked up enough to bring out that dimple, and I knew I wasn’t going anywhere. “Don’t leave,” he commanded with mock sternness, then jogged to his truck. He came back with a box in his arms.

I frowned at the picture on the side of the box. “You bought me a new stand mixer? Is that like, ‘an omega belongs in the kitchen’ kind of present?”

“Wha—?” he sputtered, thrown off his game. “No, of course not! I noticed when I was making banana cake with Cam that your mixer had seen better days, and I thought I would do something nice for you.” He held it out to me, and I took an involuntary step back.

“I don’t want it,” I said shortly. “Take it back.”

“But you need it,” he insisted, holding it out again. “Don’t be stubborn, Jasper. I can afford to buy you gifts. I *want* to.”

“And what about what I want, huh?” I gritted out. With the sting from the magazine article’s accusations still fresh in my mind, I couldn’t stop from lashing out. “I don’t want your money, Eric! That isn’t why I told you about Cam.”

He set the box on the ground at his feet. “Yeah, I get it. That’s pretty obvious, since you went *ten years* without telling me,” he snapped. I flinched, and he groaned, backtracking. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes, you did,” I said on a sigh. “And I deserved it.” We were interrupted when my phone pinged with a text, and I

pulled it out. It was from my mom.

Mom: *Cam wants to know if you're still shopping. He says he's hungry and ready for dinner. Did you want me to make something for him?*

I quickly texted back that I was just packing up the car and would be home in ten minutes.

Just a few seconds later, Eric's phone pinged. "Sorry," he muttered when he pulled it out to look, and I saw the profile picture on the text was Cam.

"Is that..." *He wouldn't, would he?* "Is that text from Cam? Did you buy him a cell phone?"

Eric went totally still, and I could see him weighing his options. Finally, he decided to go with honesty. "Yes, but—"

"What the fuck, Eric?! You know how I feel about screens, but you just had to go behind my back and buy him one. You couldn't even ask?"

"How was I supposed to ask you when you won't take my calls?" he argued back. Our voices were getting louder, and a few people turned to look. Great, something else for the tabloids to print. They would probably say I was begging for more cash.

"Forget it. I can't have this conversation right now." I headed for the driver's door, but Eric ran ahead and put himself in my path.

"Just hang on a second and listen."

“What?” I snarled.

“Yes, I bought him a phone, but it’s one of those emergency ones for kids, so he can only text or call the approved phone numbers, which is you and me and his grandparents, and that’s it. No games or apps, no internet connection, but I wanted him to be able to text you when he’s with me. I knew you would miss him.”

That soothed at least a little of my rage, and I took a deep breath and tried to let go of my temper. “Okay,” I finally bit out. “Now, if we’re finished, I have to get home.”

“Gods, I keep screwing things up between us, but this isn’t how I want it to be. Please believe me. Jasper, that kiss—”

“Was nothing,” I said, cutting him off before he could finish.

“It was *not* nothing, and you know it. Don’t lie to me and say you didn’t feel it too,” he said more firmly, taking a step toward me, and this time, I held my ground, closing my eyes and just letting myself be in his presence. He was warm and smelled so damn good. He was a temptation, and I couldn’t say no forever, because Eric and I had a connection, and it was impossible to deny it.

Against my better judgment, I admitted softly, “I felt it.”

His eyes softened. “I’m not expecting us to commit to a serious relationship straight away. I’m not saying we should get married. *Yet*. After ten years apart, neither of us are who we used to be. I’m just asking you to keep an open mind. Maybe we could try to get to know each other again.”

I tipped my chin up and looked into those green eyes, the gray sky above making them appear deeper. “But we have Cam to consider. I don’t want him to get his hopes up, only for things to fall apart. And because of your fame, the whole world will be watching.” What I didn’t want to admit was that I couldn’t let Eric break my heart again; I couldn’t survive it twice.

“We can take it slow, keep it to ourselves for a while.” When I didn’t immediately shoot him down, he said, “Maybe I could call you tonight, and you’ll actually pick up?”

“Well, we do have a birthday party to plan...” I began cautiously, but he was already nodding.

“Perfect. I’ll call you around nine after Cam’s in bed.”

“Okay,” I whispered. I felt like I just made a deal with the devil himself.

I halfway expected Eric to try to kiss me again, but he kept his word to take things slow, and I scolded myself for being disappointed. He slid out of my way and opened my car door for me. “Make sure you tell Cam I found you,” he teased, wiggling his phone at me. “Oh, and you’re accepting this gift. You’re welcome.”

I snorted a laugh and climbed into the car, while he opened the back to put the mixer in. I drove away, watching him staring after me in the rearview mirror. So that was why Cam had wanted to know if I was still at the grocery store. He’d been keeping tabs on me and feeding the information to Eric. I had a spy in my midst, but I couldn’t bring myself to be mad

about it. In fact, to know that our son was rooting for us took some of the pressure off.

Too bad my heart was still playing defense.

Eric

“PIZZA’S HERE!” I CALLED down the stairs.

“Oh shit, now you’ve done it,” Jasper’s brother Beck said, laughing.

“What? What did I—?” I began to ask, confused, before I heard the rumbling. It was the sound of a stampede coming up the stairs, feet stamping on wood, accompanied by whooping and hollering. I found it impossible to believe it was only a dozen ten-year-olds. They were hopped up on sugar and were somehow feeding off each other’s unlimited supply of energy. Beck grabbed me by the back of the shirt and pulled me out of the way before I could get bowled over as the kids thundered past to the dining room. “It’s like the entire defensive line coming at me at once!”

Beck patted me on the back. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it. Just in time for them to grow out of it.” I detected a hint of pity in his voice.

I'd been so distracted dealing with Jasper's and my emotions about the whole surprise-kid scenario that I hadn't really taken into account all the other people who'd been involved. Jasper hadn't told his family who the father was either, and some of them had made it very clear to me that they had disagreed about his choice to keep the secret.

"I'm not mad at Jasper, you know," I told Beck quietly as the kids descended on the pizza boxes laid out on the dining room table. "I don't blame him for what he did."

"Yeah, well... I do," he said pointedly. "Things could've been better, easier. He could've been a doctor by now if he hadn't been so damn stubborn."

"Hush, Beck," Isabelle scolded. "It wasn't your decision to make."

Beck gave his mother a look I couldn't decipher, full of regret, but he didn't argue. Instead, he said, "I'm gonna go grab a slice of pizza before the vultures pick it clean."

Across the room, I saw Jasper had made himself at home in my kitchen, and my chest warmed. He was busy making sure every kid had the right drink. "He has the patience of a saint," I told his mom.

"He does, doesn't he?" We both watched him for a moment. I loved how he gave every kid his individual attention, even if it was only for a split second before they went back to eating or laughing with friends.

“How’s your dad?” she asked me carefully. “Any plans for him to meet his grandson?” It had never been a secret that my dad struggled to raise me on his own after my mom left. My dad did his best to hide his resentment, but the rift that formed between us was wide. Mr. and Mrs. Mayle invited me for family dinner often in the weeks leading up to graduation, when I was over to study with Jasper. Sitting around that dinner table was the first time I’d felt like part of a family, and I still held that feeling close to this day.

I shrugged. “I called to tell him, but he didn’t know how to take the news. We’re no closer than we were ten years ago, but you never know. Maybe he’ll come around.”

The din surged in volume when someone spilled their drink. No matter the ruckus, though, my mind kept coming back to what Beck had said. A new kind of regret was itching at me. “Hey, Mrs. Mayle, I’m really sorry for what I put you all through. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. I just...” I sighed. “I just really loved your son.”

“I know you did, and I suspect you still do. It’s not your fault that his life took a different path. And he doesn’t regret Cam at all, not for one second. Even as a single parent, he still had plans to finish medical school, but then I got breast cancer a few years ago, and he dropped out to help take care of me. If it’s anyone’s fault he didn’t finish, it’s mine.”

“I’m sorry,” I said earnestly. “He’d mentioned you got sick, but he never said with what.”

“He has a hard time saying the C-word,” she said, smirking. “As if saying it out loud will give it power over us. I’m better now, but I feel like he’s still holding his breath.” She shook her head. “Hard to believe he wanted to be a doctor. He’s smart enough, and he had the drive, but his heart is too soft.”

I chuckled, thinking about how hard it had been for Jasper to see me get hurt on the field. But when I thought back to teenage Jasper and his single-minded focus on becoming a doctor, I wondered if there wasn’t another reason it was difficult for him to handle it. Maybe it wasn’t that his heart was too soft but that he felt helpless to stop it. With that degree, he might’ve had the ability to treat cancer or set broken bones. Without it, he was just a father and a son, and his love was all he had to offer.

I may not have known the part I’d played in changing his future, but maybe it wasn’t too late to give it back...

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said to Isabelle, and she waved me off with a knowing smile.

The chaos was still in full swing, but when I saw my opportunity, I grabbed it—or rather, I grabbed Jasper. “Come with me,” I whispered in his ear, hooking a finger around his pinky, aware of all the eyes on us.

“Right now? Can it wait?” he asked, half his attention still on the kids.

“I think it’s waited long enough,” I told him, and he must’ve heard something in my voice because he looked up at me, then nodded.

“Okay.” The kids had plenty of other adults in the room to chaperone, and Jasper let me lead him from the room.

We didn’t go far. I pulled him into the walk-in pantry off the kitchen and slid the pocket door closed behind us. It muffled the kids’ chatter to a dull roar. “Where’s the light switch?” Jasper asked, and I heard him sliding his hand over the wall, looking for it.

“Leave it off for a second,” I told him, drawing him into my arms. Even in the dark, I remembered his body. He hadn’t changed so much as he might’ve thought. He still fit perfectly against me. “It’ll be easier to have this conversation without overanalyzing each other’s expressions.”

“Um, okay... You’re kind of scaring me.”

“It’s nothing bad. In fact, it could be very good.” His body was tense, but as I nuzzled into his neck, he started to melt into me, his hands smoothing over my chest. It felt so right to hold him like this, and I knew I’d promised we were just getting to know each other again, but my body was ready to move on to the next step.

Instead of kissing him until he forgot his own name like I wanted to, I braced myself for the conversation I needed to have with him. “I want you to go back to school.”

He jerked, bunching my shirt in his fists. “What? No, I can’t —”

“Just hang on, let me finish what I have to say before you turn me down.” Even without being able to see his face, I

knew he was probably chewing on his bottom lip, trying to stop himself from the barrage of excuses he'd practiced over the years. He couldn't go to school because he was busy taking care of Cam, taking care of his mother, busy with work so he could pay the bills. But now that I was back in the picture, those barriers were no longer in his way.

I slid my hands up to cup his cheeks, the barest rasp of whiskers on my palms. "Listen. If your dreams have changed, there's nothing wrong with that, but if you still want to be a doctor, I can help you. If you need someone to pick Cam up from school or help with homework, I'll be there. If you're worried about bills and tuition, don't. Money is no longer an issue." I rested my forehead on his, sharing his air. "Please, let me help you."

He shook his head gently. "Have you seen what people are saying about me? They think I only want your money, and if I accept a single cent from you, it'll only be confirming what they think."

In the darkness, I shrugged. "I don't care what other people think. Do you?"

He huffed. "A little, yeah. I know they're strangers and I shouldn't care, but Cam will hear those same rumors. It's one thing to be strong for myself, but I can't put that on him."

It was hard to dispute that, but I wanted to believe that Cam was a smart kid, and he knew his dad better than anyone. He would never believe the lies.

“Did you know that the divorce rate among NFL players is like 80%?” I said.

“What? That seems high.”

“It is high. Whether it’s because of infidelity or substance abuse or mental health, the celebrity lifestyle adds a lot of pressure on a relationship, and most of those players have kids. I’m sure they must hear the rumors too. And I’m not saying it’s right that kids should be subjected to that kind of spotlight, but it never lasts. When we don’t feed into the drama, the press will get bored of us. Either that, or we could be disgustingly sappy for the cameras until they don’t have any doubt about the validity of our relationship...” As I was saying it, I was inching my fingers over his shoulders and down his back.

“Eric...” he said, a note of warning in his tone, but he arched his hips as I dipped lower, and I felt the evidence of his yearning press into me.

I let my lips trace his jawline, and he tilted his head back to grant me access. “I got my dream—it’s not too late for you to get yours,” I whispered against his skin before sucking gently on his earlobe.

He made the most delicious sound, half growl, half whimper, squirming against me, and the friction had me hard as a rock. “No fair trying to get me to agree to this while you’re doing that.”

“Doing what?” I said, playing innocent. “This?” I eased my hand down the back of his pants and inserted a finger through

the crack of his ass, growing slippery with his slick. I was seriously cursing his tight pants right now. There wasn't enough room for me to do all the things I was dying to do. I could just barely tease my fingertip along the puckered muscle of his hole.

“What happened to going slow?” he panted breathlessly.

“You want slow? I can do slow...” I said before dragging my tongue up the column of Jasper's throat at an excruciatingly slow pace, nipping with my teeth. I wedged my thick thigh between his legs, letting him ride me.

“W-we should get back to the party.” Even as he said it, he clung to me, grinding on me. When I teased his nipple through his shirt, he gripped my hair and dragged my head back so he could kiss me. It was ferocious, all teeth and tongues, and I wondered how I'd lived this long without him. I should've tracked him down and made him mine years ago.

I never should've lost him in the first place.

The sensations were overwhelming, and we nearly toppled over, but I caught a shelf and held on for dear life. I could come just like this, dry-humping in the pantry.

Without warning, the door slid open behind me, and the pantry was flooded with light from the kitchen. Jasper squeaked and tried to jump away, but I kept my grip tight, refusing to let him go. It wasn't like we could hide what we'd been doing.

Beck blinked dumbly for a second, then barked out a surprised laugh. “I was just looking for another bag of chips.”

“Here you go,” I said, reaching up with one hand and grabbing a couple different flavors off the top shelf and shoving them in his direction.

“Thanks,” he said, narrowing his eyes at me in warning. “It’s almost time to cut the cake,” he said before closing the door.

“Now, where were we,” I said, descending on Jasper again, but the spell was officially broken.

He wrestled his way out of my arms, and I missed him instantly. “We were about to go back to the party.” He finally found the light switch so he could see what he was doing while he adjusted his pants and smoothed down his hair. “How do I look? Is it obvious?”

He looked a bit ruffled, his lips swollen. I tugged his shirt collar a little higher to hide the whisker burn I’d given him, then planted one last soft kiss on his lips. “You look perfect.”

The only thing that could make him more perfect was if he was mine.

Jasper

THE TINY GRAY KITTEN stretched in her sleep, then rolled, baring her soft belly, her tail draping over my thigh.

I was seated at the clinic's front desk, working—or as close to working as I could manage when I had an adorable kitten in my lap. The poor thing had been dropped off as a stray last night after someone found her alone in an alley, cold, dehydrated, and trembling with fear. It was hard to tell how old she was, but her eyes were open, so we guessed maybe three or four weeks. Certainly too young to be without her mother.

Beck took the as-yet-unnamed kitten home last night, waking up through the night to bottle-feed her every few hours, but he couldn't very well juggle his job along with the kitten. Which left me with an itty-bitty baby in my lap.

Not that I'm complaining, I thought as I scratched behind her ear with one finger, setting off a ragged purr.

It was close to lunchtime, and we only had one patient—a golden retriever named Benji—and their owner left in the waiting room, and my stomach gave a hungry gurgle. When the front door opened, I glanced up and saw Kel arriving for his afternoon shift.

“Hey, Jas,” he said, but his usual energy was muted, his eyes puffy and red. It could’ve been from the icy winter chill that had descended over the city, but I knew better. “How was the morning?”

“Oh, Kel, what’d he do now?” I asked, meaning his husband, my shoulders sagging. I felt anger and frustration for my friend. It was none of my business, not my marriage, but I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn he’d been cheating. I mean, nobody worked that much overtime. It was suspicious as hell, but my friend seemed determined to ignore the red flags.

He shook his head, not saying anything, and I waited. He peeked over his shoulder at the waiting room then came around behind the desk. I dreaded what was coming. “I left him,” he finally spat out, the tears he’d been holding back breaking through and spilling down his cheeks.

“Oh, hun, c’mere. I’m so sorry.” I gave him a hug, with the kitten cradled between us. I may not have been his husband’s biggest fan, but no matter how toxic a relationship was, we were allowed to feel grief when it didn’t work out. The kitten gave a little mew.

Kel lifted his tear-stained cheek from my shoulder and gave a sniffly laugh. “Aww, gimme. I need kitten cuddles.” I passed the baby over, and he nuzzled into her fluffy fur.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” I asked.

He shook his head, fanning his eyes with a hand. “Not yet. That conversation will have to be done after-hours with copious amounts of alcohol. For now, I’m completely cried out. It’s been decided, no more tears.” He grabbed a tissue and dried his cheeks. “How about we talk about your smoking-hot ex instead. What’s going on there? Has he proposed marriage yet?” Kel’s smile was wobbly, and I knew he was reaching for a distraction.

I sputtered, mouth gaping. “What? No! Of course not, that’s ridiculous. Except...”

Sensing some juicy news, his eyes got wider. “Except what?”

“He might not exactly be my ex anymore. Maybe.” I gnawed on my lip, unsure where to begin or how to classify what was happening between me and Eric. We were more than acquaintances, not exactly friends, with a whole lot of lust thrown into the mix. I could still recall the way his finger teased at my hole, while I humped his leg like a dog in heat.

“Shut. Up! Tell me everything, and don’t leave out any of the sordid details. I need to live vicariously through you, and there’s nothing hotter than a sexy new romance with a professional athlete in prime physical shape.”

I could feel the blush warming my face. I felt cornered, pinned under Kel's needling gaze, and even when I said nothing, my silence seemed to be filled with a detailed description of all the dirty, dirty things I wanted to do with my maybe-not-ex.

"I, uh..." I looked around for another topic of conversation to hide behind, but I was thankfully saved from having to answer by the clinic's door swinging open, bringing with it a blast of cold air.

"Speak of the devil," Kel murmured, smiling at whoever had just come in.

"Wha—" I spun around in my chair to find Eric sauntering through the waiting room, a smirk on his lips that could indeed be classified as devilish. "Hey! What are you doing here? I thought you wouldn't be back in town until tomorrow.

"Caught an early flight, and I thought maybe I could take you to lunch."

"Aww, you guys are just too cute. I totally ship this," Kel said, pointing with a finger back and forth between us.

Eric beamed at him. "Why, thank you. Always good to find an ally. And your name is?" he drawled, leaning over the counter to offer his hand to shake.

"Kelly Nickerson, but you can call me Kel. All my friends do." And then Kel freaking giggled! "And I can already tell that you're gonna treat our Jasper here like a king. Am I right?"

Eric's chuckle was throaty and did nasty things to me. "If only I could convince him to sit on the throne."

"By throne, do you mean your lap?" I muttered under my breath, just loud enough for Eric's ears, as Brent stepped out from the back hallway, grabbing Kel's attention.

"Best seat in the house," Eric said, throwing a wink my way.

I could feel Brent's attention shifting toward me and Eric, and it had me on edge. I was eager to get the hell out of here and out from under his glare.

"You guys can head out now," Kel told me. "I've got the kitten, and I'm sure Brent can handle taking the one patient to the exam room."

"Thanks, Kel. Let me just grab my coat," I told Eric.

Brent stepped in my way. "Where are you going?"

"Just out for lunch. I'll be back in an hour." I took my coat and scarf off the hook on the wall.

"Actually, I'm gonna need you to stay. There's some end-of-year paperwork that needs to be filed," he said quickly, trying to take my coat away, but I tightened my grip on it.

"What? Why?" I snapped. My patience was wearing thin with him. "No, Brent, forget it. I'm not staying." I wrenched my coat back and shot him a look before stepping past him to get around to the waiting room. He followed on my heels.

"But I think I heard Beck saying something about—"

“If my brother needed something from me, he would’ve asked me himself. And he didn’t.”

I swung the door open into the public area, and Eric was standing right there, all six-feet-two-inches of him, his impressive biceps flexing as he clenched his fists at his sides.

Brent came to an immediate halt.

Without taking his eyes off Brent, Eric hooked an arm around my waist and dragged me into him, before cupping my jaw in his large palm and kissing me possessively. I wanted to be offended by the ridiculous display of macho dick-measuring, but I couldn’t stop myself from melting under his touch. He plunged his tongue into my mouth, and I sucked on it eagerly, my body flaring to life.

I was panting by the time he drew back, but he kept his hands planted firmly on my hips. “Ready to go?”

“Mm-hm,” I managed to say, incapable of full sentences. I turned back to wave at Kel and caught sight of Brent’s sour face, pinched and bitter, as he watched us head out. He needed to learn that no means no. Dude, take a hint.

The air was bitter and pricked at my exposed skin, and the snow crunched under the soles of my shoes. It was that squeaky texture I loved, but it meant it was really damn cold. I tightened my scarf around my neck and burrowed my nose into it.

“Let’s take my car since it’s already warm,” Eric said, his breath steaming in silver puffs as he tugged me toward where

he'd parked at the curb.

I pulled back in the other direction. "No, let's just walk. There's this fantastic little Korean place just across the street. They have this amazing kimchi stew that's guaranteed to clear your sinuses."

"Umm, actually..." Eric began, looking chagrined, "I sorta brought a picnic lunch so I might be able to convince you to get frisky in the car with me?" He phrased it like a question, and at least had the good sense to look a little naughty.

I laughed, stepping into him and wrapping my arms around his waist. "How frisky are we talking about? Let's ignore the public indecency for a second, but it's also a little too cold for getting naked."

"I'll keep you warm, baby," he said, grinning wide enough to tell me he knew exactly how cheesy that line was. Then he pursed his lips as he weighed his options. "Orrrr," he drawled, "we could eat Korean... and then maybe I could come over tonight after bedtime. Maybe stay the night, have breakfast with you guys in the morning..."

I was already shaking my head, groaning. "That's not a good idea, Eric. We're still new, and that kind of step could be really confusing for Cam."

He looked like he'd been prepared for this argument and had an answer at the ready. "It's only confusing to Cam if we're not clear about where this is headed."

"And where is that?" I asked.

He slid his hands inside my jacket, his palm settling over my heart. “I want it all with you, Jasper. I always have.” It didn’t matter how cold it was outside when he said something like that, my body heating under his intense gaze.

“A-all?” I stuttered. “Like, sex and dinner?”

“Sex is good, sure, but I mean more like movie nights as a family, all of us living under the same roof. One day walking down an aisle and saying our vows, and when you’re ready, more kids. I’m talking about building a life together, Jasper. Growing old together.”

There was a boulder lodged in my throat, and no matter how many times I swallowed, I couldn’t knock it loose. “That’s...”

“That’s a future, Jas. And I want it with you.” He didn’t waver, but I could see the vulnerability in his eyes. He was laying his heart on the table, leaving the next step to me.

The L-word was right there on the tip of my tongue, I could feel it threatening to slip out. I clamped my lips shut for good measure. It was a bad idea falling for Eric, I was sure of it. There was only heartbreak waiting for me down that path. I should tell him no, walk away while I still had a chance.

“I’ll see you at eleven,” I told him instead. Cam’s bedtime was nine-thirty, but if Eric and I planned on ending up naked, I was going to need a bit of extra time for some personal grooming.

Eric

WHEN JASPER ANSWERED THE door later that night, his skin was still pink from the shower, but I knew it was more than that; there was a blush under there somewhere. “You have to be quiet,” he instructed firmly, refusing to move from blocking the doorway until I agreed.

“Cross my heart,” I told him sincerely. I had no intention of doing anything to get me evicted when I was so close to reliving my fantasies.

“Okay...” He still seemed cautious, a crease between his eyebrows, gnawing on the inside of his cheek, so when he took my hand and began to lead me into the house, I resisted.

“Hey, Jas. There’s no pressure, you know. We don’t have to do anything tonight. If you just want to curl up and watch a movie or get some takeout for a late-night snack, that’s fine too.”

He increased the pressure on my hand, though, and gave a harder tug. “Would you come in already? You’re letting in all

the cold.” His lips curled into a smirk, and when I stepped into the front hall, he closed the door behind me then shoved me back against it, forcing my jacket off over my shoulders before kissing me roughly. Then he dug his fingers into my hair, showing me clearly what he wanted.

When he drew back, his eyes were heavy-lidded, his lips kiss-swollen. “I want this, okay? Don’t doubt that. I’m just a little out of practice.” Was it wrong of me that I liked knowing that? He began to back up, and I was eager to follow wherever he led me. “No staying for breakfast, though,” he said, pointing a finger at my chest.

“Sure,” I said without a lot of conviction. There was still time to change his mind.

Cam would be over the moon if he found me here in the morning, but I suspected this made-up rule was more for Jasper’s sake than anyone else’s. He’d gone all-in with me once before and got burned. This time around, he was guarding his heart—and I was okay with that. I’d already waited ten years for him; what was a few more days, weeks, or even months? I would wait forever if I had to.

I just really, really hoped it wouldn’t be *too* long.

We tiptoed down the hall and into his bedroom at the end, closing the door softly and flipping the lock just in case. When Jasper turned to face me, we both paused for a second. “What now?” he asked.

I loved how he put his trust in me to lead. “Now you kiss me,” I told him, smirking.

As an alpha, I preferred to be more dominant in the bedroom, but I knew how important it was to let Jasper move at his own pace. I handed over the control to him.

Jasper's breathing was ragged as he closed the distance between us and tipped up onto his toes, brushing the softest of kisses over my lips. It took everything in me not to grab him and throw him down on the mattress, tearing his clothes from his body.

With trembling fingers, he took the hem of my shirt and pulled it up, baring my chest. I obligingly lifted my arms for him and finished pulling it over my head, before tossing it on the floor.

"Oh, fuck," he gasped, his eyes widening as he took me in. His gaze was hungry, hands tracing the lines of my muscles. "You're like a statue of a Greek god, carved out of marble."

I chuckled, enjoying his reaction. He was transfixed on my abs, and without warning, he leaned in and licked me, his mouth hot and wet, tracing a path from my navel, up to my right pec, then lingering briefly to lap at my nipple, nibbling with his teeth, sending tingling ripples of heat straight to my balls. I gasped and clutched at him, momentarily forgetting that this was supposed to be his show. But I needed to kiss him, *now*.

With an arm clamped around his waist, I dragged him straight up and into my arms, and he hooked his legs over my hips, holding on for dear life. "Eric," he moaned, a plea.

“I’ve got you, Jasper. I’ll take care of you.” And I always would.

I laid him out across the mattress with the utmost care. He didn’t resist as I removed his shirt, then as I peeled his pants and briefs down his legs. I knelt at the base of the bed and admired the view.

Jasper’s body had changed since I last saw him naked. He’d lived a whole life over the past ten years. He wasn’t as lean as he once was, and there were silvery scars along his hips and lower abdomen, but knowing it was from growing our child was hot as hell. I couldn’t wait to witness the changes firsthand when we had our second child. My gaze traced a path over every inch of him.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, squirming under my scrutiny. He tried to cover himself up with his hands, but I tugged them away.

“Let me look,” I demanded, my voice husky. “It’s been too long, and I want to get reacquainted with your body.”

Settling between his legs on my stomach, I kissed across his stretchmarks, licking that birthmark on his hip I’d always loved so much, skirting back and forth around his erection but never giving him what he truly wanted. “Eric,” he grumbled self-consciously, unable to escape with how I had him pinned, but then I dipped my tongue into his belly button, and he laughed instead. “Cut it out, that tickles.”

His laughter was light and unexpected, and I loved the sound almost as much as I loved his moans. I’d always thought I was

a lighthearted, easy-going guy, but the more time I spent with Jasper, the more buoyant I felt. An unseen burden lifted off me, a pressure that I hadn't even been aware was weighing me down. And the way Jasper's face smoothed out, losing the signs of strain around his eyes and the corners of his mouth, I suspected he felt it too.

I knew Jasper was a flight risk. I couldn't give him any reason to doubt my feelings for him. I loved him, plain and simple, but I couldn't just tell him that. He would never believe me after a decade of lingering over my betrayal. I needed to *show* him.

Reaching between us, I slid a finger through his dripping crack, probing at his entrance. "It's not too late to change your mind, you know. I can stop if you want me to."

He groaned, arching his hips in an attempt to work my fingertip deeper inside him. "Eric, I can't think straight, and my balls feel like they're about to explode. Trust me when I say it's far too late."

Just to torment him further, with my finger embedded in his hole, I licked the length of his cock, from root to tip. Jasper gave a muffled grunt, his shaft bobbing, and I paused to savor the bead of pre-cum that dripped from the slit, the flavor like nectar on my tongue.

He grappled with my shoulders, trying to drag me up his body. "Seriously, I don't have the patience I had ten years ago. Get up here and fuck me already."

“Shh,” I chided him, but I crawled up his body, dragging my torso along his dick to tease some friction, leaving a smear of pre-cum on my abs. “You have to keep quiet, remember?”

He narrowed his eyes at me, not in the mood for sass. Instead of scolding, though, he said, “You’re overdressed,” brow arched as he popped the button on my pants.

“I didn’t want you to think I was rushing you.”

“No, please! By all means, rush!” He tried to push my pants over my hips, but there was no way he could do it on his own like this.

I got up off the bed and shucked my pants, then tucked my thumbs into the waistband of my boxer briefs. Jasper’s eyes were laser focused on my bulge, and he sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and held his breath. I eased down the fabric slowly, my erection, long and thick and eager, bouncing.

Jasper gave a little growl. “Perfect, now get back here.” He made grabby hands at my dick.

I laughed but didn’t jump into his arms just yet. First, I bent down and fished a condom out of my wallet. We’d made this mistake before, and while it had given us the greatest gift, I also didn’t want Jasper to have his choices taken from him. When we got pregnant, it would be because we were trying for a baby.

His casual eagerness dimmed when he saw what I was holding, and he offered me a sweet smile, gratitude reflecting in his eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered, and I knew I’d done

the right thing. I'd shown care and forethought. He wasn't the only one who'd matured.

As I joined him on the bed, he sat up and took the condom from me. I watched with rapt wonder as he tore the wrapper and took it out. He gripped the base of my cock firmly in his hand. There was something so erotic about the way his fingers wrapped around me, massaging as he rolled the condom on, and I groaned, thickening impossibly further for him.

I laid him down and settled over him, moving with tenderness. Kissing him thoroughly, with long, slow caresses, I showed him that this was more than just sex to me; this was the beginning of our future. I lined myself up with his entrance and eased in as gently as I could, but *damn*, he was tight.

As I breached his hole, he threw his head back with a gasp, his body going rigid, and I dipped my head to kiss along his neck, trying to help him relax. "I'm so sorry, baby. I'll go slow." Hurting him was the last thing I wanted to do. I held steady, my muscles aching with the urge to thrust, waiting for him to adjust to my girth.

After a long moment, he blew out a long breath and nodded. "Okay, I'm good now."

Even though he'd given me the go-ahead, I eased into it, working my way into him an inch at a time until I was fully seated, my hips against his. Sweat was beading on my brow with the effort of restraining myself, and it didn't help that he was making these little whimpers of pleasure, his fingers digging into my back.

His ass was so tight, squeezing around me like a fist, almost like he hadn't had sex in ages. "Shit, Jasper, you feel so damn good," I whispered, dropping my forehead to his, eyes closed against the onslaught of heat building in my core. I wasn't going to last long at this rate.

I drew back, until only the head remained inside him, then surged forward, filling him completely. "Again," he whimpered on a sigh. "Do that again." Who was I to say no?

With each thrust, my need for Jasper grew. We were clinging to each other like we would never let go, and keeping quiet was nearly impossible.

"Oh fuck, faster!" Jasper gritted out. He was so close, and I needed him to come. Now!

I bent my knees, spreading his legs wider, and angled my hips. I felt the moment I rubbed against his prostate, his whole body shuddering beneath me. "Oh, oh shit... *oh!*" He bit down on my shoulder to muffle his cry, his cock pulsing and emptying his cum between our bodies. Just in time, as I climaxed hard. I choked out a curse, dropping my head to his shoulder as my knot expanded, filling him to the max. I regretted the condom for a second, wishing I could be injecting my seed deep inside him, to see it dripping from his hole down his thighs, marking him as mine.

We have time for that, I reminded myself. We have forever.

With my knot in his ass linking us together, I rolled us to our sides and held him close, breathing in our sex-drenched scent of sweat and slick, reveling in this moment of perfect bliss.

Jasper was draped around me, completely sated, our legs entwined. I wanted this every night for the rest of my life.

There was still something missing, though. I wanted my cake and to eat it too. Or rather, I wanted Jasper to have the whole damn buffet, all-you-can-eat dessert included. He deserved the house, the marriage, the lifetime supply of mind-blowing orgasms—*and* he deserved to have the career he wanted. “Have you had a chance to think more about going back to school?” I asked casually, broaching the subject out of nowhere.

He gave a wary chuckle, making his channel clench around me. “Why do you always bring this up at the worst moments?”

“This way you can’t escape the conversation, and you’re less likely to yell at me when you’re still all blissed out,” I teased. I kissed him gently on the forehead and brushed his damp hair back from his forehead. “Don’t worry, I won’t push the issue. I’m only asking that you think about your options, okay? I’m here for the long haul, no matter what. You’re not alone in this anymore.”

He didn’t answer me, but he didn’t need to. I could tell the seed I’d planted was taking root. I didn’t know what decision he would make, but I knew he would at least consider it from every angle, before making the right choice for him and for Cam. And maybe even for me.

Between the warmth of his bed and his body, and the tickle as he lazily traced his fingertip over the tattoo on my bicep, I found myself being lulled to sleep, and my eyes drifted shut.

“No breakfast,” Jasper mumbled, but his breathing was already evening out. Neither of us showed any sign of moving.

Jasper

EVEN BEFORE I OPENED my eyes, I knew he was gone. There was a distinct absence in the space around me, like a black hole, the gravity of it pulling all my attention. Sure enough, when I cracked my eyes open, I found the bed empty and cold. Eric had tucked the blanket back around me, but the pillow still held the indent of his head.

He listened. I'd told him not to stay for breakfast, and he listened. So why was I so disappointed?

It was still early, the sun just barely lightening the sky, but I couldn't stay in this bed another minute. Not when it was nothing more than a reminder of last night, how loved and cherished I felt in Eric's arms. It was a stark contrast to how alone I felt now without him. Had I always been missing this piece of myself?

For the past ten years, I thought I'd been doing okay on my own. I found satisfaction in going about my day, taking responsibility for my and my son's life, and spending quality time with Cam helped keep me from being lonely. I had set my

romantic life on the back burner because Cam came first. Always. I considered my personal life an unnecessary indulgence. But now, I wondered if I'd been lying to myself all along. I'd been living a half-life.

And now that I knew what I was missing, I wasn't sure I could ever go back to the way things were.

It took more effort than usual to drag myself into the shower. My limbs were heavy, my movements sluggish. Even more noticeable, though, my ass was still tender, and I felt it with every step I took. I propped myself up against the shower wall and let the hot water soak into my body. I couldn't help the invading thought, *This shower would be more fun if Eric were here...*

"Fuck," I muttered almost in disgust, grabbing the bar of soap and doing a quick lather and rinse. I refused to moon over him. I was a strong, independent omega, and I'd done just fine without him. And if he disappeared from my life tomorrow, I could live without him again. He was just a man.

I managed to keep that stiff upper lip all the way until I stomped down the hall and caught sight of Cam curled up on the couch in front of the TV, watching cartoons in his PJs, and I melted. "Morning, buddy," I said, bending over the back of the couch to drop a kiss on the top of his head, smoothing down his unruly bedhead. "Pancakes?"

It was too early for enthusiasm, but he flashed me a thumbs-up, eyes still fixed on the screen.

As I headed into the kitchen and got started on the batter, I thought about how different this would've been if Eric had been here. Would he have played it off all casual, strolling into the living room and plonking himself down on the couch to watch cartoons with our son like this was an everyday occurrence? Or was he the type of morning person who woke up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and would he and Cameron have made the pancakes together? My thoughts snagged on that image, stuttering to a halt. What would that be like? I'd made ten years' worth of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners by myself. To have help would be...

Nope. Not going there. Way too soon to be painting that picture.

Eric would be getting on a plane shortly, heading out of town for a game in Kansas City this weekend, and maybe that was a good thing. I needed a little space to think clearly. Being around him made me throw logic straight out the window. Besides, according to him, I apparently had more important things to think about...

After I had mixed up the batter, I poured the first batch onto the hot pan, and while waiting for them to cook, I pulled out my phone and brought up the university website. Eric kept bringing up the idea of me going back to school to finish my medical degree. I had to admit, it was an interesting thought.

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy my job. I liked working for my brother, the pay was decent, and I couldn't knock being around

cute animals all day, but it wasn't exactly challenging me. I... well, I *loved* the idea of learning something new.

It would mean accepting a lot of help, from Eric and from my parents, but Cam wasn't a baby anymore. It would be easier now. It had been damn near impossible the first time around. I managed to get through my pre-med courses, but it was a lot of juggling. First through the final months of my pregnancy, then sleepless nights with an infant. The early-morning labs were brutal, and I missed too many bedtimes with my son in favor of study sessions on campus. It was a tradeoff, and I didn't like it.

Then when my mom got cancer, I put everything on hold. It wasn't just that she couldn't babysit Cam for me anymore, but I also wanted to help take care of her. It was an easy decision.

Now? Deciding whether or not to go back? Less easy.

I was just scrolling through the course selection when my phone lit up with a phone call. At first it set my heart racing, and hope surged that it was Eric calling to say good morning. But nope, no such luck.

Sighing, I hit the accept button and brought the phone to my ear. "Hi, Brent," I said shortly. It was Saturday. What did he need that couldn't wait until Monday?

"Hey, Jasper. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Nope. What's up?" I asked, giving the pancakes a flip. Only half my attention was on what Brent was saying.

“I was just, you know, wondering if... you’d like to go for coffee with me this afternoon.”

My hand jerked, launching a pancake, missing the pan entirely and landing on the floor with a plop. “What? Brent, no! That is *not* a good idea.” I didn’t get it. I hadn’t done a single thing to encourage him. I’d thought Eric’s public kiss would’ve had Brent backing off, but if anything, he seemed determined to double down.

“Why not? Is it because of Eric Van Leer?” His huff carried through the phone. I could almost hear the way his lip stuck out in a pout.

“That’s none of your business, Brent. Who I see is my choice.”

“He’s not right for you,” Brent scolded. “You’re making a mistake. Hotshots like him, they’re always looking for the next conquest. He’ll cheat on you, if he hasn’t already. You need someone stable.”

“Like you?” I scoffed, and Brent paused. I hadn’t meant to sound so rude, but he couldn’t be serious.

“Sure, why not me?” he asked. “We’re compatible. I own my house, have a good amount in my savings account. Cam and I get along great, and you know I’d take great care of both of you. I’d like to think I’m not bad-looking and—”

“Stop!” I interrupted. It was like he was trying to sell himself on the marriage market. “I just don’t see you that way. We’re

friends, nothing more.” Honestly, that was being generous. I didn’t consider him anything more than a co-worker.

“Then, as friends, let’s go out for coffee. I can pick you up around—”

I slammed my hand down on the counter in frustration. “Oh shoot, Brent, my pancakes are burning. Gotta go!” And I hung up. I felt like I was being a coward, running from this conversation, but there just didn’t seem to be any other way out of it. He simply wasn’t taking no for an answer. And with my luck, Brent would just show up as if I’d agreed to the coffee date, so I quickly made plans to take Cam to the zoo for the afternoon instead.

Shutting off the stove, I poured myself a cup of coffee, then carried a plate of pancakes through to the living room and put it down on the coffee table in front of Cam. He slithered off the couch to sit on the floor, bringing his face even with the plate, and dug straight in.

“*Ahem,*” I said in an exaggerated way.

“Thank you,” he mumbled around a mouthful.

The TV show seemed like a bunch of nonsense to me, with bright colors, shrill characters, and no plot that I could decipher at all, but that suited me fine. I’d done enough thinking for one day, and my head was starting to hurt.

At the end of the show, as the credits began to roll, I saw Cam pause, fork halfway to his mouth. “Hey, Dad? When am I going to get a little brother or sister?”

I choked on my coffee, nearly spraying it everywhere. “What? Where did that come from?” It wasn’t the first time he’d asked me, but it had been a few years. Not since one of his friends in kindergarten had a new baby brother. Cam had been fixated on the idea of a baby all his own, and we’d had to have a talk about where babies came from and how I couldn’t get pregnant on my own.

But unlike last time, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him it was never going to happen. Because for the first time in ten years, it wasn’t impossible.

In fact, my heart insisted that it was a very real possibility.

Cam glanced back at me then went back to dragging his fork through the leftover syrup on the plate. “I dunno. I just figured maybe since Eric was back that you might want more kids.”

I thought his words over carefully. He hadn’t said he *wanted* a sibling, just that he assumed it was something *I* wanted. “I’m not saying it’s going to happen, but how would it make you feel if it did?” I asked.

He shrugged, but after a moment, he peeked over his shoulder at me, and there was an eager sheen to his eyes that was hard to ignore. “It would be all right, I guess.” He wasn’t fooling me for a second. He wanted this, but he was scared to admit it. Adults were the ones who made the big decisions, the *impossible* decisions, and it didn’t matter how much kids kicked and screamed. If it wasn’t in Cam’s best interest, it wasn’t going to happen.

But maybe... just maybe... Eric wasn't just what was best for our son, but also for me.

So help me, I couldn't believe I was actually thinking about it. Eric said he wanted it all—marriage, house, babies—a future, and he wanted it with me.

Was that something I wanted too?

Eric

THE NOISY CHATTER OF the locker room faded into the background as I stared down at my phone, reading Jasper's text for the fourth time. *Be careful out there today.*

It was the first I'd heard from Jasper since Friday night. He'd been radio silent since I sent him a text on Saturday that said simply: *Miss you.* I didn't want him to think I was an alphahole who'd used him, but I also didn't want to push him too hard, too fast. I wasn't overly worried about his silence, because I'd left him with a lot to think about, and he was the type to weigh all the pros and cons to any decision. If—*when*—he chose me, it would be because he trusted in us. He knew what I wanted. My end goal was to build a life with Jasper and Cam. Now he had possession of the ball, and I was just waiting for the pass before I could rush him, full speed ahead. I would propose marriage today if I thought it wouldn't scare the shit out of him.

Christmas was coming up, and we hadn't talked about it. I was dying to ask, but now wasn't the time. I had hoped I might

be able to wake up at Jasper's house on Christmas morning so I could be there to watch Cam open presents. I didn't need any other gifts than that; to be with my family was more than I could ask for.

"Meeow," someone said, and when I turned to look, Schuster made a clawing motion with his hand, and a few of the other guys laughed.

"What?" I asked, lost. It was clear they'd been talking about me, but I'd been distracted by Jasper's text.

Schuster's smile morphed into a leer. "That omega of yours must be a real wildcat to mark you up like that."

My hands instantly clenched into fists, my skin heated, and I stood to my full height. "I warned you to watch your mouth when talking about my omega." I could feel eyes on us. Tensions were high before a game, but we needed to be working as a team, not bickering like teenagers.

"If you don't want people talking about him, then you shouldn't show up looking like you've been in a catfight." He arched a brow then sauntered off.

I hadn't seen my back, but Jasper had left a defined bitemark on my shoulder from when he came. A lot of the guys on the team loved to compare their sexcapades, but I didn't want to reduce what I had with Jasper to locker-room gossip. It felt too personal, too intimate, to share with my teammates. Glaring at Schuster, I quickly pulled on my pads and fastened the buckles, followed by my jersey, covering up all evidence of our lovemaking.

Something was off today, a weird vibe in the air. It was the first time I'd felt dread instead of excitement before a game. While my body was here, my mind was with my family, my heart in Jasper's pocket. Football had always been my dream, but now, there was something I wanted more.

My priorities had changed over the past few months, and football didn't mean as much anymore. I was grateful for the opportunity I'd had, but the anticipation leading up to a game wasn't as exciting as how I felt when I knew I was about to see Jasper. The thrill of the win was nothing compared to how I felt when my son gave me a hug. Maybe it was time to move on before an injury made the decision for me. I was almost 30, young by most life standards, but in the NFL, it meant I was close to retirement.

And I couldn't wait for what came next.

My musings of the future were interrupted when our coach came in and gave us a quick rundown of our game plan, followed by a little pep talk. And then it was time for us to make our way to the field. My teammates were pumping each other up in their own way, feeding off the energy, but I felt so far removed from today's game. I probably should've been worried about my lack of focus. Through the concrete hallway, our cleats created an echoing staccato, but growing even louder was the roar of the crowd.

"Let's do this!" our kicker, Cummings, whooped.

As we emerged jogging onto the field, the warmth of the locker room leached from my body. Damn, it was cold. It was

just barely 30 degrees, and even in the stands, the fans were dressed in thick coats and hats, mitts and gloves, most of which were in their team's colors, a sea of red and white. I could see my breath as I ran onto the field. The air pricked at my face, and I swore it smelled like snow. At least the sky was overcast, cutting down on the glare.

The home team's starting players were called, which set the crowd off with cheers and whistles, then it was time for the coin toss. We won and chose to kick. And just like that, the game began.

We got off to an early lead thanks to the other team fumbling the ball, running it down the field for a touchdown. We had a good standing in the season to date, and we had almost clinched our spot in the playoffs, but we weren't going to back off now. After three quarters, the score was 25-7. It may not have been a particularly close game, but our luck could always change. We wanted to maintain our lead, and we were prepared to work our asses off for the win.

To keep warm on the benches, we had long johns under our pants, plus electric handwarmers and thick jackets, but I was glad when it was my turn on the field. The best way to warm up was to keep moving.

"Get out there and wrap this up," Coach said, slapping me on the back as I shrugged off my jacket and jogged onto the field.

Out from the relative cover along the sidelines, I really felt the full sting of the wind. It had started to pick up, the clouds overhead swirling, a few snowflakes beginning to spiral down.

It would make the grass slippery and add an element of danger to the game.

I rolled my shoulders and hopped in place a few times, getting my blood flowing. Adrenaline began to surge through my veins, my breathing loud inside my helmet. This was what I had lived for the past ten years. Even before that, all through high school, football was my life. But for the first time, there was a sliver of doubt creeping in...

I crouched down and set my fingers on the ground, the grass dampening my gloves. I tried to focus on the game in front of me, but I couldn't quite get there. My brain was filled with noise, a whole slew of what-ifs and maybe-shoulds.

The ball was hiked back to me, and I gripped it in my hands, my fingers finding the laces. I immediately stepped off to the left, searching for a target. I couldn't catch a clear view down the field, but the window of opportunity was closing fast, a few mere seconds if I was lucky. When a small gap opened, I pulled back my arm and fired off a pass, and it sailed down the field. Jackson, our wide receiver, almost had it. He was running as fast as he could, a hand outstretched, and his fingers grazed the ball, but it tipped off his fingertips and bounced out of bounds.

Dammit, we were so close! Coach signaled from the sidelines to run the play again, and we moved back into position. I jogged along behind the offensive line, my body buzzing in preparation. I blew out a long, slow breath and paused...

Then the center snapped the ball back to me.

With a burst, we exploded into action, coiled muscles finally released. In front of me, the two lines collided, but they weren't my concern. I had to trust the guards would keep me safe. My job was to get this ball down the field.

My vision homed in on Jackson, pelting down the field toward the end zone, bits of grass kicking up from his cleats. Nothing else mattered in this moment. I slowed my breath, my heart thudding heavily in my chest. I ignored the movement from the corner of my eye, pulled back my arm, and threw. It was perfect, the angle, the speed, and Jackson was in the clear. I knew he would catch it.

However, I didn't have a chance to witness it, as I was knocked sideways. It was like being hit with a battering ram. My eyes shut tight, and I braced for impact, trying to keep my body loose. As the ground came up to meet me, the impact knocked my breath from my lungs with a whoosh as the linebacker came down on top, his shoulder ramming into my chest.

And then something snapped.

I opened my eyes, gasping to catch my breath, and my view down the field was cast sideways as the play continued. The crowd was on their feet, and I could tell by their reaction that Jackson had made the touchdown. A small consolation.

My fingers were tingling, and not in a good way. My first instinct was to laugh. Did I really just get injured, right when I was thinking about retiring? With the adrenaline still pulsing

through my veins, I wasn't feeling it yet, but I knew the pain was coming.

It was bad.

The linebacker was quick to roll off me and offered me a hand up. It was Derek Mahoney, a guy I went to college with. "Hey, man, you good?"

I lay still, leaving his hand hanging in the air between us. "Nope," I managed to force through gritted teeth.

He took in my position on the ground. "Shit," he muttered. "Don't move, man, okay?"

I grunted in response. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. I didn't know how badly I was hurt yet, but I didn't want to move if there was something cracked in my spine.

Mahoney waved at the paramedics waiting on the sidelines, and while I couldn't see them from this angle, I knew they were running over, likely carrying a spine board. I wasn't going to be walking off the field after this one.

A woman with her brown hair pulled back in a tight bun crouched down beside me, peering through the face mask on my helmet. "Where does it hurt, Eric?" she asked.

I took stock quickly, my pulse rushing in my ears. "My shoulder," I told her, panting, each shallow breath producing a little cloud of vapor. I couldn't draw a full breath. "My arm, maybe my chest?" The pain was radiating outward now, down to my fingertips and through my torso, and it was hard to

pinpoint as the heat crept through my body at an alarming rate. At least I wasn't cold anymore. "I don't think it's my neck or back, though," I said without much hope.

"Better to be safe than sorry," she said, offering me an apologetic smile.

What worried me the most, more than the injury itself, as they put a neck brace on me and carefully transferred me over to the spine board, was that I knew the cameras were rolling. For the first time ever, I hoped Jasper wasn't watching—and yet, I knew for certain he was. Cameron would be scared, and I wouldn't be able to tell him I was okay.

I should've made Jasper my emergency contact.

Jasper

“STOP IT,” I SCOLDED myself, tucking my thumb into my palm and squeezing tight. I’d been gnawing on my thumbnail since the game three nights ago, but it was right down to the quick now, and if I kept going, I would draw blood.

My phone pinged with a text, and I scrambled to pull it out. When I saw it wasn’t Eric, I deflated a little. It was Cam texting from school. I’d insisted he go because there was nothing either of us could do to make this situation better, and I figured maybe the distraction of his friends and classes might do him good.

Cam: Is he there yet?

Dad: Nope, not yet. I’ll let you know.

Eric should’ve been back by now. I got up off the couch and paced the living room a few times, peeking through the curtains after each lap.

It was so much worse than I could’ve expected, watching Eric get hurt. Players got tackled all the time, and they usually

got back up and brushed it off. So, when Eric went down, I'd assumed he would hop up, and I would be teased mercilessly for the way I'd gasped.

But he didn't get back up.

I could tell by Cam's reaction that this wasn't normal. Eric lay on the field for too long, not moving, and then one of the players from the other team waved the paramedics over. "Dad, is he okay?" Cam asked, his voice trembling.

"Yeah, I'm sure he's fine, buddy." I tried to keep my voice light, to smile reassuringly, because Cam needed me to stay calm. But on the inside, I was curled up in the fetal position, having a full-blown meltdown.

While the paramedics were attending to him, they kept showing replays of the sack. Over and over, in slow motion, I watched Eric get crushed under that bulldozer of a man. My throat got tighter, squeezing until I could barely catch my breath. I didn't want to watch, but I couldn't look away. Cam cuddled up to me, and we held each other tight.

Finally, they got him onto the spine board and started carrying him off the field. What did that mean? Was he paralyzed? Wasn't all that padding supposed to keep this from happening? *Shit. No, no, no.* Cam choked on a sob and buried his face in my chest. "Shh, he'll be okay," I whispered, rubbing a hand over his hair and down his back.

I almost missed it. If I hadn't been watching the screen so intensely, I never would've seen it, and a choked gasp slipped past my lips. "Cam!" He looked up, and I scrambled to find

the remote so I could rewind it. There it was again, and my heart soared. “Cam, look! He’s giving a thumbs up. He’s telling us he’s okay.” Relief washed over me so quickly I felt lightheaded, a shaky laugh sneaking out as I closed my eyes. “He’s okay.”

Eric and I chatted briefly later that night after Cam was already asleep, but he was at the hospital and couldn’t talk long. He just wanted to make sure we knew that he was okay. He was back from a CT scan, and while his collarbone was most definitely broken, his spine was fine. He needed to go in for surgery to get a plate put in, but he would be home in a few days. I had every intention of taking care of him for as long as he needed.

I came back to the present when I heard a car pull up in the driveway, and I ran to the window, banging my shin on the coffee table. “Shit,” I muttered, rubbing the spot, but the pain wasn’t important. The only thing that mattered in this moment was Eric, currently getting out of his Uber.

Racing to the front door, I jerked it open as he was coming up the front steps. My vision went blurry with bubbling tears, and he gave me a sad smile. My hands came up, but I left them there, hovering uselessly. I wanted to hug him, but I didn’t know where was safe to touch him. His right arm was in a sling, keeping it in position. He couldn’t even put his jacket on properly, hooked over his shoulders awkwardly.

“I’m okay, baby. I won’t break. Everything is pinned in place.” He stepped inside and held his left arm out, and I fell

into him with as much caution as I could manage.

My sob was muffled against his chest. "I'm so sorry, Eric."

"Shh, there's nothing to be sorry about. Every athlete knows it's a risk." He rubbed his hand in a slow circle over my back.

"I should be the one comforting you, not the other way around," I teased, pulling back but keeping my hands tangled in his shirt. It was safe to say I wouldn't be letting him go for a while. "Come inside. I'll make you some lunch, anything you want."

Taking him by the hand, I led him farther in and closed the door, helping with his jacket and boots. Then I sat him down on the couch and set about fluffing cushions to prop carefully under his arm. "What would you like? Coffee? Hot chocolate with some of those little marshmallows? Or how about whiskey? Wait, are you on painkillers? You probably shouldn't mix those with alcohol." I couldn't seem to stop fussing.

Eric cut off my babbling by snagging my hand. "Jasper, it's okay. Just sit down with me. You're what I need to make me feel better."

I lowered to the couch beside him. It felt like there was a ball of worms in my gut, and I couldn't seem to look away from his bandage peeking out from the collar of his shirt. My lower lip started to tremble, so I pulled it between my teeth and clamped down hard enough to sting.

"Baby, don't do that," he whispered, using his thumb to pull my lip back out, smoothing over the indents left by my teeth.

“You’re making this out to be a lot worse than it is.”

My eyebrows jumped. “You mean it’s not serious? I just assumed, what with the surgery...” I cleared my throat, cutting off my confession that I had assumed this was a career-ending injury. “So, what’s the next step? Physio? What kind of recovery time do you have?” Though, to be honest, I wasn’t sure my heart could handle watching him play again after this.

Eric shifted on the couch so he could face me, our knees bumping. “Look at me, Jas,” he said, and I realized I’d been staring at his shoulder again. I forced my eyes up to his. They held a strange sheen, and I wondered if it was the drugs making him so mellow. If it were me, I’d be furious, raging at the injustice of losing so much. His face was smooth, though. “I think it’s time for me to retire.” He said it so simply, without a single waver in his voice.

My back bowed as I caved in on myself. “Shit, I’m so sorry, Eric.”

He shook his head, smiling. “I’m not. It was such a wild ride, and I’ve been so damn lucky. It was an incredible opportunity that most people will never have, and I don’t regret a second of it.”

I searched his face for a sign that he was hiding depression or rage or even fear and doubt, but there was only a depthless certainty. “Why aren’t you more upset?” I asked. “I mean, I’m glad you’ve made your peace with this, but... are you high?”

He laughed, and I was surprised to hear the sound. This really wasn’t how I thought this day would go. “No, I’m not

high. I wanted to keep my mind clear when making these kinds of decisions.”

“What other decisions are you making?” My throat tightened painfully, and I swallowed hard. Was he about to tell me he was moving away? Without the team, there was nothing holding him here except me and Cam. Were we enough?

He took a deep breath. “Jasper, I want you to—” He was interrupted by my phone ringing.

We both turned to look at it on the coffee table, and I could see from here that it was Brent. “Ignore it. What were you saying? You want me to...”

“Um, right.” He cleared his throat as the ringing stopped. “Jasper, I want you to move in with me.”

My jaw dropped. “What?”

His eyes widened. “Or I could sell my house and move in here with you guys if that’s easier. Of course it’s easier. Cam won’t want to change schools. I should’ve thought about that.”

“But—” This time it was me the ringing interrupted, and I huffed a breath out through my nose, glaring at Brent’s name on the caller ID. “Sorry.” When the ringing stopped, I tried again. “It’s a big step, Eric. And you’ve just had this massive life change. Are you sure you want to be making these decisions now? What’s the rush?”

Eric opened his mouth to answer, but the phone rang yet again, and he clamped his mouth shut with a clack of teeth.

“Maybe you’d better answer it. Sounds like it could be important.”

I highly doubted it, but I answered the phone all the same. “What do you want, Brent?” I snapped.

“Hey! I’m just in the neighborhood, and I thought if you were home, I could swing by and—”

Eric must’ve overheard, because he plucked the phone out of my hand and put it to her ear. “Sorry, Brent, Jasper’s busy. And you know what? He’s actually busy tomorrow too. And the next day, and the day after that. Forever, Brent. Jasper is busy with me *forever*. And if you have a problem with that, you and I will have words. Okay?” I couldn’t hear Brent’s reply, but it seemed to satisfy Eric, because he said, “Great,” and hung up, tossing the phone aside. He winced as he realized what he’d said. “Sorry, was that too much?”

My lips had started to stretch into a smile. “No, I think it was just right. Forever, huh?”

He shrugged, turning bashful. “I mean, if you’re okay with that.”

I pursed my lips, pretending to think it over. “I might be able to work you into my schedule.”

“That’s very generous of you.” His smile softened. “I love you, Jasper, and I don’t want to waste any more time.”

His words hit me right in the chest, and warmth spread through my body. He’d said exactly what I was thinking, after watching him get hurt yesterday. Life was short, and even if

our relationship didn't last forever, that wasn't the point. Being in love wasn't about playing it safe. And in the end, he was worth the risk.

"I love you too," I admitted softly. Saying the words out loud after so long felt like flying. The last of my fear and uncertainty melted away, leaving my heart light and open, ready to be filled with love and happiness.

Eric's relieved smile was shaky, and he grabbed me by the back of the neck and dragged me in for a sweet kiss, his tongue swiping gently against mine.

When we broke the kiss, I didn't go far, resting my forehead on his. "You know, Christmas is coming up, and... I was wondering if maybe you'd like to stay?"

His grin was wide, like I'd already given him his gift. "I thought you'd never ask."

This time when he kissed me it was far from tender, and he tried to drag me over onto his lap with his good arm. "If we hurry, we have time to squeeze in a quickie before we pick Cam up from school."

"Eric! Your shoulder!" I protested, and sure enough, he hissed in pain as he banged his arm on the couch's armrest.

He would not be deterred, though. "Okay, change in plan," he said, leaping off the couch and dragging me by the hand down the hall toward the bedroom. "You might need to do most of the work. But I promise, I'll pay you back."

I was more than happy to ride his cock, and I was looking forward to spending the rest of my life making sure we were even.

Eric

CHRISTMAS WITH MY FAMILY was exactly what I'd always dreamed it would be. The holiday excitement was one of the things I truly felt like I'd missed out on with Cameron, but if I thought he was too old to get excited about presents, I was wrong.

Before the sun had even crested the horizon, the bedroom door flew open, and Cam came catapulting onto the bed, landing dangerously close to my balls, one elbow in my gut. To be fair, I suspected he'd forgotten I would be here.

"Eric! You're still here!" he cried in response to my groan, squeezing between me and Jasper to give me a hug.

"Morning, bud," I managed, sidling over to make room, keeping my injured arm carefully away from the flopping child. "Merry Christmas."

As eager as I'd been to move forward at lightning speed, Jasper and I hadn't taken this step lightly. We had lots of conversations, both between us and with Cam, and made sure

our son was okay with us being together, and to say he was welcoming was an understatement. Cam had not so discreetly whispered, “Our plan worked!” Jasper just shook his head, smiling, playing along as if he didn’t know our secret. We started off with family dinners, but things had been going so well that we decided it was time for the final step before we could officially move in together. Sleepovers.

We’d begun looking at the real estate pages online, trying to find the perfect home for us. Close to Cam’s school, with a pool, and of course with enough bedrooms that we could expand our family—hopefully in the not-too-distant future.

Christmas morning, though, that was where today’s excitement lay. “Should we go see what Santa brought you?” I asked, ruffling Cam’s hair.

He rolled his eyes at me. “I know my dad is Santa, Eric.” It made my heart hurt a little to hear him say that.

Jasper’s voice was muffled by the pillow as he mumbled, “Nope, not this year.” He lifted his head and peeked one eye at Cam. “This year, it was Eric’s turn to play Santa.” Cam’s eyes glittered, his smile widening.

Cam tried to make a break for the living room, climbing over his dad, but Jasper snagged him on the way by for a quick hug. “Merry Christmas, Cam. Love you.”

Cam sounded exasperated as he said, “Love you too, Dad,” before shoving off Jasper’s chest and booking it out of the room.

We listened to Cam's footsteps running down the hall to the living room where our Christmas tree was set up, a stocking full of presents hung on the back of a chair.

Jasper sat up, his hair adorably rumpled, pillow creases across his face. It made me love him even more. "Merry Christmas," he said, and he somehow managed to make it sound sexy as hell as he crawled closer to give me a kiss.

I slipped my fingers up under his t-shirt to skim his soft skin, and I felt goosebumps raise. "Mm, how did you know I wanted to wake up to my sexy omega? I don't remember telling anyone my Christmas wish."

He chuckled. "Sorry, your present will have to wait for later."

And just like that, I was hard, thinking of all the private gifts he might give me. "Damn, baby. You're going to tease me like that and just let me suffer all day?"

"Yep," he said with zero remorse, throwing back the blanket and rolling away.

"You won't even give me a preview?" Was I whining? Yes, I sure was.

He peeked over his shoulder at me. "Nope," he said, popping the P as he sauntered toward the bathroom, hips swinging.

I adored this cheeky side of him, but I had yet to find a side to him I didn't love. And today, I got to see them all. I watched with awe at how he took care of our son, from doting on him and giving the most thoughtful gifts, laughing and being

goofy, but somehow still managing to get his help in cleaning up all the torn wrapping paper. Once all the chaos was over, I made us all French toast and bacon for a late breakfast, and then we lazed around watching movies, cuddled up on the couch, with one of my boys on each side of me.

I lost track of time, and when someone knocked on the door, I was thoroughly confused. “Who’s at the door?”

“That would be my parents,” Jasper said, getting up to answer the door.

Oh, shit. Was I supposed to make a big turkey dinner or something? I looked down at my wrinkled shirt and pajama pants. I was not in a state to see my hopefully future in-laws. When they walked in, though, they didn’t seem to care in the least—and they also didn’t seem to be staying.

We all exchanged Christmas hugs, and then instead of them taking off their winter gear, Cam started putting on his boots.

“What’s going on?” I asked, frowning. “Are we going out for dinner? I’ll need to get changed first.”

Jasper was having a hard time containing his grin. “Nope. Our holiday tradition is for my parents to take Cam for a sleepover, and then they open presents at their place and do Christmas all over again. And I get a day to sleep in. Did I forget to mention that?”

“You sure did,” I grunted, taking in his mischievous smirk. Meanwhile, I was thinking of all the things we could do with our time alone.

As tempted as I was to rush everyone out the door and get started with this tradition, I held myself back. We all gave another round of hugs and Christmas well-wishes, lingering painfully. As soon as the front door clicked shut behind them, though, I turned my predatory gaze on Jasper. “Is it finally time for me to unwrap my present?” I asked, my voice husky, and I snatched the front tie on his flannel pants and tugged, the bow coming undone.

He looked nervous all of a sudden. “I’m not the present... not exactly...”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “Whatever you bought me, I hope you kept the gift receipt, because all I want is you.” When I tried to grab him, he stepped back with surprising swiftness, evading capture. I growled and pursued him as he walked backward down the hall. If my arm weren’t still in a sling, I would’ve thrown him over my shoulder and had my dirty, dirty way with him.

He held up a finger to forestall me. “I’ve decided to go back to school.”

My heart soared, momentarily distracting me from my goal. “That’s awesome! I’m so proud of you.”

“Hang on, there’s more.” I was still listening, but as we walked through the bedroom doorway, I backed him up to the bed with nowhere to go and brought our bodies flush.

My lips found his throat, and I licked along his skin, his pulse surging under my tongue. “Talk faster,” I told him. “I

don't want to interrupt you, but I've been dying to be inside you all day."

His breath fluttered past my ear. "Right, sure." He gulped. "So, I've decided not to be a doctor. After seeing my mom go through her cancer treatment, I don't think my heart could handle that. But... I was thinking about changing my focus a little, to working in a lab. A lot of my credits can be used toward a degree in medical science."

"You're my brilliant omega. I have no doubt that you can conquer anything you set your mind to. I fully support you." As I said this, I'd been working the hem of his shirt up, and after I dragged it over his head, I moved my mouth lower to his exposed chest, nibbling on his nipple before sucking up a mark on his smooth flesh.

He moaned, bucking his hips against me. "I-I'm not done," he panted.

"Talk while you help me get my clothes off." I could handle the pants with the elastic waistband, but getting a shirt off without moving my shoulder was always an adventure and left me feeling less than graceful.

He started lifting my shirt for me. "Another reason I don't want to become a doctor, I was thinking about the long, intense years of study, internship, the sleepless nights. And... it would be awful hard to do all that juggling a baby."

He'd waited to drop that bomb until my shirt was up over my face, still caught on my arm. "What?!" I blurted, scrambling to pull myself free. "You're preg—"

“No! Sorry, that came out wrong. I’m not pregnant, but... I could be.”

I needed to see his face, *now*. With his help, we got the shirt off at last, and I cupped his cheek and looked down into those beautiful blue eyes that made me feel unimaginable hope. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying...” He took a slow breath. “I’m saying that I thought about what you said about wasting time. I want to have another baby with you. If you want.”

“If I *want*?” I scoffed. And then, because I simply couldn’t resist kissing him when he’d just given me the best gift in the world, I grabbed him around the waist with my good arm and pulled him straight up against me, his feet leaving the ground. “I want,” I panted between kisses. “I want, I want. Can we start trying now?”

In response, he reached between us and gripped my cock through my pants, stroking my erection with the soft flannel. “Let’s ditch the condoms.”

I growled. “Damn my shoulder. I want so desperately to own you right now.”

Jasper moved down my body, sliding his pants over his hips to puddle on the floor, before making a big production of uncovering my cock, licking his lips. “I’m sure we can find a position that works.”

He turned and crawled onto the bed on all fours, arching his back as he looked over his shoulder at me. “How about this

one?” He reached back and pulled one cheek aside to reveal his glistening hole.

I groaned, kneeling on the bed behind him and leaning down, swiping my tongue all the way through his crack, from his balls, over his taint, before delving into his entrance, his fragrant slick making my mouth water. I tongued his hole until he was thrusting back, fucking my face. But no, as much as I loved making him squirm, this wasn't how babies were made.

I moved in behind him and lined the thick head of my cock up against his puckered star. This was it. Just as one door closed behind me with the end of my career, another path lay open before me, and all I had to do was reach out and grab it. A husband, kids—the family I'd always dreamed of.

I sheathed myself inside him, his tight heat welcoming me, except... no matter how amazing it felt without the condom, something wasn't quite right. His moans of pleasure were too far away. Kneading my hand into Jasper's ass, then sliding it up along his spine, I hooked my arm under him and across his chest, bringing him up onto his knees, holding him against me. “Jas, I need to see you, to kiss you.”

“Lie down,” he said, and I reluctantly pulled out and did as he said, rolling as quickly to my back as my injury allowed. Then he straddled me, notching me straight back inside him, dropping down in my lap with a single thrust that had my eyes rolling to the back of my head, groaning. Then he lay down on top of me and kissed me, the strokes of his tongue against mine matching the languid roll of his hips. “How's that?” he

asked breathily, but he didn't need to ask. It was clearly perfect for both of us.

"I love you, Jasper," I whispered against his lips, cradling his face in my palm. "I can't wait to see you grow round with my child inside you." Gods, the mere thought of it nearly brought me over the edge.

"I love you too," he just barely managed to say, his words getting choked off by a groan as he increased the pace.

Hot, I was so damn hot, like a fire was being stoked with the friction of each grind, the flames fanned with each gasp. It was both too much and not enough all at the same time. I wanted to piston myself into him again and again until we both exploded, but I also wanted to slow down, to memorize every detail of the moment we vowed to create life together.

Jasper's skin grew damp with sweat as he rocked against me, and I knew there would be no holding back for either of us.

When I couldn't take it any longer, I held him in place and fucked him from below. I struggled to catch my breath, pressure building, my balls clenching. Jasper's whole body went rigid, and he threw his head back as he came. I felt him throbbing between us, and it set off my own release. I held myself as deep inside him as I could as I filled him with my seed, sending all the prayers to the universe that we would get our baby.

Jasper moaned as my knot swelled inside him, and his dick jerked. Then he dropped his head onto my chest and shuddered. "That was..."

“So damn good,” I finished for him.

“Yes, that.” He chuckled, then after a moment, lifted himself up to look down at me. “Do you think it worked? Am I pregnant?”

“I think it’s far too early to tell, but don’t get discouraged if it doesn’t happen right away. Either way, I intend to keep practicing. Okay?”

He nodded, and we lay together, talking into the night, making love whenever the mood struck us. Our future was coming together, and I was so excited to be here for everything that came next.

Jasper

I DIDN'T GET PREGNANT that night. Nor did I get pregnant any night over the next three months, but that didn't mean we'd stopped trying. If anything, we couldn't keep our hands off each other, making up for lost time. It was just... I was starting to get a bit worried. We'd conceived Cam without even trying, so I supposed I thought it would be easy.

Instead of freaking out and insisting we see a doctor about it, though, I decided to put that anxious energy to good use. And as it turned out, I was ridiculously efficient now that I had a second set of hands. Eric was around to help with the cooking, the cleaning, the parenting and chauffeuring our son to appointments or activities or playdates. Suddenly, it seemed like I had time to do *everything!* Donations for the school bake sale, volunteering at a soup kitchen—I'd even taken up gardening, now that we had an actual garden.

We finally found the perfect house for us in the neighborhood, with a fenced yard and a pool, lots of counterspace in the kitchen, plus four bedrooms just begging

to be filled with children, so I canceled my lease and Eric put his house on the market, and we set about moving in. And since I suddenly found myself with all this extra time and energy, I threw myself into painting and decorating too!

At Beck's vet clinic, I was training my replacement, a soft-spoken woman named Dierdre. I was officially enrolled in classes for the fall—part-time, just in case a baby came—and Eric gently suggested that I could quit my job if I wanted. We didn't need the money, between his savings and his new income from the local high school where he'd applied for the coach position. It was quite a step up for the team, having a former NFL quarterback to help guide them, considering their last coach had also been the science teacher. The principal kept apologizing that they couldn't pay him more, but Eric didn't care in the least. He just loved helping the kids, and he wanted to stay close to home in case he was needed.

All in all, it was a pretty great life, and yet... something was missing. But maybe not for much longer...

I swallowed hard, tiptoeing past Cam playing video games in the living room, with my paper bag from the pharmacy in hand. Cam was just as excited for a baby as I was, and I didn't want him to get his hopes up if it was another false alarm. I was late for my cycle, and I'd put off taking a test for as long as I could stand it.

Disappearing into the bathroom, I reached into the bag and pulled out the pregnancy test. My chest felt tight, making my breath kind of wheezy. I blew out a long, slow breath and tried

to shake it off. “It’s probably nothing. The test will be negative, and I’ll go about my day.” I peed on the stick quickly, put the cap back on, and set the timer on my phone for two minutes.

Longest two minutes of my life.

“I’ll go for a jog, make some dinner, hang out in the pool with Cam. No big deal. Life goes on.” Considering this time last year, I had no intention of having more kids, I’d really jumped in with both feet on this baby train with Eric. More like a rollercoaster, with all the ups and downs I’d felt every month. How did I get so invested so quickly?

My whole body jolted when my timer went off, and I snatched the test up and looked at the little display window. I gasped. I blinked. I blinked again. *Are there two lines?*

“Oh my gods...” I whispered, the stick wavering so badly in my hand that I wondered if I was misreading the test. I quickly set it down on the counter so I could look again. Now that it was steady, I could very clearly see the result. “Pregnant,” I choked out. “I’m preg—”

I spun around in a circle, lost about what to do next. My heart was fluttering like a hummingbird trapped in my ribcage. I needed to tell someone, but Eric was at the high school for a practice. *Why the hell did I wait until Eric wasn’t home?!* I knew logically it was because I had intended to bear the brunt of the disappointment by myself, but now I needed to celebrate!

I whipped open the bathroom door and shouted into the hallway, “Cam! I’m pregnant!”

There was a clatter that sounded like he’d dropped his game remote, then he leaped over the back of the couch and ran to me, his eyes and mouth wide. “Are you for real?! I’m gonna be a big brother!” He raised his arms in a giant V for victory then did a little dance right there in the hallway. “Should I call Eric and tell him to come home?”

“No, no! It’s not an emergency, but…” I trailed off, an idea blooming. “We probably have a couple hours until he comes home. We should find a special way to surprise him.”

“Ooh, yeah.” He thought about it for a second, then said, “Nothing is more special than cake.”

I laughed, hugging him close. “Yes, cake. You’re right. Will you help me?” I wanted to make sure he felt included in every step.

Cam decided on his favorite chocolate cake recipe, and while he got that in the oven, I made a big batch of icing and struggled to get it the brightest, sunniest yellow I could get. While it was baking, Cam decided to play in the pool for a bit, so I sat on one of the pool loungers and started browsing online for cute cake designs. There was no shortage to choose from, like a baby bottle or little footprints, or even putting an actual soother on it. I wasn’t sure I was skilled enough to make anything too fancy, but I knew Eric would love it all the same.

When the cake was done in the oven, I set it out on a rack to wait for it to be cool enough to decorate without melting the

icing. Just as I sat back down in my chair, my phone buzzed with a text.

Eric: *Got done early here, so I should be home in ten minutes.*

“Shit!” I hissed. Ten minutes wasn’t enough time to ice a cake! I needed to stall.

Me: *Hey, sweetie, could you please swing by the store on the way home and grab some milk? And maybe eggs and one of those roast chickens in the deli?*

Eric: *Sure, no problem. Love you, babe.*

“Crisis mode!” I yelled at Cam. “He’s early!”

He hopped out of the pool and started cleaning up, while I booked it to the kitchen. The cake was still very much too warm, but there was nothing to be done about it. I slapped on that sunny yellow icing as fast as I could, and it immediately began to melt right off, forming a sunny puddle around the cake. “Oh well,” I said.

“I hear a car!” Cam shouted, running in from the backyard, dripping water from his swimsuit across the floor.

“Double shit,” I muttered under my breath. “Was that even twenty minutes?” I grabbed a piping bag and tried to write out “BABY” across the top in big block letters.

Cam was swiping a towel along the floor, while still dripping behind him. “Don’t worry about the puddles, just go get dressed.” He took off down the hall with the wet slap of feet, while I tried to fix my disaster of a cake. My hands weren’t

any steadier than they'd been when I held the pregnancy test. I looked down at the cake with a discerning eye and winced. It wasn't pretty, but it would have to do.

The front door opened, and my heart was pounding with excitement. I couldn't wait to see Eric's reaction. My grin was wide, cheeks warm, as I ran to meet him.

"Knock, knock," someone said, and I frowned, slowing to a jog. That wasn't Eric. Beck peeked in through the front door. "Everyone decent?"

"Of course we're decent. It's the middle of the day, and the front door was unlocked. Were you expecting an orgy?" I grumbled, hardly thrilled to see my brother right now. "What are you doing here?"

He made a face at me. "Well, hello to you too, grumpy pants."

"I'm not grumpy; you just aren't who I was expecting. What do you need?" I tried to play it casual, but I was talking too fast, and there was sweat beading along my hairline and dampening my shirt. I kept one ear open for Eric's car in the driveway. I needed to get Beck out of here fast.

Beck's eyes scanned me head to toe, before narrowing in suspicion. "Seriously, what is up with you? You're acting all squirrely."

"Nothing is up with me!" I snapped. "Would you just get to the explaining already?"

He pursed his lips, and for a second, I thought he wouldn't let it go. Then he finally relented. "I got a phone call this morning from a colleague. He's supposed to be a keynote speaker at a vet symposium in Nashville this weekend, but something came up and he can't make it, so he asked if I would fill in. I was just wondering if you could take Pepper for the weekend. I know it's last minute, but I need to leave—"

"Yep. Sure. We'd love to. Is that all?" I was already nudging him toward the door.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think I wasn't welcome."

"Oh, really?" I said, not at all caring that I was coming across as rude.

"Well, hang on. Pepper's in the car, so I'll just bring her in."

"She's here?" I yelped, then I sighed. "You knew I would say yes."

"Duh." Pepper was the kitten abandoned at the vet clinic last fall, and after bottle feeding her, we'd all grown understandably attached. It was no surprise to anyone that Beck chose to keep her.

As he headed out to get her from the car, I stepped out onto the porch to keep Beck out. I didn't want him to get the impression he was welcome and invite himself to stay for a cup of coffee or something. I loved my brother, and under normal circumstances, a surprise visit would be no problem at all, but I really wanted to tell Eric the news about my

pregnancy privately. He deserved to know before everyone else.

Beck came back a few minutes later with a pet carrier and a bag of her things. “I switched her food because the last one was causing some stomach upset. So I need you to give her half a cup of the dry food twice a day, and you can mix in a bit of the canned wet food. She’ll complain that she’s starving between meals, but don’t buy it. She’s a master manipulator.”

“Right. Got it. No overfeeding.” I was bouncing on the balls of my feet, and I reached out to take the carrier, but instead of handing it over, he stepped around me back into the house.

“Here, I’ll just put her inside.”

“Beck, seriously,” I growled. “I know you’re my older brother, and you seem to think that gives you some kind of right to tease me or torment me or whatever, but can we do this later? I’ve kinda got something planned.”

Pretending he hadn’t heard me, he put the carrier down and headed for the kitchen. “Mm, smells good in here. You won’t mind if I grab a bite to eat, right? I’ll be heading straight to the airport, after all.”

“Beck!” I tried to grab the back of his shirt, but he evaded me and turned toward the messy cake on the counter.

“Ooh! Cake, and it—” He stopped talking, and I covered my face with my hands. He didn’t say anything for too long.

Peeking through my fingers, I saw him with a stunned look on his face, eyebrows creeping steadily higher as he read the

slumped lettering.

Everything happened at once. Just as the front door opened behind me, Beck blurted, “You’re pregnant?!” and Cam ran down the hall shouting, “Papa’s home!” It was the first time he’d called him Papa.

We all froze.

I turned slowly and took in Eric’s shocked expression, jaw hanging low. There was no doubt he’d heard what Beck announced. I really hoped he wasn’t having a heart attack. “Surprise,” I said lamely, clearing my throat.

Cam took the pressure off when he ran at Eric and threw his arms around his neck. “Congrats, Papa. You’re gonna be a dad again.”

Eric dropped the grocery bags and caught Cam up in a massive hug. His eyes were turning red as he tried not to cry. “This is the best day ever,” he said, but he sounded like he was getting choked up. He reached for me, and the three—make that *four*—of us had a big group hug.

“Better than winning the Super Bowl?” I asked.

“Hands down,” he vowed, pressing salty kisses all over my face.

Beck gave us a moment before asking, “Does that mean we can eat the cake?”

Eric

LIFE WAS GOOD. HELL, it was better than good. It was *perfect*.

A lot of ex-players resented the injuries that ended their careers, and some even had a hard time transitioning to a new way of life, but I saw it as a kind of blessing. I was lucky the injury wasn't worse. The surgeon who did the repair did a great job, and it healed well. I'd continued with physical therapy to keep up strength and flexibility, and while it still ached from time to time, I managed to throw the ball around a little with the kids on my team, and that felt amazing. Besides how much I was enjoying my coaching job, I also got to spend more time at home now, and that was just plain bliss. I never would've guessed how much satisfaction I got from doing laundry, but yesterday I caught myself smiling as I folded Jasper's underwear.

Yep. Life was good. So I couldn't help but wonder how long it would last.

As I headed toward my car in the parking lot, I heard someone behind me shout, “Hey, Coach, heads up!” and I turned just in time to catch the ball as it came spiraling in.

“Whooo, damn,” I cursed, rubbing at my shoulder. “Manny, I’m telling you, you’re one to watch out for. You keep practicing and you’re guaranteed to get a scholarship to the university of your choice.”

He ducked his chin as his cheeks darkened with the praise. “You think so?”

“I know so.” This kid was even better than I was at his age, and without the cocky overconfidence I’d been cursed with. With a little guidance, he would make it all the way. “Have you thought about what I suggested?”

He made a face. “I dunno. Yoga doesn’t sound like my thing.”

“I know you say that now, but I promise it’ll take your game to the next level. I wish someone had told me that back in high school.”

“All right, Coach, I’ll give it a shot.”

“You won’t regret it.” I patted him on the back and handed back the ball, before continuing on my way to the lot. “Don’t forget school starts next week,” I called over my shoulder. “You keep those grades up, okay?”

I was eager to get home. Summer was nearly over, and both my boys were headed back to school, Cam in grade 5 and Jasper in university. This called for a special treat, so on the

way home, I stopped at the grocery store, heading straight to the bakery before swinging back around to the frozen foods aisle.

I was whistling a tune, a cherry pie in one hand and a tub of chocolate ice cream in the other, when I stepped up to the checkout line. The woman in line in front of me turned and looked up briefly, before doing a double take. “Hi, how are you?” I asked politely.

It wasn't unusual for me to get attention from people who recognized me. I would often give autographs or take pictures with fans, but I hadn't been expecting the reaction she gave me.

“*Hmff*,” she snorted, scowling, before spinning on her heel to look away.

I recoiled a little at the attitude. *Okay, not a football fan, I guess. No big deal.* Except, she wasn't the only person giving me side-eye. My skin prickled from all the eyes on me. I saw one man nudge his partner with an elbow, and the two of them glared daggers.

Feeling a little disconcerted, I turned to the cashier when the line moved. “Good afternoon,” I said, but it was apparently a lost cause. Instead of the usual chitchat I got from the cashier, she frowned and didn't even acknowledge my greeting. In fact, she wouldn't even look at me, just shoved my food in a bag, and I swore she intentionally dropped the ice cream in on top of the pie.

What the hell?

It was the weirdest thing. It was like the whispering in second grade when someone started the rumor that I ate dog food. What the hell was going on?

I was almost at the exit when my eye caught the cover of Chatter Magazine in the rack by the checkout. *What the fuck?!* I stopped right there, transfixed. There, in a full-page candid photo, obviously taken with a telephoto lens without my knowledge, was a picture of me... and another man. The headline read: “CAUGHT CHEATING.”

Ignoring the chain blocking off the closed checkout, I leapt over and pulled one of the magazines out and started flipping to the article.

“This isn’t a library,” the cashier from the next checkout over said, not even bothering to hide her sneer.

Grumbling, I fished out my wallet and dropped a ten-dollar bill on the counter; it was the smallest I had. “Keep the change,” I muttered, ducking my head in shame as I hurried out of the store, even though I knew for certain I hadn’t done anything wrong.

Once I was in the safety of my car, I whipped open the magazine to see what I had supposedly done. The picture was clearly doctored to make it look like I was closer to the man than I actually was, and they’d done something to the lighting to make it look intimate, while I was pretty sure it was taken when I was talking with one of the students’ parents at a practice last week. There had been three other parents there, but they’d been cropped out. It was totally innocent, but it sure

didn't look that way. They'd made it look like I was cheating on my omega.

“Ridiculous,” I grumbled, feeling unsettled. “How can they print this trash?” More importantly, though, how could anyone believe it?

There was an article to go with it, full of baseless lies that no one could prove one way or the other—but then I got to the part that said, “A close personal friend of Jasper Mayle, who chooses to remain unidentified, says he isn't surprised by the adultery. ‘Eric Van Leer is nothing but a dumb jock who doesn't know how to treat someone like Jasper. That omega is the sweetest, kindest man, and he obviously deserves better. It was only a matter of time before Van Leer showed his true colors. Hopefully now Jasper can make a clean break and move on.’”

My stomach plummeted all the way down to my shoes, before threatening to come straight back up. I swallowed repeatedly to keep my lunch where it was. Clean break? Move on? I would bet money that the unnamed source was fucking Brent, taking one last chance at breaking me and Jasper up. But... what if it actually worked? My skin went cold and damp, and my hands were shaking, which made it hard to fumble the key into the ignition. I needed to get home. Now. Before Jasper heard the rumors.

The tires squealed as I peeled out of the parking lot, horn honking as I cut someone off. I had to force myself to slow down and drive more carefully, but my heart was like a

jackhammer trying to break through my chest, and my vision was going blurry. Panic made me reckless.

I couldn't lose Jasper. Not when I just got him back. I'd betrayed him before, so maybe it wasn't such a stretch for him to think I'd done it again, but I wasn't the same man I was a decade ago. He had to know that. Right? But if he believed it, would he leave again? I would miss out on my children's lives, and I refused to let it happen. I would beg if I had to, force Jasper to give me a chance to explain.

My shirt was damp with sweat by the time I came roaring into the driveway. I grabbed the ice cream and sprinted for the front door, taking the steps in one leap. "Jasper?" I shouted, slamming the door.

I heard splashing in the pool, so I headed through the house to the glass sliding doors that opened onto the back deck. As I dropped the shopping bag on the counter on the way by, my gaze fell on the same fucking tabloid lying out on the counter. Too late. He'd seen it.

"Fuck," I spat, dread churching.

Bracing for a fight, I stepped out into the sunshine. I hoped my knees were up for all the begging I was about to do.

Jasper was lying on a lounge beside the pool, soaking up some sun. My heart gave a heavy thud whenever I saw him. He was just so beautiful, especially like this. The sun had made little freckles emerge across his chest and shoulders, and he had the smallest baby bump beginning to come out.

“Hi, Papa! Come and swim with me!” Cam shouted, splashing water in my direction.

I tried to smile, but it felt awkward and painful. “Sure, buddy, just give me a few minutes to say hi to your dad.”

Jasper took off his sunglasses and squinted up at me, and I moved around to block Cam’s view of our impending fight. I crouched, and whispered with as much emotion as I could muster, “Baby, it’s not true!” I gripped his hand hard, half expecting him to jerk away from me.

He frowned. “Of course not.”

“They’re just trying to sell a story, and someone photoshopped that photo to make it look—wait, did you say?” I tried to backtrack the conversation.

He smiled softly and squeezed my hand. “I know the story isn’t true.”

All the air in my lungs came out in a whoosh, and I nearly collapsed in on myself with the sudden relief. “You do?”

“Of course I do. It’s just a tabloid. I trust you.” He took in my state, my hair likely sticking up from running my hands through it, my shirt askew. “Hey, honey, shhh,” he soothed, sitting up and pulling me into his arms. He ran his hands over my back, and my heart rate finally slowed enough that I could catch my breath. “I’m not going anywhere, I promise.”

Ten years might have passed since the last time we hurt each other, but it was clear the emotional trauma remained. I would never stop blaming myself for screwing things up with Jasper

the first time, but it was more than that. He wasn't the only one who bore the scars.

He kissed me gently on the forehead. "Gimme a few minutes." With superb parenting skills, Jasper sent Cam off to play with his friend next door, promising pizza for dinner in an hour, then as soon as we were alone, he took me by the hand and brought me to bed.

He lay down, and I curled up beside him and rested my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. Somehow, against the odds, I had earned Jasper's trust, and deep inside, I knew I could trust him too. We'd been barely more than children ten years ago, and we'd made childish mistakes. But we were older now, and wiser, not to mention deeply in love. There was no reason to doubt the foundation we were building.

Jasper raked his fingers through my hair. "Better now?"

I nodded. "Sorry, I had a bit of a moment. I should've warned you about the tabloids, but I figured they would move on after I retired. I panicked."

"It's okay. You can talk to me about these things, you know. We're a family now, Eric. And family are there for each other. No matter what."

My family growing up had never been reliable, but it was a nice ideal to aim for. Placing my hand over Jasper's abdomen, I tried to imagine our child growing inside him, sending them the unconditional love I already felt for them. "I can't wait to meet you," I whispered to them.

And just as I was swirling my finger around Jasper's belly button, a thought snagged in my brain. "Shit! The ice cream! I left it on the counter. It's going to be soup."

"Oh, dear..." Jasper said slyly, not sounding all that disappointed. "Whatever will we do with all that runny, sticky, sweetness?"

I looked up at him, and he was giving me that sexy grin of his, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. "Oh, you devil, you," I growled. "Don't move a muscle. I'll be right back with the ice cream."

"And a towel," he suggested, giggling.

Yep. Life was good.

Jasper

THERE HAD BEEN BETS running in my family that the new baby would arrive on Cam's birthday, and as the fall frost was swapped out for an early winter, the snow here to stay, I started to wonder if they were right. But then, two weeks before our son's 11th birthday, my labor began.

I sat up in bed, a bit confused and disoriented about what woke me up. It was still dark out, with just the faintest glow outlining the curtains. Eric was snoring softly, but otherwise, the house was quiet. I was about to discount it as a dream, when the pressure returned, making me squirm in discomfort. My eyes snapped open, and I stared up at the ceiling with my breath held.

Braxton Hicks, I told myself. *It's nothing. Go back to sleep.*

It could've been heartburn or the baby rolling over, but when the sensation came back, I thought it was a pretty good bet this was the real thing.

Sneaking to the bathroom, I called my mom so she and Dad could get ready. They were on deck to take Cam for us while we were at the hospital, and I knew they'd want a chance to grab a coffee before heading over.

I sat on the edge of the tub, focusing on my breathing in an attempt to slow my racing heart and calm my roiling insides. When that didn't work, I took a warm shower, which also didn't work. I needed Eric, who always knew exactly the right thing to say, but I didn't want to wake him up just yet. I just knew he would elevate the energy level a thousand-fold. He was beyond excited for this baby to get here. Every day he came home with some new toy, or burp cloths with penguins on them, or itty-bitty baby socks, and he'd decorated the nursery in an explosion of color, a contrast to the muted tones in the rest of the house.

The time on my phone said it was nearly six when I heard movement from the bedroom. Sheets shifted, and I knew Eric was reaching for me, sitting up when he found the bed empty. Here I was, half dressed, leaning over the bathroom counter, hyper-focused on the sensation of squeezing that spread across my midsection with increasing frequency.

There came a soft tap on the door. "Babe? You okay?" Eric whispered, and I could hear how his voice was laced with worry.

I opened the door and practically crawled into his arms. He didn't question, just held me as tightly as I held him. "It's time," I told him after a long hug.

There was no panic or fear from him. Only comfort and a strong confidence that I hadn't been expecting but absolutely needed. He tilted my chin up to kiss me softly. "Let's do this." I should've known he would be good under pressure; he had plenty of experience for keeping a cool head with a timer counting down.

Eric took care of everything. He helped me get dressed and ready, then made sure our bag was packed and at the door. Then he woke Cam up and got him ready to go spend some time with his grandparents.

Too soon, it was time to head to the hospital.

Cam hugged me carefully, unsure where to put his arms so that he wouldn't hurt me. "Are you sure I can't come to the hospital? I can be a good helper. I can tell you to breathe." He demonstrated with a few *hee-hee-hoos*.

I kissed the top of his head. "I wish you could, but the hospital has rules about who can be in the delivery room. I promise Nana and Poppy will bring you in to meet your little brother or sister as soon as they can."

My mom got all teary-eyed, and she couldn't stop hugging everybody. Eric was lapping the attention up. He'd grown up without his mom, and it wasn't until this moment that I realized how much it had affected him. Maybe that was why he wanted to build a family of his own so desperately, to surround himself with all the love he missed out on as a child.

Oh gods, now I was crying too.

Even my dad, ever the stoic, seemed to be struggling to manage his emotions. Thankfully, he took control of the situation. “All right, let’s get this show on the road,” he said. “We’re not helping him deliver this baby by standing around.” He ushered my mom out the door with a hand at her back, nudging gently. “Come on, Is. You too, Cam. Let’s go.”

Wordlessly, I followed Eric to the car, but I wasn’t in the mood to talk. My mind was too full—mostly with fear.

Some people said that omegas blocked out the worst memories of labor, as a way of coping with the trauma to our bodies, but that was a big, fat lie. While years had passed since Cam’s birth, I hadn’t forgotten a single detail. The pain, obviously, but also how absolutely alone I’d felt in that moment. It was just me against the world, and I felt like I was staring into a black hole, the gravitational field trying to suck me in. It was a narrow thing, this ledge I was standing on, and I felt like it could go either way, and no one could predict what would happen over the next 12 hours.

Eric, watching me across the console as he drove to the hospital through quiet morning streets, seemed to sense the direction my brain was headed. He grabbed my hand and held tight. “Everything will be fine.”

I nodded like I believed him, but meanwhile, my thoughts were spiraling out of control.

We pulled into the parking lot outside the hospital, but I paused on the sidewalk, staring up at the building. Eric didn’t rush me. He just pulled me into his side and kissed me on the

temple. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, so lean on me when you need, okay?”

It felt like someone hit the fast-forward button. Through the insurance paperwork, directed upstairs to labor-and-delivery, and a nurse ducked between my stirrups to check my progress and declared, “Eight centimeters. Great job, Dad! It won’t be long now,” with a cheery smile.

I was on the thousandth lap of the tiny room when the urge to push washed over me, heavy and urgent. I remembered this feeling, and I knew all too well what came next.

“I’m not ready for this,” I panted, clenching my eyes shut, the panic in me threatening to take over.

Instead of fighting against me, trying to convince me that I was indeed ready, Eric simply gripped my hand and rubbed my back, helping to carry me through the contraction. When I looked up at him, his gaze was steady, unshakable. “What do you need to feel ready?”

“I-I need...” I wasn’t sure there was an answer. “I don’t know what I need.” Drugs. I needed drugs.

But it wasn’t the pain I was afraid of; it was everything else. A baby! After raising Cam alone, I’d given up on having more kids, and I hadn’t really given myself the time to get used to the idea of having a new tiny baby relying on me entirely again. But then a thought snuck through the panic. The responsibility wouldn’t be on my shoulders alone. Eric would be here with me this time.

“How about a distraction, something else to focus on?” he asked.

I found myself nodding, my eyes remaining fixed on him, as though seeing him clearly for the first time. “Yeah, sure, that sounds good,” I agreed vaguely, my whole being filled with love for this man.

“Okay, a distraction... let’s see...” he said, looking around the room for inspiration.

“Marry me,” I blurted suddenly, clinging to the lull between contractions.

His head whipped back so quickly, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he got whiplash. “What?!”

“Why are you so surprised? You don’t want to marry me?” I asked teasingly.

Eric gave me a skeptical look, eyebrow raised. He’d always made it more than clear all the steps he wanted to take in our relationship, and I’d been waiting for a proposal this whole time, but he’d been holding himself back. He wanted to let me set the pace, but I knew with absolute certainty that he was it for me. He had been the only one for me since high school. Even when we were half a country apart and I pretended to hate his guts, my heart belonged to him, and I wanted to make it official.

I tried to lower myself to one knee in front of him, but he put a stop to that immediately. “Gods, Jasper, you’re in labor.” Grumbling, he lowered himself instead then sat me on his

propped knee, the material of his pants rough against my exposed ass, bare through the back of my hospital gown. “That’s as close to kneeling as I’m willing to let you get.”

Cupping his face, his unshaved cheeks prickling my palms, I kissed him far too gently for the whole-body ache I was currently experiencing. “The thing is, Eric, I *am* ready for this baby. All morning, I’ve been obsessing over my memories of what it felt like the first time I was in labor. The pain, the fear, the solitude. And how hard it was to raise Cam that first year. And it was like I came up against this wall of dread, thinking about doing it all again. But you reminded me that nothing about this is the same. This is the way it was always meant to be. We’re doing this together, and I don’t ever want to be without you again. Marry me, Eric.”

“Of course I’ll marry you,” he said against my lips between kisses. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring box. “If you’d given me half a chance, I was going to ask you after our baby was born.”

I laughed, throwing my arms around his neck, but then my laugh turned into a groan as a contraction racked my body. Eric held me together while the pain threatened to pull me apart, and then when the contraction had passed, he lifted me easily and carried me to the bed. “What do you say we get this baby born.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

With Eric by my side and my determination back in place, it was practically easy—well, as easy as pushing a baby out

could be, which was not very, but when compared to Cam's birth, it was a breeze. My tears as I held my daughter for the first time were of joy and relief. There was no grief, no regret.

And when my parents brought Cam to visit later that night, and he curled up on the narrow bed beside me, my bliss was complete.

"This is your sister, Emma," I told him. "Do you want to hold her?"

He nodded, his jaw slack in amazement, and Eric helped to show Cam how to support her head.

Ten years ago, I'd been alone and afraid, devastated by everything I had lost. I never could've imagined the future, being here with Eric, building a life and a family together. Now, I knew better than to guess what the future held in store for us, but it was sure to be amazing.

Eric

YEARS LATER

I CROUCHED DOWN, FINGERTIPS on the ground, looking left and right for an opening. “Eric Van Leer is in fine form tonight, looking to bring home a win for the Comets,” I said in my commentator voice, and Winnie giggled from the change table, watching me with her deep blue eyes so much like her omega father’s.

Bobbing up, I shuffled a few steps to the right, then bent my arm back and launched the rolled-up diaper at the bin in the far corner. A perfect spiral. The diaper gave a satisfying thunk as it went straight in without touching the rim. “Yep, I still got it.”

Winnie was too young to clap, but I liked to believe she would have if she’d had the motor skills. Instead, she kicked her legs in excitement, cooing. Who could’ve guessed I would be putting my football skills to good use in throwing out diapers and dodging toys on the floor?

Just as I scooped Winnie up, there was a round of applause behind me, and I looked over my shoulder at Jasper. “Very

nice,” he said, teasing but still somehow making me warm all over. It probably had something to do with the way his eyes were roaming down my body, lingering in all the right spots. “The only thing that’s missing are the tight pants.”

“I’ll wear those for you later, if you’d like,” I said, giving him a little wink.

With Winnie tucked in one arm, I reached for Jasper with the other, but he stepped back and held a finger up in warning. “Nuh-uh, mister. I know how you work. You distract me by being all sexy, and then the next thing you know, I’m pregnant. But I’m putting my foot down. You hear me? No. More. Babies.” He enunciated it carefully, but he was also smiling coyly. I wasn’t very good at interpreting these mixed messages.

“You hear that, Winnie?” I asked her, tickling her belly. “You’re the last baby.” It was hard not to want a dozen more when they were this damn cute, but the four kids we had were more than enough. We had thought we were done at three, but Winnie was a bit of a surprise, which was only fitting since we’d started with a surprise baby too.

We were interrupted by a chorus of dogs barking, our senior dog Bento teaching our new puppy Shadow the art of overreacting to someone at the door.

“Daaaaaad! Paaaapaaaa!” Emma shouted from across the house, her voice extra loud to be heard over the barking. “Cam is here!”

Jasper rubbed a hand over his face. “What is it with kids and yelling across the house?”

I stuck my head out into the hall and yelled back, “Hey, Cam! Can you check on dinner? There’s lasagna in the oven.”

“Okay!” Cam yelled, adding to the din.

When I turned back to Jasper, he had his arms crossed over his chest, giving me an unimpressed look. “What?” I asked. “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Right?”

“I give up,” he said with a sigh. “You deal with the chaos. I have to go get dressed or we’re going to be late.”

I watched my husband head toward the bedroom, and I took a moment to thank my lucky stars that things worked out for us, because I couldn’t imagine my life without him. We’d now had just as much time together than we did those ten years apart, and while we kept changing who we were, reinventing ourselves with each new job, each new addition to our family, we were more in love today than we’d ever been.

Tonight was our 20th high school reunion, and Jasper and I were both looking forward to a night out. Jasper, especially, needed a break. He’d been pulling a lot of late nights at the lab lately, because he felt like his team was close to a breakthrough on a new treatment for breast cancer, and it was his ultimate goal. I was so proud of him for everything he’d achieved. He might not have been the surgeon he had dreamed about being 20 years ago, but the way he lit up when discussing the science behind his research, I knew it was where he belonged.

As for me, I had my hands full. Between coaching the high school football team, two little league soccer teams, and raising all these kids, I was looking forward to a whole weekend with just my husband. Cam was staying over to watch his sisters for us. I knew he missed them like crazy now that he was living back on campus. Plus, I suspected he was dying to eat some real food. His dorm room only had a microwave, and baking skills like his were going to waste without an oven.

Sure enough, when I rounded the corner into the kitchen, I found Cam buried in the fridge up to his waist. “Help yourself,” I said over his back.

He emerged, grinning, a carton of eggs in one hand, milk jug in the other. “Hey, Papa. Thanks for stocking the fridge for me. I promise I’ll fill your freezer with muffins and cookies.” Cameron was taller than I was, and I could tell he’d put on more muscle mass since his football camp over the summer. He was definitely earning that scholarship. His hair had gotten longer too and was now flopping over his ears, matching his scruffy cheeks for an overall unkempt appearance.

The dogs, with their second sense for when food might be dropped on the floor, had crowded into the kitchen, bumping into the backs of my legs.

Winnie squirmed in my arms trying to get to her favorite big brother. “Hey, big girl,” Cam said, putting his ingredients down on the counter to take her from me. “I’ve seen Emma and Winnie, but where’s Ray?”

Rachel was our little mischief maker. At six years old, she was small enough to fit into or behind anything, but tall enough to reach all the good stuff—especially with a chair. I groaned, and we all began the search.

I checked all her favorite spots first—Winnie’s crib, the back of Emma’s closet, and the hanging bench on the porch we’d had screened in last summer. I was just heading back inside when Cam whispered, “I found her,” holding his finger to his lips. I followed him to the living room, where he pointed down to the pair of feet sticking out from behind the couch. Ray had made a little blanket nest back there and had fallen asleep for a late nap.

Chuckling, I said, “Good luck putting her to bed later.”

“Nah, piece of cake. I got this.” Cam was seriously the best big brother any of our girls could’ve asked for. Big and strong to keep them safe, so patient, and he even loved to read them stories using silly voices. They were all looking forward to their weekend together.

“I’ll be back. I need five more minutes to finish getting ready,” I said just as the timer for the oven went off. I stopped off in the kitchen on the way by and left the lasagna to cool on the stovetop, before heading to the bedroom to grab my tie and jacket.

As I walked through the doorway, though, I found Jasper in front of the mirror, straightening out his suit. Damn, my husband was hot. He smoothed his hands over his short hair, then grabbed his contacts case and went to pull off his glasses.

“No, leave the glasses on,” I said, my voice about two octaves lower all of a sudden.

“Really?” he asked skeptically, meeting my gaze in the mirror’s reflection.

I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist. “Mm,” I murmured into his neck, sliding my hand down the front of his pants and grinding my growing erection against his ass. “They make you look smart and sexy.”

He gasped, his cock thickening under my palm. “Can’t you wait until we get to the hotel?” he gritted out, while his head dropped back onto my shoulder as he enjoyed the attention.

“We could have a quickie now, and then another round at the hotel room before we go down for the reunion. And then again after...” I pinched his nipple gently through his shirt.

Jasper groaned and rocked into me. “You’re insatiable.”

“You love it,” I rasped before sucking his earlobe between my teeth, making him whimper, and I knew if we didn’t get out of here quick, I’d have him ruining his nice, new suit. So, with herculean effort, I peeled myself off him. “Come on, omega mine. Let’s go show off our dance moves to a bunch of people we used to know.” I threw down a dab, and in response, Jasper did a little whip and nae nae. Our children would be appalled.

Neither of us really cared what any of our old classmates thought of us, the jock and the nerd. After high school, we realized the personas we once worked so hard at building were

no longer important. All that mattered was family, happiness, and unending love, and we had all three in spades.

“Shall we?” I asked, holding out my hand to the love of my life.

“Let’s,” he agreed, placing his hand in mine. Together in everything.

Epilogue

THE STAFF

TIME WAS A FUNNY thing. Some days crept by at a snail's pace, while other times, years seemed to pass in a blink.

This was Diya's final shift. She was retiring at long last. She'd been working at The Scarlet Hotel for over 30 years, but it felt like just yesterday she'd started off bussing tables. From busser to server, working prep then to grill, all the way up to sous chef in recent years, Diya had made a decent living here.

She sighed wistfully. She was going to miss it.

"Peter, what the fuck?" Cherie groaned, hanging her head. "Why did you choose today of all days to train new staff?"

Diya bit down on her laugh. Cherie had lost a little bit of her bite over the year, mellowing out as she too approached retirement age, but she still had no patience for newbies.

Peter had stuck around after his first shift, much to Cherie's dismay, earning Diya 50 bucks on that bet. Not only had he defied the odds and managed to make it through training, but he was now the kitchen's front-staff supervisor. Diya

suspected he'd only stuck around because of Delia, whom he'd trailed after like a lost little puppy for the longest courtship in history, but he'd worn her down in the end. They'd been happily married for four years now, with a baby on the way.

Peter shrugged. "It's a busy night, and we need the extra hands. Plus, it'll be a good way to let them sink or swim. Either they'll make it or the won't."

He was right, it was a busy night. All three banquet halls were booked tonight—a charity gala, some sort of marketing award ceremony, and a 20th high school reunion—and there wasn't a single vacant room upstairs.

Diya left the server training to Peter, with Cherie's occasional bitching in the background, and set about giving the kitchen staff direction. The charity event took most of their attention, since the standard was higher. It was a bunch of rich elite collecting money for an omegas' shelter, A New Day, and if the food wasn't up to their standard, they would all be hearing about it. The reunion was a breeze in comparison, because the planning committee had opted for a buffet. Reunions were more relaxed as the alumni got older. They cared less about reclaiming their glory days and dancing to outdated playlists of what was now considered "oldies." Now it was mostly about having a night off from kids and work.

The evening's chaos was a familiar environment for Diya, and she relaxed into her role in the kitchen. Tomorrow, when she woke up in her retirement, there would be no kitchen, no

hotel, no chaos of any sort. She had no spouse to eat breakfast with, no kids or grandkids to spend the weekend with. It was an unsettling concept, this blank slate, an empty calendar with nowhere to be. *What on earth will I do with my time?* She figured she would join a knitting group or a book club. Maybe she would volunteer with that shelter. And it was never too late to find love.

Or maybe she would get bored after a month and come back to work.

But then she bent down to grab a box of potatoes, and her knees screamed in protest, reminding her of her age. *Maybe I'll do some traveling instead...* she thought to herself in an attempt to psych herself up for the change.

As the evening wore on, the pace slowed. They moved from dinner to dessert, from savory to sweet. There were chocolate lava cakes, rich cocoa-dusted truffles, and whipped mousse with fruit and Grand Marnier, and Diya made sure each serving looked incredible.

“*Psst,*” Cherie hissed to get Diya’s attention. When Diya peeked over at her, Cherie jerked her head toward the door, indicating for her to follow.

Everything was under control, the night winding down, so Diya stepped out into the hall, the cool air washing over her like a soothing balm, drying the sweat on her brow. “Where are we going?” Diya asked.

Cherie gave her a little wink before leading the way to the banquet hall where the reunion was going on. “It’s your last

night, Diya. I think that calls for a little celebration, don't you?" Cherie began unbuttoning her jacket, so Diya did the same.

With their jackets folded over their arms, they pushed through into the banquet hall, and the music swelled in volume.

Diya felt a little guilty about cutting out early, but what was her boss going to do about it? Fire her? All the same, she asked, "Is Monsieur Holland still around?" She peeked over her shoulder, as if waiting to get in trouble.

"Are you kidding? With his husband and new baby at home? I'm surprised he came in at all today. He ran out the door at 5 like his ass was on fire."

Emerson Holland also wasn't the same man he'd been ten years ago. He used to be uptight, a stickler for rules and decorum—but then the hotel nearly went out of business. For a couple years, the staff were all holding their breaths, waiting for the end. There were budget cuts, staff shortages, which all led to customer complaints. Maybe that was the catalyst for everything that happened next. After the manager and his father had a falling out, things finally began to change for the better. That was when Emerson got together with his husband. Now, Monsieur Holland smiled a lot more, that was for sure. And in turn, the staff were happier too.

This was what made Diya second-guess her retirement. She loved it here, and she was going to miss her coworkers like crazy.

“Hang on, I’ll grab us some drinks,” Cherie said, making a beeline for the bar.

Diya leaned up against the back wall, taking in the chatting crowd. The lights were low, giving the whole room an air of mystery. There were tables around the outside of the hall, where people could load up a plate from the buffet before sitting in small groups to catch up with old friends. The center of the room, however, was taken up by a dance floor, and it was packed. Diya’s eyes were drawn to one couple in particular who were dancing with wild abandon, not a care in the world about how ridiculous they looked while flossing, their arms and hips swaying, their smiles bright.

“Here you are,” Cherie said as she reappeared, holding out a cup to Diya.

Diya made a face even before she brought the cup to her lips. The fumes coming off it were potent enough to make her eyes water. “Gods, woman, what the hell is in this?”

Cherie gave a wicked smile and a shrug. “Couldn’t let you retire without at least one regret.”

“I regret following you in here,” Diya muttered, but she was laughing as she took a sip anyway, wincing as it burned all the way down.

The two women settled in with their drinks, and Cherie rested her head on Diya’s shoulder. “You know, we made a pretty good team. I’m gonna miss you,” Cherie admitted, just loud enough to be heard over the music. It was hard for the tiny chef to admit to a weakness.

“I’ll come visit,” Diya said, though it felt like a lie. She was entering a new phase of life, and as she moved in this new direction, there wasn’t going to be room for the hotel and its staff. They would probably text back and forth, maybe talk on the phone once or twice, before finally drifting apart. Diya’s eyes teared up, and she wiped furiously to keep them clear. The alcohol was already blurring her thoughts and making her more emotional.

Cherie pretended she didn’t notice the tears, and instead, she pointed a finger toward the dance floor, frowning. “That guy, the one who’s twerking... wasn’t he famous once? He looks familiar.”

Diya smiled with fondness. “Yeah, he was a football player. I met him once a few years ago.” Athlete or not, if he kept working his body like that, he was likely to throw out a hip. “Certainly looks like he’s having a good time.”

Although the party they’d crashed was for the younger men and women around them, still in the prime of their lives, Diya and Cherie made it their own celebration. Of a life well lived, a career at its close.

“Cheers to you, doll,” Cherie said, lifting her glass. “May your retirement be quieter than this madhouse.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Diya replied. They clinked their glasses in a toast, then drained their toxic beverages with a groan. Yep, that regret would be visiting them both in the morning.

Diya sighed, giving Cherie one last hug before calling it a night. They said their farewells, and shift completed, she

headed home. On the bus back to her apartment, the world nicely warm and fuzzy around her, she decided it was important not to rush. Our lives passed us by so quickly, and the finish line was always dangling a carrot in front of our noses. We were always reaching for the next thing—graduation, marriage, kids, promotion, retirement—whatever it was, and before we knew it, it was over.

Life was meant to be a journey. Instead of looking forward to the happily ever after that was promised, it was important to enjoy the journey it took to get there. Diya smiled softly out the window as the neon lights melted together and a light drizzle began to fall, painting a pattern down the glass.

If only she could rewind time and live it all again. She wouldn't have changed a thing.

Also By Trisha Linde

The Scarlet Hotel series:

Room 404

Room 1016

Room 709

Room 215

Room 307

Room 1212

Room 519

Room 1003

Room 810

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The Back-up Date (written with Summer Chase)

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An Omega's Wish

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Just Right (written with Lorelei M. Hart)

About the Author

Trisha Linde spends all her time immersed in books, both reading and writing, mainly because she lives where it's too cold to do anything else, and what better way to keep warm than with a hot book. The first time she read mpreg, it was love at first sight, and there's no turning back now.

When she gets older, she will likely invite strangers over for dinner, and you can bet your ass there will be sequins.

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