

A romantic couple is shown in profile, about to kiss. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a white lace-trimmed top. The man has dark hair and is wearing a light-colored suit jacket over a white shirt. They are standing on a wooden dock that extends into a calm lake. The background features a sunset with a golden glow over the water and a line of trees on the far shore. In the top right corner, there is a logo consisting of two crossed hockey sticks with the text "LAKE SPARK OFF-SEASON" below them.

LAKE SPARK
OFF-SEASON

WAITING *to score*

EVERY LYON

WAITING TO SCORE

LAKE SPARK OFF-SEASON

BOOK 1

EVEY LYON

LAKE SPARK OFF-SEASON SERIES

Waiting to Score

Waiting to Win

Waiting to Play

Listen to the Waiting to Score playlist [HERE](#). Want freebies and sneak peeks? Join my [newsletter](#).

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Also by Evey Lyon

ABOUT

Former hockey star Declan Dash loves to play the game, and the one with his friend's little sister, Violet Spears? He plans to win...

Running into my brother's billionaire ex-hockey-playing best friend at a special kind of party should have been a red flag. Pulling one another's names from a bowl at said party was a coincidence. Having a wild night together that we said we'd forget was probably our mistake. Especially when Declan shows up weeks later as the new owner of the hockey team that practices in Lake Spark, and he has an offer for me.

Meet him every day in his hotel room for a week to enjoy a little fling while he passes through town.

Yep, I stupidly agree. But the man has a few talents, and I need to take a lunch break from my flower shop anyway. Except, our timeline gets extended, and the game Declan plays doesn't come with a rulebook. The lines between us get blurry. My brother will go through the roof if he ever finds out that his friend laid a finger on me, but it's my heart that feels fragile, because I can't figure out if we have a future or if I'm just a big game where he's been waiting to score...

Declan and Violet bring the heat in this brother's-best-friend and billionaire romance. Waiting to Score can be read as a complete standalone and is the first book in the Lake Spark Off-Season series which is a spin-off of the Lake Spark series. For lovers of small-town romance with a touch of hockey.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to Lake Spark during the off-season! This is a spin-off series of Lake Spark. **You do not need to have read the Lake Spark series to enjoy the off-season series.** Will you get a special feeling from the cameos if you read the Lake Spark series? Absolutely.

Whereas Lake Spark focused on neighbors and various sports, this series focuses on a new group of next-generation characters, new faces, and only hockey.

Waiting to Score takes place where Worth the Wait ended—six years in the future from the previous series. Violet first appeared in Worth the Wait as Ford's little sister, and she is now the one to fall in love in an unconventional and lighthearted way in Waiting to Score.

DECLAN

Loosening the collar of my crisp white shirt is priority number one as soon as I get out of this arena.

But the tie around my neck is a reminder of many things.

For one, professional hockey players wear suits to show respect for the game, and during my time as the captain of the Chicago Spinners, I was most certainly no exception. But those days are over, and now I need to focus on a new way to occupy my time, and it just so happens that today required a tie.

The paperwork still needs to be finalized, but, nonetheless, a proud smirk wants to escape me as I walk through the Chicago arena's empty halls. Hockey will always be in my blood, which is why when the ink dries, I'll be the new owner of the Spinners.

I'm sure there will be opinions, there always are. Like when most people assumed that Declan Dash's parents bought a position for their son on a professional hockey team, but I proved them wrong with every winning goal until I held the title of Captain. And now I have the ultimate F-you to all the naysayers.

The perfect timing was presented to me when the former owner sadly, unexpectedly passed at the end of last season, which led to a quick sale. With my retirement status looming and contract ending, I put in a highball offer on impulse, thanks to the cashflow of my hockey career, family money, and an app investment from years ago.

Now I'm striding through a hallway as the man on top.

"Declan," I hear a familiar voice call out my name.

Turning back, I'm greeted by the legend himself, Ford Spears, in jeans and a T-shirt. I was lucky to have him be my mentor during my early years on the Spinners before he retired. I consider him a friend; we have dinner together every few weeks or so.

"Hey!" I greet him with a side hug, as two men who have high-caliber sportsmanship and friendship would.

"One step closer?" He raises a brow at me.

I try to control my grin. "Maybe," I say, playing it cool. Rumors run rampant, but I'm under agreement not to discuss my latest career move until everything is officially announced. Truth be told, the former owner was neither great nor bad at his role, but fate seemed to step in to give the team a change. That's what I'm going to bring to the table.

"Either way, don't forget that you promised to help with the summer camp this year." He gives me a pointed look.

I beam, holding my hands up in surrender. "I would never forget. It's for a good cause." When Ford retired a few years ago, he moved to Lake Spark to run a sports complex. His training facility includes teaching skill development for players and summer camps for kids that every one of our teammates, present and past, volunteers at for a few days. I just skipped the last few years due to other commitments, so I owe him a week for sure.

"What brings you to the city?" I wonder.

"Just met with the marketing department about arranging a charity event later in the year out in Lake Spark. Plus, I need to pick up some supplies for the wifey. She's decided that baby number three gets a space-themed nursery to try and see if we will actually have a son who doesn't enjoy hockey." Ford smiles proudly as he swipes his hand—his wedding ring visibly shining—across his stubbled jaw.

"There you are!" A woman's voice breaks our conversation, and we both look to our side.

Well, my day just got better.

Ford's younger sister, Violet, saunters over, and her striking looks have my eyes instantly committed to staring at her more than I should.

Her sparkly blue eyes greet me with a glimmer of curiosity, which is highlighted by the dark hair framing her face. Her expression appears neutral to me, and it's throwing me for a loop wondering what she thinks of my presence.

"Violet saved my ass by joining me in Chicago to handle the shopping and promised to meet me here," Ford explains. Lake Spark is a small town about two hours from here if traffic isn't a pain, and the last I heard, Violet moved there to be close to her brother.

She quickly interjects and nudges her brother's arm. "Because you owe me lunch before I bid you farewell and meet my friend for our concert tonight." Violet clears her throat and turns her attention to me again. "Hey, Dec, long time no see."

Nobody calls me that. Nor do I seem to care in this moment. She can call me whatever she wants, and I'll answer either way.

"I think that's the point. Your brother has a strict rule that no hockey player should go within a five-mile radius of you, not even just to say hi," I joke, but we all know that it's true.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't find Violet attractive, but Ford always made it clear that hockey players shouldn't go near her, which made sense since she was in college when he played, and not every man on our team had noble intentions.

Including me.

But I've been respectable to her through the years when I've seen her around, always a gentleman, except for the occasional flirty remark to test the waters for the very unrespectable fantasies in my head.

"Excuse me for watching out for my little sister, as any big brother would. Only guys who bring their A-game and

honorable intentions will do,” Ford states, while Violet just rolls her eyes.

I glance at my watch, knowing that as much as I would like to figure out if Violet is wearing black lingerie underneath her pink dress, I have things to do and places to be.

“I guess Ford is aiming for the big-brother-of-the-year award. Anyhow, I need to run, but we’ll catch up soon.” I offer my hand to Ford for one of our team shakes.

“For sure,” he promises.

My eyes land on Violet again, whose lashes flutter as she offers me a half-smile, and I still can’t pinpoint why her eyes on me feel heavy, yet playful. It’s a thought I should probably ignore.

Even when I walk away and notice that she’s watching me leave.

FINALLY, this damn tie can go. The rest of my suit stays.

“Are you ready for tonight?” My childhood friend Brent gives me a devilish grin as he greets me in his front hall, mirroring my dress code, with his hair slicked back. A subtle sound of electric house music plays in the background.

This is one of *those* parties that involve a bowl with names to pick.

The invite list is carefully vetted, and everyone here knows they will be leaving with someone.

It’s not that I do this on a weekly or even monthly basis, but this isn’t my first.

Sometimes, you just need to indulge in a wild night.

“This is exactly what I need today,” I admit.

I undo the top button of my shirt, relieved I ditched the tie during the elevator ride.

Brent pats my shoulder, indicating to follow. “Come on, we need to get you something strong to drink before a night of debauchery.”

I walk through the penthouse, taking in the familiar surroundings. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer exquisite views of Chicago at night, with little specks of light scattered in the foggy night air outside, as we are so high up in the building.

Making our way down the hall into the kitchen, I trail behind Brent to the island counter where he instantly begins to pour a fresh glass of Scotch, while my eyes scan the room. Everyone is dressed to affect, because impressions count.

Brent has a strict protocol for choosing guests, and he can be brutal with his criticism too. Nobody here would call themselves committed in a relationship with someone, and they purely enjoy the thrill of this setup.

He hands me my drink with a smirk, and his eyes narrow in on me.

“Thanks,” I say. Taking a sip, the burn hits my tongue just right, but my eyes do a double take back to Brent who seems to have intel he’s holding onto. “Something you want to share?”

“In a few minutes we will get this show going.” Brent gives me an assuring nod, but his look is indescribable. “Did you see who just walked into the kitchen?”

I didn’t take much notice of faces when I came in, since a drink felt like the priority.

I turn around and notice a pair of legs that I missed in my assessment of the scene. A pair of legs that has me invested to explore further, which is why my sight draws a line up from her black stiletto heels, along her defined smooth legs, to her pink dress. It’s different than before, better. This magnificent journey of exploration ends when my eyes land on her lush lips stained with dark pink lipstick.

But her cute mouth isn’t the only thing familiar. It’s her blue eyes that hit a button somewhere inside of me, just as

they did earlier today. Those curious eyes that wander the room, taking in her surroundings.

She's standing there, patiently waiting, like a doe lost in the forest.

And I'm the big bad wolf.

She is the last person I would ever expect to see here.

Violet Spears.

DECLAN

I pause with my lips on the rim of my glass.

“I know, I’m surprised too,” Brent mentions, glancing over his shoulder in Violet’s direction.

I can’t tear my eyes away from her. “How the hell did she end up here?” My voice is half-edged and half... well, intrigued, far too much.

“Her brother would go through the roof.”

My eyes whip to Brent’s. “Again. Why is she here?” Now my voice is clipped.

“Violet knows Charlotte, and you know I can’t say no to Charlotte when she requests an extra invite.”

I rub a hand across my jaw from his explanation. “Thank fuck for the NDAs that we all sign.” I’m not even joking.

This woman, oblivious to my gaze, is completely off-limits.

But since I’m no longer her brother’s off-limits hockey player friend and everything stays between these walls, then I have no problem looking a little longer at her, trying to comprehend how in the world she wound up standing before me twice today.

She’s a bad idea, but I’m the selfish guy who ignores potential alarms when the parameters allow... as in the rules of this party preventing anyone from finding out.

Lucky me, the parameters allow.

Violet's eyes catch with mine and blaze in recognition. She looks away quickly but then back to me, as there is no escape.

She's been caught, and I've been caught.

My interest is far too piqued, because she doesn't strike me as someone who would come to these types of parties, and my guess is that this is her first.

"Knew you would love the guest list," Brent speaks low before I move.

I'm too confident of a guy to pretend to ignore this coincidence of being at the same party, which is why I stride my way toward Violet, with her eyes now glued on me as I approach her.

Planting my feet next to her, standing side by side, I notice the way her breath catches and her body flinches in my presence.

"Violet," I greet her firmly, with a sinister laugh brewing in the back of my throat.

"Declan." She returns the tone but doesn't look at me.

"I thought you had a concert tonight. This is the last place I would have guessed to run into you."

"A little white lie. I doubt my brother would enjoy the specifics of what I'm doing tonight. Charlotte is a friend of mine; we went to college together." I've never hooked up with Charlotte, but Brent loves to. Apparently, Charlotte is wild, and she's married to her job in marketing and detests relationships as much as Brent.

My eyes roam the room to see if anyone takes notice of us, which they don't.

"Brent and I have known one another for years. You do know that nobody leaves this party alone, right?" I tell her, and it doesn't surprise me that it comes out almost as a dare, because I've thought about bending her over a few times through the years, in various ways.

She turns her body to me and gives me, I swear, a seductive smirk. "I do know that." She pauses for a second

while her demeanor turns relaxed. “How are you, Declan? I didn’t get to ask earlier. It was your last season of hockey. All good?” Her tone is purely genuine, soft, and it’s refreshing because nobody ever asks me like they truly care.

I half-smile. “We’re at a sex party, and you’re asking me how I am?”

“Why not?” She shrugs.

“Your brother wouldn’t be thrilled if he found out you were standing before me.”

Her smirk turns humorous. “Considering you telling him would immediately reveal what you get up to in your free time, then I severely doubt he’ll find out. Besides, nobody wants to talk to their friend about their little sister’s sex life. Not to mention the contract we all signed,” she challenges with a cocked brow.

I like her bite. “True. But *why* are you here?”

“Why are *you* here?” she counters.

I have no qualms revealing the truth. “I’m a man with needs who enjoys a beautiful woman. I don’t do relationships and don’t go for the puck bunny bullshit; I have a little more class than that.”

Violet scoffs a laugh. “Wow, that’s some honesty.”

I have to quirk my lips and squint an eye to study her. “You’ve done this before?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, which doesn’t help this situation, as it draws my eyes to her pert cleavage, and she taps her arms with her dark pink nails. “There is a first for everything.” I admire her candor and the hint of assurance in her voice. “Everyone is allowed to live a little. There are many things in life that scare me, and this little rendezvous of an evening is not one of them.”

“What does scare you then?”

She side-eyes me. “Birds. Freaking hate them.”

I chuckle. “Any bird in particular or all birds?”

“All. I just have a complete trauma thanks to Hitchcock.”

“Fair enough. I hate maple syrup, if it’s any comparison.”

She snorts an adorable laugh. “Doesn’t your family own Grizzly Dash, that maple syrup company?”

“That and a bunch of hotels. But maple syrup is... sticky and too sweet.”

“Many delicious things in life are sticky and sweet... it’s natural.” Her tone is floaty and seeping with innuendo.

“I like your philosophy.” And her dirty mind.

Her head lolls to the side slightly. “What *really* scares you?”

I have to rile her as my mouth curves up. “That you’ll end up with me tonight.”

She glances at me with her wistful eyes. “The odds of that are slim.”

“Want to bet on it?” I challenge.

She lets a chortle escape her edible mouth. “Not really, no.”

I step closer to her, eager to touch her arm and feel her skin that looks silky. Leaning in, I whisper, “That’s a shame, it could be fun.” I let my lips gently graze her cheek, desperately wanting a little nibble before I step away.

Her breath changes as she straightens her back; she’s affected, which was my goal, so I take another step back to create space, admiring the goosebumps spreading down her arms, and I enjoy my victorious smirk that I’m now entitled to take.

Our eyes hold, but we are interrupted by the sound of a glass clinking.

Brent is standing on his coffee table, tapping a drink glass with a fork. “Ladies and gentlemen, shall we get started?” He grins.

The small crowd gathers around him, and my eyes remain laser-focused on the prize I know I want.

WE GET to the final two couples, and the four of us stand in a square, as if fate has already paired us off. Brent next to Charlotte, and Violet near me.

Violet's eyes darken as her eyes shift to mine. I'm not sure if Brent picks up on this or if he heard me once mention how it would be good to screw Violet into oblivion to get what I need out of my system, but Brent gives me a confident look.

"Well, ladies, last draw." Brent smiles at Charlotte and Violet. Charlotte is all game, even nudges Violet's arm in excitement, but Violet looks nervous as she nibbles her bottom lip.

Odds are completely in my favor.

Brent slowly pulls the paper up to reveal his name. Then he looks between all of us as he draws a paper up from the other glass bowl, moving inch by inch to draw this out, making me nervous that he'll pull the wrong name, because random my ass, I'm counting on luck.

"And the name is... Charlotte." He displays the paper.

Relief hits me. Looks like he gets his wish, and I'm not complaining either.

I immediately turn to my prize who parts her mouth gently, hoods her eyes, and then opens them in slight disbelief. She can't seem to look at me as she breathes a long inhale.

As Charlotte and Brent leave with their hands interlaced, eager as can be, I soak in our newfound silence as I pull the last two papers, one from each bowl, with our names on them.

I step into Violet's space. "Well, look at that. You and me." I'm smug, and she focuses on our names scribbled on the paper with a droll smile gracing her luscious lips.

As I move closer to her, it causes her to stand taller. “Rules are rules, Violet,” I taunt her with a breathy whisper into her ear, and I feel her tremble in my presence. She smells like fresh-cut flowers, and it tingles my nose, and for a split second, I’m not sure what the play is for this game book.

She stares directly into my eyes, and anticipation is already flowing to my dick.

“You and me, it seems,” she whispers huskily then swallows, before she surprises me by yanking my arm to drag me with her toward the hall, with her heels clicking at a fast pace.

Brent is worth millions, so it is only fitting that his place has exactly five bedrooms, along with an office that I’m sure someone is using without care for a lack of a bed. I mean, there is a nice leather sofa in there.

We’re already alone in the hall, as most head straight into what they came for. I grab Violet’s wrist to stop her and swiftly spin her until she’s pressed against the wall, with my hand fitting perfectly against her hip. She’s warm to the touch, and her whimper from the element of surprise sends a promising surge through me.

But I gotta be virtuous for one sec.

“This is where I throw you over my shoulder and get you the fuck out of here, out of respect for your brother,” I grit out because I hate throwing in a yellow card right now.

“No!” she is quick to reply, nearly panicked.

“Ah, so you do want to be here and with me?”

A sly, sexy-as-fuck smirk takes form on her mouth, a confidence that feels new. “What if I say I’m not complaining?”

“Consent. I need to hear you say it.” I’m direct, but damn, my voice swelters with heat.

“Yes. I’m here and with you, apparently.” She escapes my hold and reaches out with her fingers to touch my chest under the sides of my suit jacket.

I tilt my head slightly to the side. “Did you know I was going to be here?” This coincidence has me slightly in disbelief.

She shakes her head and chides, “Rules are rules.” Of course, none of us knew exactly who would be here until we arrived. Her fingers are playing with my buttons, and I hope she breaks every single damn one of them tonight.

“Vi, a woman like you should be getting wined and dined by some lawyer who plans on buying you a house in the suburbs.”

She laughs nervously. “A woman like me deserves to explore... things. And I doubt I would find this opportunity in Lake Spark.”

I’m not going to question her more; it’s not in me to knock down someone’s sexual confidence, which she clearly has.

Her brother would kill me. But I don’t seem to care about that at this moment.

Especially when I feel Violet’s body warmth mingle with mine and notice when she steps closer, inviting me to snap and ravish her.

“Not here, sweetheart, let’s go,” I inform her, grabbing her arm and dragging her with me.

“What, why?” she protests.

I don’t answer, instead continuing our journey to the front door. I see the line of purses on the side table, and I indicate for Violet to grab hers.

When we go into the hall near the elevator, I pin her against the wall, this time pressing my body against her middle that makes her jolt and let out a gasp.

“I know this is your first time doing something like this, and by all means, I can take you into Brent’s guest room. But at some point, you will have to face everyone when you leave, and as much as I appreciate the idea of them knowing how much you enjoyed having my cock inside of you all night, I’m

going to show one ounce of respect for our delicate dynamic tonight.”

I’m direct as I trace her mouth with my finger. Her hot breath hits my flesh, making me slightly delirious, imagining her mouth spreading heat down my chest until she goes lower where I like it the most.

Her bottom lip falls, her eyes near pleading, and I’m doing my damndest not to slam my mouth onto hers.

Not yet, anyhow.

“My place is up one floor, has a better view too. The rules apply for the night. You and I will be more comfortable there,” I clarify.

“What if I say that takes away from the experience?” she dares. “Isn’t the whole point that maybe I get a glimpse or hear someone else and vice versa?”

Nuh-uh, I draw a line at the idea of anyone spying on her. Something inside of me doesn’t like that thought. She’s mine for tonight, only mine.

I huff a chuckle. “You’re a bit wilder than I anticipated. Kind of had you pegged for being vanilla, an on-your-back-in-bed kind of girl.”

Her mouth falls open in humorous offense. “You may just be a piece of work.”

Stepping between her legs, my hand lands on her inner thigh, causing her to gasp. Slowly, I trail my fingers up her bare skin until I feel the heat of her soaked panties that I run my thumb along, her body writhing against my touch as her breath catches.

“Which apparently you love.” Fuck, I feel like I may crawl out of my skin if I can’t dip a finger inside of her stat.

That hint of flowers on her skin occupies my brain. *I bet she tastes like rose water*, that’s what comes to my mind. My tongue will discover soon enough.

Because lucky for me, tonight is about pure pleasure with the unexpected surprise that is my friend’s little sister.

VIOLET

The first time I decide to try something outside of my norm, and my brother's ridiculously handsome friend has to be the guy whose name is pulled out of a bowl?

There are *most definitely* worse things in life. I'm just not used to this kind of luck.

Just watching Declan swagger into his penthouse has me ready to tear his clothes off.

A voice somewhere, no clue where, probably inside my head, that I choose to ignore reminds me that this guy is the poster of everything my brother has warned me against, and friends would roll their eyes too, knowing that he's trouble.

Following Declan into his living room, I see the place has expensive leather furniture and fancy art on the walls. I don't take much notice, as I enjoy watching him throw his suit jacket to the sofa without a care that it will wrinkle. Declan's sandy brown hair is combed back, screaming for me to run my fingers through it, and it looks soft to play with. Just like his lips that currently display a wry smile, while his piercing blue eyes seem to be assessing me.

Because rules are rules, and we are one another's prize.

This brings me back to the thought that I have no complaints that this is how the night ended up.

My heart is pounding from anticipation. I was prepared for sex with a stranger, not a man I see at my brother's yearly holiday party.

A man who just took a calculated step in my direction.

Gulp.

“Last chance for an out,” he says as he begins to undo the cufflinks at his wrists, preparing himself for whatever ideas he has in his head.

“I’m still here.” I sound confident, but my stomach just flipped.

Remember why you are here.

Reaching behind my back, I find the zipper on my carefully chosen dress, and with one tug of my fingers, I slowly pull down. My thoughts go through my reasoning as the zip comes undone, tooth by tooth.

I’m single, life is merely a routine lately, and the pool of men in Lake Spark is lacking. I miss sex. Like, a lot. When Charlotte mentioned her plans, I was intrigued and turned on. I’m not against trying new things. A perfect escape from the ordinary.

I carefully studied the list of rules, and I signed on the dotted line with no hesitation, which I have no regret over.

Relief and nerves twist inside of me. Not going to lie, the idea of sex with a stranger you just met was daunting, and I wasn’t sure it was for me, and luckily, I went in knowing there was always an out, as the rules value your choice. But Declan deleted the random-man factor and brought familiar to the table. Maybe too familiar, because I’m far too excited that it’s him.

I’m a complete beginner at this kind of thing, but Declan’s look informs me that this whole setup is ordinary for him. He seems willing to guide me.

My spine straightens when his finger presses firmly against my lips, indicating that I shouldn’t speak, only listen.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat this. Tonight is slightly out of the usual for me, in terms of my knowing you a little more than I probably should, considering what I’m about to do to you.” He tips his head gently to the side and a scoff escapes

his mouth. “Why on earth would a party like this interest you, Violet?”

I’m not afraid nor shy of this man, maybe slightly in awe. Which doesn’t make sense either, because I’m used to hockey players, so starstruck isn’t me. If I had to pinpoint it, it’s his confidence in this situation, probably because I’m about to match it, and I’m not used to that. Not many guys can handle me.

Feeling bold, I dart the tip of my tongue between my lips to touch his finger, a mere poke, causing Declan’s eyes to blaze in surprise as he attempts to anticipate my next move.

I wrap my lips around his finger to suck, with one long stroke of my tongue, ensuring my eyes stay fixed with his, before I pop my lips off. “Stop questioning me, because I’m not making assumptions of why you do this, and trust me, I could make plenty.” My voice feels heavy with a yearning for us to move faster.

He chuckles under his breath, shifting his focus to his watch that he begins to undo. “Fine. I’ll just assume you are living a mundane small-town life and needed a thrill. You decided to play this game and got damn fortunate by ending up with me.” He holds his watch up before clasp his hand around it to place it in his pocket.

“You just assume that then.”

Truth be told, he nailed his theory. I love Lake Spark. I moved there to be closer to my brother and his growing family. Despite living in Ford’s shadow, I hold no resentment, and he’s key to my life. Not to mention, there was a perfect little store on Main Street that was calling my name.

“You’re not the type of woman to be fucked by a stranger.” Declan begins to unbutton his shirt.

I shimmy my dress down my body. “Do I even want to know what type of woman you think that is?” I step out of my dress in front of this man as if this is a normal occurrence.

He discards his shirt to the side, not even blinking an eye as he examines me in my black bra-and-panty set. “You smell

like expensive roses, not perfume, but natural. You don't need to put in the effort with your looks, and your smile is sweet. You're the woman that some guy will bring home to meet his parents, which means you should never settle for someone who doesn't give you conversation and effort."

My eyes widen at his explanation. I should be flattered.

Dragging my hair to one side, I turn to offer him the clasp of my bra. "I do smell of expensive roses, because I own a flower shop." I tremble slightly when he takes his time to unhook the strap, the back of his finger sliding along my skin, lingering and causing a ripple in my body, including my nipples that now peak.

"That's what you do?"

"You never talk about me with Ford?"

"It rings a bell now from what your brother has mentioned, but I don't make a habit of taking interest in a woman that I can't fuck, to be honest."

I have to smile to myself. I never knew he was so candid.

"But now you can have me," I state the obvious.

Purposely, I wait to turn and face him, instead sliding the straps of my bra off my shoulders to toss the garment to the floor.

"I'm happy you highlight that. I would hate to be the boyfriend who can't impress you with flowers since you own the flower shop," he says metaphorically.

I chuckle softly. "Just means he has to be creative to catch my attention."

I should feel vulnerable right now, but it's only the opposite. I'm empowered by confidence brought on by undeniable attraction.

His warm hands land on the curves of my shoulders, and I feel him step closer behind me, our body heat becoming one.

"He shouldn't need to be creative, unless he is compensating for something. Lucky for me, you're single and

here. Tonight, you have my full attention,” he whispers against the shell of my ear.

My clit pulses from anticipation, while I clench my thighs to gather stability.

“Oh gee, only tonight,” I tease.

Declan’s hands fall to my hips, and he grips them. “Maybe you had my attention a little before too, which is why I already have ideas of exactly how I want to play with you.” He guides me by the waist to turn me around.

I try to suppress my smile because it’s a boost knowing someone has noticed you. I’m a confident person, but that doesn’t make a compliment worth any less.

Facing him, his gaze dips low, as I’m completely topless, and a smirk twists on the corners of his mouth.

“No going back,” he warns as his eyes graze back up to my mouth.

“I’ll survive.” My tone is flippant.

“This is probably a bad idea.” He rubs his thumb along my bottom lip.

I take hold of his hands to guide them to my chest. “Good thing it’s only one night then.” The feeling of his palms molding my round breasts sparks electricity between us.

His smirk grows. “I like your mindset.”

“I’m only here to appease you,” I joke with a light tone.

“You deserve a gentleman, and maybe I’ll be that at some point tonight, but right now, I need to do this.” His fingers pluck a nipple while his eyes stay pinned to mine. “Have you thought about having me inside you before?”

“Your ego needs a boost?” I cock my head to the side, with his hands still on my breasts. He won’t give me what I want until I answer. “Once or twice,” I admit.

“Good girl, honesty is key for tonight.” He begins to trace his lips along my jawline. “In that spirit, you’ll tell me when you’ve had enough, because I intend to go a few rounds,

making you come with my fingers, mouth, and cock. Hopefully, you feel in a giving mood too.”

Have mercy on me, this is exactly what I was imagining.

“I think I can be persuaded,” I say breathlessly.

“Good. I need to watch you touch yourself, because I want to study the way you like it so my tongue can show you how to do it better.”

A new wave of heat runs through me with the realization that his cockiness is apparently something that I like.

In a flash, he moves his hands. I feel at a loss until he instantly cups my face to slam his mouth onto mine, stealing my breath and driving me wild. His one hand threads through my hair then yanks slightly to tilt head in a better angle, a clear position for him to consume my lips.

He’s firm, then tender, to downright greedy. I have no chance to explore because his tongue is already flirting with mine because Declan is a step ahead of me.

I loop my arms around his neck, enjoying his kiss that turns messy.

This is just a little fun, except judging by the feel of his cock pressed against my middle, then he isn’t little at all.

Thank you, heaven, for finally allowing me to win something.

He hoists me up, my legs instantly wrapping around his waist, while our mouths don’t part as he walks us to the couch.

I gasp, as I’m startled by the way we fall together perfectly against the cushions. With his body over mine, my hands begin to wander down his abs, attempting to reach his belt, but he’s quick to pin my wrists above my head.

I’m a version of myself that I don’t quite recognize... and I love it.

We’re all allowed to have wild nights.

A one-of-a-kind sort of night.

Even if they end with a morning after and an empty bed
with a note in place of a warm body next to you.

DECLAN

A FEW WEEKS LATER

This is my test.

The last time I saw Ford was a few hours before his sister became my dirty little secret.

Now? We're alone and sitting at Catch 22 in Lake Spark. The restaurant on the water overlooks a few docks with boats and is an easy walk from Main Street. This town is busy as hell during the summer months, which is why this restaurant is bustling with people. We're at a table for two outside on the deck, with late-morning sun shining down on us.

Yep, just the two of us.

I'm one soft drink order in and I've already pictured Violet straddling me while my dick pistoled my way up into her, causing us to moan in sync.

A wave of guilt hits me because I left before she woke up.

I haven't seen or spoken to her since.

That's my doing.

"This week you're going to meet with my staff at the rink?" Ford asks.

I shake the memories out of my head and focus on the hockey king sitting in front of me. Sunglasses cover his eyes, but his brown hair doesn't show any signs of age. Then again, he's only thirty-six.

"Every day, I'll train with the kiddos in the morning or afternoon and have my meetings in between. Will that be okay for you?"

Ford nods with a grin. "Of course, anything you want. You're the one bringing my old team to Lake Spark."

I take a sip of my iced tea, relieved that the world now knows my new career title. "One of the perks of becoming

owner of a hockey team is that I get to make decisions. I think it's good that the Spinners will move their training and practices to Lake Spark next season; it'll bring more focus. Where they train now is already 45 minutes outside of the city, so Lake Spark isn't much farther in retrospect. Plus, the existing building needs a total refurbishment, and the last owner passed before the team was able to renew the contract. This could be the start of transitioning everything," I explain.

Ford looks at me, impressed. "You've really thought this through. Then again, people forget that you're more than a pretty boy who can shoot a puck."

I grin at his comment. "Story of my life. Everyone assumes something about me, yet all I do is prove them wrong."

"I always liked that about you."

"It'll be good to be out of the city for a little bit. My parents are driving me crazy, and parties just don't feel the same anymore."

Normal parties, not the ones where I screw your sister.

"How's the maple syrup business?" Ford asks as he glances at a duck walking along the deck.

"Hell if I know. I only occasionally glance at the financials when we have essential company meetings. I leave it to my family to run. That doesn't make them too happy, nor did my new ownership status of the Spinners thrill them. But trust me, maple syrup isn't in my calling. I mean, I keep a bottle in my kitchen out of loyalty but never open the disgusting thing."

"Brielle loves that stuff. It's a must every time she makes pancakes." He always smiles when he talks about his wife and kids.

I can imagine it must be a unique feeling, I've just never been drawn to the family lifestyle.

"How is the Spears crew?" I lean back in my chair to study my friend who seems completely at peace.

“Great. Connor is on summer break yet still hits the ice a few times a week, forward seems to be his position of choice. Sixteen is an age that requires a few extra bottles of beer, for me, not him. I swear that kid is going to give me my first gray hair.” Ford and Brielle had Connor when they were very young, which makes it a little more fun that the age difference between father and son isn’t so big. “Wyatt is still in the napping phase, and Brielle is always radiant when pregnant.”

“A few more months, right? Is this your last one, or are you going for creating your own hockey team?” I’m generally interested, as their family is growing, and his gushing grin is *nearly* infectious on the matter.

“Nah, when this one arrives later this year, then we’re done. Three boys and a dog are enough for us, plus my sister is around, so I’m sure she will add to the family gatherings soon enough.”

My lips stall on the rim of my drink glass at the mention of Violet. Taking a shallow sip for appearances, I swallow a deep breath. “Didn’t realize she was dating someone.” I sound casual enough.

Inside of me, something feels tied to her, a connection, and not the wrists-knotted-to-my-headboard kind.

Truthfully, it was concerning how I woke to find her peacefully asleep next to me in my bed, naked. Either the bed was made for her, or she was made for the bed. I liked the way she looked wrapped in my sheets. I had to unravel us when I slowly slid out from the covers. I’m not used to that.

I have no right to be territorial about her dating life, but my interest is far too piqued.

“She’s not seeing anyone. I just don’t imagine her being single for long. Violet is smart, runs her own shop, and she’s fun. I’m not blind, I know half the team had a thing for her, and Violet is relaxed, so she’s easy to hang out with. I’m sure the mayor has a son or nephew somewhere for her, and I think the new sheriff in town has been eyeing her. I think he would pass my approval list.”

Not going to lie, Violet made an impression on me and has lingered in my head. I can only agree with her brother's remarks. Well, except for the sheriff part. Other than his handcuffs, I doubt he would bring much to the table to keep Violet interested.

“Right,” I manage to say.

Luckily, the waiter arrives to take our orders. Still, as Ford reads off the menu, my mind wanders to Violet. I've already failed this test of brunch with Ford a few moments in because she's all I can think about.

I don't owe Violet an apology. The setup of that night had clear rules. It wasn't intentional that I left her before she woke, but I had somewhere important to be. Not to mention, that would have been a slightly awkward morning after considering sex with her was... different. If I'm honest with myself, it was slower and more sensual at times than my usual play. Those parties are a temporary escape, but with Violet? It was like a whole other world.

Not apologizing to her doesn't exactly feel right either, and I want to rectify that.

Violet is a lethal combination if a man looks close enough. She knows what she wants, and that's sexy as hell. But she's also the kind of woman that any grandmother would invite over for tea. This combination of the two are not good for any man's head.

“Since you'll be in Lake Spark more often, maybe you'll set down some roots since hotel life can't be that fun.”

“This week, I'm staying at the Dizzy Duck Inn here in town, and I'll probably get a weekend home here. I do want to be a bit hands-on with the team if they train here. At least, I want to be able to observe the players,” I explain.

Ford hisses a sound. “You know that the team hates when the owner is around at practices.”

“That's because most owners never played the game, but I'm different. Either way, I will make myself hidden if needed.” This team will only be the best in my book, it's what

I want, and I'll prove to everyone that having me as owner is well worth it.

“Good. I'll keep my eye out if any interesting real estate becomes available.”

“Like I said, I'm not sure if small-town life is for me, but it's worth an investment,” I repeat to calm his eagerness.

“Weren't you dating a real estate agent once?”

I scratch the back of my head. “Many years ago, for like two months, but she got clingy way too fast.” Nor did she understand that I had no intention of sending her flowers and planning future holidays together.

“I can never keep up with your dating life.”

“That's the point,” I state with a tight smile. For the most part, people know that I have a good time, they're just not aware of the specifics.

Thank fuck for that. Ford would kill me.

I take a moment to look out across the lake where a line of pines frames the outline of the water. Lake Spark is beautiful, I'll give it that.

Lake Spark has been a business decision for the team, but maybe a little downtime would be good for me while I'm here. I've never given much time to nature, but they say it brings better focus.

Our food arrives a little while later.

“Thank you,” I hear Ford tell the waiter.

I repeat the sentiment and stare down at my BLT sandwich.

“Looks good,” I say while I debate how to attack the sandwich.

In truth, I'm not that hungry.

Probably because I was hoping he would bring up Violet a little more in conversation. It would be my practice to act

indifferent around Ford, examine if I would ever feel guilt for betraying a friendship.

Instead, I'm left disappointed that I'm not awarded the opportunity.

"You should stop by our house later. Connor is having friends over, so I'm going to BBQ and have Spencer join."

I have to grin. "Oh yeah, your street where every homeowner is a professional sports legend, or you."

"Spencer retired, but come on, join us. We'll drink a few beers while we ensure my sixteen-year-old and his crew don't get out of line. Brielle would love it if you stopped by. You haven't seen her yet since she really started to show."

"I've never been one to turn down a social gathering." I take a bite of my sandwich. Something clicks in my brain, and I wipe my mouth and suggest, "I should bring something for Brielle. Fruit, flowers?"

Please say flowers.

"Just bring yourself."

That doesn't help.

I'm failing. Miserably.

Violet keeps seeping into my thoughts every time I look at Ford. Or it's the fact that I'm in Lake Spark and it has crossed my mind a million times that Violet lives here.

My brain flashes the image of her lying underneath me, and the way her breath hitched in surprise when I rolled us over in bed, or the fact that we barely left my sofa the first two rounds.

I scratch my cheek, realizing that I need to take matters into my own hands, especially if I'll be in Lake Spark more often.

"My mother would be disappointed if I show up to your BBQ empty-handed. I'm sure I'll find something in town."

"I mean, Violet's shop, The Flower Jar, has gifts as well as flowers. I'm sure she has something, plus it helps her business.

I do my best to ensure she doesn't go bankrupt.”

“Is that a concern?”

He scoffs a laugh. “No way. She's always busy, a lot of online orders. The Dizzy Duck Inn contacts her for flowers when people stay for a night and need that romantic touch. I'm just her big brother and want her to succeed, and all business helps.”

Violet strikes me as an independent woman with strong shoulders. What her brother mentions sounds right on point.

“I'm going to assume, like all great places in Lake Spark, that I can find her store on Main Street?”

“Main Street, First Street, Pine Street, or Duck Lane, the only streets in Lake Spark, but they all run into Main or the lake.”

“Quaint.” I try to suppress a smile.

Ford grins. “Nah, just easy. Welcome to Lake Spark.”

My lips quirk out at Ford's sentiment.

Easy.

Not exactly, but at least I won't get lost.

Because my next stop is finding Violet at her flower shop.

VIOLET

I stare at my sixteen-year-old nephew, Connor, who's tapping his fingers on the counter of my store, The Flower Jar, his chin resting against his propped elbow while he seems to be in deep contemplation.

It's summer, which means he should be having the time of his life. He's a popular kid, with good looks that keep his parents worried. It's no secret that every girl at his school harbors a crush on him. Add in the fact that he plays varsity hockey and I'm confident he thinks he's the messiah to some.

"You okay there? You seem kind of... lost." A bewildered smile stretches on my mouth as I count the individual sunflowers for my brother's order, thankful my apron catches the drops of water from the stems.

"Carnations look like roses, I don't get it."

Ah, yes, he's been debating which flowers to buy for the last five minutes.

I playfully hit his head with a sunflower. "They are not the same, and I've told you that many times. You need to go for roses if you want to impress a girl," I remind him.

The joys of your brother accidentally having a baby at young age means my nephew and I can hang out without it feeling like I'm just another parental figure. I was eleven when he was born. We have a special bond, closer to friendship, because I'm the cool aunt. He tells me things that he wouldn't tell his parents, although he's pretty damn close with them too.

“You’re right. A single rose, red, classic, and it’s more of a statement.” He stands tall, confident with his choice.

My brow raises. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “Just someone.”

“Nothing to do with your pool party later?” I ask as I walk to the bucket on the floor filled with roses. I hold one up for his approval, and he nods.

“Maybe. Haven’t decided if she’s worthy or not, I’m keeping my options open.”

I snort a laugh. We’re going through a lot of roses this summer.

The chirp of a parrot reminds me that there is a bird in a cage in this place, not by choice.

“I’m a hostage,” the bird parrots.

Connor laughs and glances at Nugget. “That animal is hysterical.”

I shudder from the realization that I’m never alone here. “He isn’t helping my phobia, but he belongs to the landlord, and the parrot isn’t going anywhere. Just a shame I can’t keep the blanket over his cage for longer periods.”

“Oh, baby,” Nugget chirps. I sigh from exasperation.

“When are you going to bring a guy to our house?” Connor asks.

Great question. There hasn’t been anyone, well, not since that night in Chicago with Declan.

Declan.

The man with a foul mouth who leaves filthy memories in my head.

He worshiped my body like it meant something but left as if I was nothing.

Shaking my head, I focus on my nephew.

“If you bring a guy over, it will divert the attention away from me. I’m going to lose my mind if my dad tries to let me

throw another party. I know his plan. Try and be relaxed, get my friends on his side so they only want to hang at our house. It's going to kill my dating life."

Pulling some ribbon off the spool, I smirk to myself. "I think that's the idea. Boohoo, your parents let you throw awesome parties that I hear girls talking about when I pick up a coffee at Jolly Joe's. Just trust me, you want that kind of dad. Growing up, I had rules on top of rules and couldn't tell my parents anything."

Our parents divorced, with my father being the major parental figure. For the most part, I shouldn't complain, except for the fact that I lived in the shadow of Ford's stellar career and his young fatherhood that was a constant point of contention between him and our dad.

"What did you do about the rules?"

"Waited until college, let loose like an animal, and made questionable choices," I state matter-of-factly before I point a finger at him. "Which you will *not* do."

Wrapping the silver ribbon around the rose, I'm kind of relieved that I'm closing up early today. There was a Saturday-morning rush, a wedding delivery, and an hour of chasing a supplier for a delivery time on my fresh orchids arriving next week.

Connor indicates with his watch that he wants to epay, but I wave him off. "Family discount," I say. He gives me his signature grin and begins to turn, but I clear my throat. "Forgetting something?"

He reaches for the sunflowers that I packed with green paper around the stems. "Keeping me out of trouble, Aunt Violet?"

"No. Your dad would kill us both if one of us forgets to bring your mom the dozen sunflowers that your dad wants hand-delivered." I tilt my hip out.

"Did you add an extra one from me?"

"Of course."

My nephew has moves, I'll give him that. Every time Ford orders Brielle flowers, Connor adds an extra flower, brings it to Brielle, and ensures she knows that the additional flower is from him. She turns to a puddle of goo every single time, while my brother just smirks with pride. It's ten times more extreme now that she's pregnant again; I heard there were tears last time.

"You're the best. See you at the party."

I offer a short little wave. "Yep."

Watching him leave, I sigh as I lean against my counter and scan my shop. A wave of satisfaction hits me, because The Flower Jar is mine. Well, for the most part. I had to lease the building, but I designed the interior space, manage the administration, and other than a few part-timers helping me out, I'm here pretty much six days a week. I can check off the box marked "small business owner," and I'm having a blast doing it.

But career is only one aspect of life.

Looking through my window, with gold stenciled letters on the glass, I see that Main Street is busier than normal, probably because it's tourist season. Illinois summer puts everyone in a good mood—until winter hits us. We sometimes improve in mood around February, with Valentine's day, before spring rolls in, which keeps us on our toes with unpredictable weather.

Fortunately, flowers are the key to brightening anyone's day, and they are available in my store all year round.

It's just... flowers are also the language of romance. I'm somehow part of everyone else's moments, yet I don't experience my own.

Maybe I'm a little envious when I watch Ford with his family. Who wouldn't be a little jealous?

Shaking away the thought that creeps into my mind more often than it should, I sigh and grab a broom to sweep the floor and prepare to close up.

A few minutes later, I step outside and grab a few buckets filled with flowers on display. The fresh air and sun are a welcome change. Sometimes I wonder if the sun and flowers are competing to turn someone's day around, it feels like today the sun wins.

Because the thing with flowers is that while you can buy yourself flowers, it doesn't have the same effect as if someone else would. And right now, there is nobody in my life, not even close, only a memory of a night that lingers in my thoughts.

Heading back inside, I recount the list of things I need to do to close, and it's a welcome distraction.

It's twenty minutes later when I turn off the tablet for orders and payments then head back to the closet where I lock things away.

The sound of the bell over my front door rings to inform me that someone is here.

"Sorry, the options may be limited since I'm closing up," I call out, not looking up, as I'm too occupied with noticing how dirty my apron is today.

Untying the belt, I walk back onto the shop floor.

"It's okay, there is only one item I'm looking for."

That voice causes me to instantly freeze, except for my eyes that snap up to confirm that it's him, and I'm faced with a smirk as he leans against the counter, with sunglasses in his hand and wearing jeans and a light blue short-sleeved button-down shirt that accentuates his piercing eyes.

"Declan."

"Violet."

Hesitating, I take one step into the middle of my shop, doing my best to interpret his suave smirk and not combust at the same time.

He left a damn note on the pillow, with paper he'd folded into a bird, after a night of endless fun. I can't really be mad because that was what I signed up for, but still, it stung a little.

“Tie her up.”

Declan instantly searches for the source of the words and finds Nugget perched in his cage. My face turns red from the choice of words this bird spits out at random moments.

“Someone is direct. I like it.” Declan’s cheeks heighten as he grins to himself.

I shake my head and smile tightly in embarrassment. “He is the culprit of my daily misery.”

Declan’s head tilts in different angles to study the bird. “I thought you have a bird phobia, so why am I staring at a parrot in a cage?”

“Nugget is part of the deal with my landlady. I get a decrease in rent if I keep the bird, since my landlady moved downstate to a condo that doesn’t allow pets. His limited vocabulary that is barely appropriate is just a bonus.” I’m sarcastic and huff out a breath.

“You’re handsome.” Nugget pecks his beak as he walks along his pole.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Declan responds.

Looking away, I hide my soft smile as I touch a lisianthus amongst a bunch of flowers. I do my best to occupy myself and erase the memory of Declan’s mouth covering mine to block my moans while by back was on his couch. “I wasn’t expecting you here. Is there something I can help you with?”

I can feel his gaze on me. “Thought I would stop by. I saw Ford, and he invited me to a BBQ. I would like to bring Brielle some flowers.”

I swallow because now I know that I will have to be near him at my brother’s house. I knew this day would come eventually.

“Well, uhm, okay, what do you have in mind?” I walk around the counter, avoiding glancing in his direction.

“What about sunflowers?”

I chortle a laugh. “Trust me, Brielle has enough of them. The men in her life enjoy buying her sunflowers.” I peer up to find his eyes set on me and a subtle wry smile on his lips.

“Then maybe chocolates are a better idea,” he mentions. I nod once and feel my mouth tug, wanting to smile gently. The air between us is peculiar, neither tense nor calming. He clears his throat. “Truthfully, you’re the item on my list that I came here for.”

Heat swells in my body, and my brows raise in surprise. “Whatever do you mean?” I say, playing coy.

His jaw flexes side to side as he grins. “Since flowers for Brielle are a no-go, then maybe you can arrange something else for me? Can you have something delivered to the Dizzy Duck Inn?”

“As in what?” I’m curious. I watch as he picks up a small square card with my logo from the pile on the counter, and he flips it between his fingers.

“Any flowers will do, they’re even optional, but the card is kind of crucial.” He tips his head gently to the side and hands me the card.

An audible breath escapes me. “Sure. What am I writing?” I click a pen and pose my fingers, waiting for him to dictate.

“About last night...” He pauses when he notices that my fingers freeze mid-sentence, and I stop writing. Something inside of me boils. This man has some nerve, asking me to deliver flowers to some woman he spent the night with. “Shall I continue?” he asks.

I swallow, debating if I should throw him out of my store now, but something inside of me tells me to go on. It’s the tone of his voice. “Next sentence.” I remain defiant.

“My answer is yes, Violet.”

“What?”

“No, I mean, the card is from you, so you’re signing your name.”

I wave my pen between my fingers and look at him for answers. “I don’t follow.”

He stands confidently, and a pleasing smile graces his lips. “You’re going to answer a question that I’ll ask at the BBQ and send me the card one day real soon, flowers optional.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“You’ll see.” It sounds like a delicious threat. He clears his throat as if he wants to switch topics. “I thought it would be good to clear the air.”

I notice a wilted rose on my counter that I forgot to clean up earlier. Picking it up, I pluck one petal off. “Oh?” I pretend to be surprised. “Nothing to clear.” I grip another petal, this time with a little more force.

Take the high road, Violet.

Declan’s eyes squint to study me as I continue to tear. “*Yeah*, not sure that’s true.”

I grab the scissors. “Do you mean leaving before sunrise? Or the note folded as a bird that said *Coffee machine is ready, door will lock on your way out, thanks for a good night, Declan.*” I cut the stem rather ceremoniously.

“Something like that.” He reaches forward with a grin, cautiously wrapping his fingers around the scissors, causing our hands to touch and my body to jolt with electricity. “How about you put these down.” He takes the scissors and sets them back on the side.

“Why apologize now? Are you worried you hurt my feelings? Never fear, I knew what I signed up for.”

He runs his thumb along his chiseled jawline with a little bit of stubble, bringing my attention to his mouth that I want to kiss. “Still... I’m not sure I would have left had it not been for the fact that I needed to meet with my lawyer to finalize the paperwork to become owner of the Spinners.” My spine straightens at his admission, because that *is* a crucial meeting. He seems to notice, as he angles his head to enable his eyes to catch mine. “I had a great night.”

“Really? You only mentioned *good* in your little note on your pillow,” I say rather dryly.

Declan chuckles from my humor. “I’m not one for notes. Anyway, I’m in town and thought I would stop by.” He scans the room around him. “It smells like you. This place, I mean.”

“Flowers do tend to have a fragrance.”

His fingers glide along the countertop. “You did well here.”

“Thanks.” I stare over his shoulder and notice the old lady from the knitting club peeking into my store. “The town gossip is here. She spreads stories like wildfire but ensures they never leave the Lake Spark bubble.” I wiggle my fingers at her with a bright smile which causes her to scurry off.

“If only she knew our little secret.”

My eyes whip to Declan who has a sweltering gaze.

A brief pause floats between us. The air turns into a giddy awkwardness, but I’m not sure what I was expecting. I only know pieces of him; he’s a mystery in some way still.

“I’m staying at the Dizzy Duck...”

A smile forms on my lips. “You mentioned when you had me writing a card that apparently I’m going to send to you.”

My eyes narrow in on him, and I cross my arms over my chest. I wait for him to further explain, because I have no idea what he’s up to. I mean, there are many reasons why he mentioned where he is staying, but none of them are good for me.

“I really should apologize.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s fine. I mean, you have your protocol, and you’re the one who is a pro at these kinds of things.”

“Violet, you’re not just anyone.” He sounds near adamant.

Frustration fills me to the brim. “Yeah, I know. I’m Ford Spears’s little sister and have been branded as off-limits to any guy who plays any sport for a career.”

The corner of Declan's mouth hitches up. "That, and you are... memorable."

It's impossible trying to interpret his words without feeling a twinge of hope. But I'm going to run in circles, and I'm positive Jolly Joe's has maple pecan ice cream today that is calling my name. Untangling from my untied apron, I hang it on the hook behind me.

"So why do you have me sending you flowers with a card?"

"I haven't decided yet, but it'll be good."

My eyes go bold at his suggestion. "Trouble?"

"Maybe." He's playing coy.

I huff a breathy laugh. "I'm not going to answer to that," I say firmly.

"Yet," he adds.

"If we're done here, then I think we made our peace and can move on."

I grab my purse and circle around my counter, only to find that Declan hasn't moved an inch. In fact, he gets even more comfortable in his lean against my property, with one foot crossed over his ankle.

"We're all good for your brother's BBQ? You're not going to look at me and think of my cock inside of you?" The words flow off his talented tongue so casually.

I feel my cheeks burn. "Really, you're off the hook. We had a night of fun, it is what it is. I'm sure you've enjoyed many parties since then." I motion with my arm to the door and hold my keys with my other hand.

He propels off my counter, following my cues. "I really appreciate your attitude with all of this, especially since I haven't been to any parties since." His tone is flippant.

My eyelids flutter as I look at him with disbelief.

He hooks his finger and glides it along my cheek in passing, touching me as if he is catching a distant memory. He

smirks smugly, proud that he caught me off guard.

“You leave an impression and know the score—”

He’s hinting at something, and I scoff a sound between my stretched lips, stopping his sentence. “You’re kind of unbelievable. Gutsy, at that. Goodbye, Declan.” I walk to the door and open it, with the bell making a noise, and wait for him to get a clue.

I’m not sure how I feel about the last few minutes, nor do I particularly want to question why my thighs feel tense in a good way or why on earth the mere touch of his finger against the curve of my face still feels like it may haunt me the rest of the day.

I don’t dare look up at him as he leaves, and I think his swaggered walk out of my shop is from accomplishment.

He wants to occupy my thoughts, have a sense of hold over me, and simply feel like it’s his doing that I toss and turn later.

But the joke is on him.

Because he didn’t need to put in the effort.

I haven’t been pining over him, yet I sure as hell haven’t forgotten that I have the ability to make that man beg.

And that’s what I intend to make him do.

VIOLET

Sitting at the table overlooking the lake, I glance at my brother who is busy flipping burgers while talking to his neighbor Spencer, a retired professional baseball player. Ignoring the group of teenagers in the pool, I focus my attention on Brielle and April, Spencer's wife.

"Are you sure you're okay manning the fort while Ford and I get away for a little bit?" Brielle double-checks while she pours me some wine, because it's conveniently my favorite and makes me more agreeable.

I willingly take the glass. "Of course, I'll keep an eye on Connor and play with my little nephew Wyatt. It's only a weekend, and it's still a few weeks away." As much as my dad acts like a grandfather, his relationship with Ford is different, more fraught at times, and our mom lives in Oregon since they divorced many years ago. I'm Ford's local family, and I don't want to let him down. Not to mention Brielle, who despite having a few years on me, is the closest thing to a best friend that I have in Lake Spark. We can talk for hours.

Brielle glances radiantly down at her growing belly. "I'm a planner. Well, except for Connor." She's glowing, and her brown hair seems to get more gorgeous as the pregnancy develops, I mean, her hair even flows in the wind perfectly.

"Two kids under the age of three, plus a teenager. I don't know how you do it." April flings her blonde ponytail behind her shoulder before she chomps on a tortilla chip.

“A busy house is the way we like it, but we’re done after this one. Three boys will be plenty.” She smiles as Ford comes to stand behind her with a plate of burgers, and she affectionately touches his shirt. I can’t believe they were apart for ten years. They tried the whole co-parenting thing until they admitted that they’re meant for more.

Spencer takes his place next to April, kissing her cheek.

I feel like an extra wheel, but I have my wine glass, so that’s a plus.

“How was work? Didn’t kill the bird yet?” my brother asks as he slides a burger onto my plate.

“You know Nugget is part of the deal. Didn’t notice him much, as I was busy, but Connor stopped by.”

“I know. I love the sunflowers,” Brielle gushes.

Looking over at the pool, I point out the obvious. “Quite a boy-girl ratio happening over in the pool,” I taunt my brother and indicate with my head to the teenagers where guys are outnumbered by far.

Spencer chortles a laugh. “Don’t rile him, we just went over his master plan for being the cool dad and promising to keep the hockey team away from my daughter.” Spencer’s daughter Hadley is a few years younger than Connor and has an obvious crush.

“It will only make her want them more,” April adds.

“How about we switch topics so I can sleep tonight?” Ford suggests as he sits down. Brielle asks him something related to the kids, but I only catch the end of their exchange when he mentions that Declan will be here soon. “Now that he owns the Spinners and is adamant that they train here in Lake Spark, maybe he’ll be around more.”

I nearly choke on my wine. Declan’s name sparks warmth inside me, all because of one wild night and his surprise visit to my flower shop. But it’s this new fact that I’m learning which has me thrown off my axis.

“You okay?” Brielle attempts to rub a circle on my back.

I pat my chest while my other hand holds onto the wine glass placed on the table. “Yeah, totally, just drank a little too fast,” I assure her then focus my attention on Ford. “Around more?” I repeat, attempting to sound steady.

“Declan? He’s here this week to help with the hockey camp, but he also wants the Spinners to train here next season. I’m trying to convince him to move here,” Ford answers.

That man.

He’s in my head.

Declan didn’t mention more frequent visits to Lake Spark, only the Dizzy Duck Inn, which normally equates to temporary accommodation, as in a passing-through-town kind of thing.

I feel my face drop from the realization that this bothers me more than it should.

Meanwhile, the sound of an approaching car engine hits my ears, distracting me from my mind racing in a thousand directions. Luckily, my distraction is broken by one of Connor’s friends who is walking into the yard with his thumb hiked over his shoulder as he calls out, “Con, your parties are always unreal. Not only are the adults here like former pro athletes, but now you have a guy show up in the newest Maserati who I am sure looks like Declan Dash.” The teenager shakes his head with a grin.

Christ, of course Declan would drive a ridiculously expensive car. It fits perfectly with the image of playboy billionaire that everyone has stamped him with, and I’m still undecided on whether it’s true or not.

I notice Brielle has a strange expression while she stares at me, but I ignore it.

I’m about to be tested.

Can I look at Declan with indifference when my brother is so close?

No. I. Can. Not.

There is no sense in even trying. I have stupid butterflies in my stomach because I did the horizontal, vertical, and upside down with the guy who I'm sure I will be passing the salad bowl to in about three minutes.

"Hey, Declan," my brother greets the guest of honor.

Declan swipes his sunglasses off as he walks into the yard, surveying the scene. There are teenagers splashing in the pool again, the sun is bright but beginning to dip low in the sky, and all the adults are around the table, ready to welcome this guy.

"Hey, everyone, looks like quite a setup," Declan mentions then hands Brielle a small bag with tissue paper. "This is for the lady of the house for keeping all the Spears crew together." He gives her a side hug before giving a high five to Spencer and a nod to April. His eyes pause on me for a second, then his focus is back on Brielle who is unraveling her box of chocolates. "Got something from Jolly Joe's. Your sister-in-law convinced me not to buy from her shop."

"You saw Declan today?" my brother asks, with creases forming on his forehead.

I nod. "Yeah, didn't think it was worth mentioning." My sight zips to Declan who has a subtle smirk on his mouth. "I knew Brielle was getting flowers already," I explain.

"But you always say that a person can never have enough flowers." Ford seems confused.

"True, but—" I begin.

Declan cuts in. "Don't give her a hard time. She was closing up and busy writing a card for an important order. Between the talking parrot and her need to focus on her delivery, then I'm sure I caught her at the wrong moment. Did you get that order out?" he asks me with a hint of smugness.

"How considerate of you to ask. You know, you should try a burger. Ford seasons it with his own special spice mix." I smile and do my best to keep this conversation moving and away from myself.

"Sounds delicious," Declan replies.

Ford hands him a plate, and Declan sits down just in time for everyone to offer him something.

My nephew walks to our table, seeming to be on a break from his afternoon of friends, flirting, and swimming. “Hey, Declan.”

“There’s our future hockey star.” Declan and Connor bump fists together.

“When did you get the car? I wish Dad would go all-out.” He looks at Declan with a bit of worship in his voice.

Declan pats Connor’s arm. “First off, I can only fit one other person in that car, max. Your dad needs a good family car, and he still has a Jaguar for when he has a kid-free day.”

“Dad won’t let me drive it. I’m sure you’ll be the cool guy and let me drive your car.”

Ford scoffs, feigning hurt. “Oh my, Connor is the first kid whose parents won’t let him drive fancy cars because he only just got his license.”

“That car in our driveway isn’t even on the market yet. This is going to skyrocket my popularity at school.” Connor shakes his head then walks away, clearly annoyed that Ford isn’t taking him seriously.

Declan points his finger in the air. “And that is why having kids is not on my radar.”

“Never say never. By the way, are you still dating the model you met at some charity event?” Spencer pipes in.

“Nah, that ended like a year ago,” Declan confirms.

Brielle shakes her head. “Admittedly, I can’t keep up with your dating life, but I’m happy you’re here. Speaking of dating...” Her voice raises an octave. “Sheriff Carter completely has a thing for Violet. He asked me when you normally take a lunch break when I was at the park the other day.”

Here we go again. If the man has such interest, then he needs to make his move, as I’ve been hearing about this for months.

“Ooh, that is some high-quality Lake Spark stock, with deep connections,” April points out.

Ford raises his hand. “He has my approval.”

“She doesn’t need your approval,” Brielle says. “Now, if you will excuse me, I need to go get the ice cream out for the kids.” She begins to stand, but I quickly beat her to it.

“Relax. I’ll go, and I think if by kids you mean hormonal young adults, then yes, I know my instructions.” I salute her then leave, heading straight inside.

I need air. Which makes no sense, as I’ve been outside by the lake for a good hour, but I need air free from Declan and the word *dating*.

I don’t want confirmation that this guy has no plans to ever settle down, and I sure as hell don’t need to hear about his dating history. Nor do I want to talk about my current lack of love life with him in attendance.

When I arrive in the kitchen, I blow out a breath and take a moment, pausing with my hand on the handle of the freezer. I remind myself that I knew what I signed up for on that night with Declan; it’s like a freaking mantra in my head every time he enters my brain, which is a lot.

It was only one night.

Opening the freezer, I grab the boxes of ice cream sandwiches, and I have to smile to myself. This house is, literally, hangout central, and I don’t even want to know what Connor is going to try when his parents are away for their babymoon.

I set the boxes on the counter, then go back to grab another that was stuck in the back of the freezer. Closing the freezer door, I jump when I find Declan leaning against the counter with arms crossed.

“Came to give you a hand,” he states with a sly smirk.

Rolling my eyes, I stack the boxes. “No, you didn’t. You probably excused yourself to use the little men’s room with no

intention to do that, and instead, you came to find me. Alone, for that matter.”

“One, ‘little’ and me don’t go in the same sentence, you know that. Two, you’re right.”

My hip dips out, and I lean against the adjacent counter while our eyes meet to linger for a few good seconds. We both have wry smiles on our faces as we stew in the fact that we did something so very intimate, because no-strings or not, history is something we now have.

“What do you want, Declan?” I sigh, with my half-stretched smile not fading, and I glance out the floor-to-ceiling windows to confirm that nobody is taking notice that we’re inside.

“Did you keep the card?”

I shrug my shoulders. “It wasn’t recycling day.”

“Meet me every day this week at my hotel room.”

My eyes shoot in his direction to find that he is dead serious.

“W-what?” I stutter.

He steps slowly once, twice, I lose count, but his hands land on either side of me to trap me between the counter and his body, causing a tingle to spread through my veins.

“We can repeat last time, enjoy the connection we have, have a little fun.” His voice is low, and feeling his breath so close makes me weak in the knees.

“Ah, so this is your crazy suggestion that I should agree to?”

He threads his fingers into my hair by my ear. “A card with flowers is an extra touch, right?”

I laugh under my breath at how unbelievable he is, but at least he has me smiling. “I’ve never sent a guy flowers as a thank-you for sex. Not from me directly. I’m sure a few of my customers had me doing that. Normally, it’s the guy sending flowers, though.” I raise a brow at him.

“We don’t do conventional.” He smirks.

“No. You just proposition me inside my brother’s house, which is a bold move. He may kill you one day if he ever finds out. Speaking of which, there are like baby monitors everywhere in this place,” I whisper loudly in absolute amazement at his bravery.

Declan’s fingers tap my hips as his eyes dip low to watch. “Living dangerously doesn’t scare me.”

“Clearly.”

“What do you say, Vi? Tomorrow is Sunday, I know you’re off. The sign on your door told me.”

Geez, he’s been thinking about this all afternoon.

My mouth opens, but I’m mute.

“I’m sure you have lunch breaks where you need a little more excitement than catching up on the gossip at the general store,” he adds. “Or are you hoping for the sheriff to sweep you off your feet?”

I shake my head at the fact he was listening outside and seems to be slightly annoyed, or maybe that’s my hidden wish.

This situation he’s offering is enticing, but I’m not sure it’s wise.

Laughter from outside breaks my gaze from the man in front of me, drawing my attention over his shoulder where I notice the adults outside, all happy in their solid marriages.

Pushing Declan away, I break free and walk to the cupboard that normally is home to the heavier stuff to drink.

“Damn it,” I curse to myself when I see the shelves are empty. I forgot that Ford hides the good liquid when Connor has parties. Responsible parenting is screwing me over right now.

“You okay there?”

I hate that I can’t suppress a grin, which is why I don’t face him. “Yup.” I recall another fact that I learned today. “Is it true?”

“That I want to fuck you in my hotel room? Yes.” His tone is neutral.

My entertained smile doesn't fade. “I meant that Ford mentioned you might be in Lake Spark more often. You missed that detail earlier.”

I feel his eyes studying me. “Is that a problem?”

Could be. Makes an escape harder, and the reminder of him will always be around me.

“Not at all,” I lie.

My body trembles when I feel him step behind me, his talented fingers pressing lightly against my ass.

This man is shameless.

“What do you say?” His voice is a sweltering grovel that spreads across my skin, while he takes the opportunity to slide the strap of my dress back over my shoulder, as it fell slightly. I wish he would do that again.

Slowly turning on my toes, I face the devil that has me far too intrigued. “I think...” My tone is purposely a breathy, needy husk. “That the ice cream is going to melt.” I smirk, satisfied, and walk to the ice cream.

I notice he puffs a breath. “You're the first woman to test me like this.”

The bottle of maple syrup sitting on the counter near the olive oil catches my interest. The label has a picture of a cartoon bear wearing sunglasses, leaning against a tree. It's Declan's family's syrup. He really is unescapable.

Grabbing the boxes of ice cream, I slam them into Declan's direction for him to carry. “Make yourself useful, will you?”

“Will I be rewarded?” How does this man flirt so easily?

Walking in a slow stride past him, I poke my finger against his hard pecs. “Undecided.”

He hisses a sound. “I'll be relentless.”

“I’ll be defiant.”

Maybe a distraction and a good time is exactly what I need. I mean, my cheeks hurt from smiling so much today, despite my brain working overtime.

Declan’s jaw flexes, and then a relaxed droll grin graces his lips. “I’ll take the ice cream out.”

I nod in approval, as I need him out of here so I can steal the bottle of syrup.

Because I know exactly how I’m going to use it... when I show up to his hotel room.

DECLAN

Hitting the rewind button on the screen, I watch the replay once more. It's from the final game of the season, when Toronto lost. I pay attention to their coach—our new coach—and his reaction to the loss in the final seconds. His frustration is a little too visible for my liking; he could work on adopting a poker face. If it wasn't for his contract, then I would have him gone. I just added another bullet point to my long list of notes; I need to discuss the coach's demeanor, probably with our general manager present. I know that I should leave training and strategy to the team, but I really feel my experience as a player can bring a lot to the table.

Closing my laptop, I sigh as I look around my hotel suite. I'm going to miss playing on the ice under pressure; now I'll be the guy that watches from behind the boards. Stretching my arms, I debate what to do, as I feel restless.

That I completely blame on Violet.

Honestly, my proposition was something not even planned, but after seeing her again, a split-second decision was made. She looked at peace in her flower shop, and that cute summer dress with straps that fall off her smooth skin was a complete bonus.

Last night at the BBQ, I did my best to stay out of Violet's way after the kitchen run-in, but my eyes kept circling back to her. The way she teases Ford is hysterical, and her laugh can make even a grumpy man delirious.

I wonder if I'll see her today.

My phone vibrates on my desk, and I pick it up to see my father's name flash across the screen. That's a solid tap of the red button. I'm not in the mood to talk to him and listen to how I should invest more of my time into the Dash empire.

Rubbing my face, I know I need to get out of this place and enjoy the sunny afternoon, with fresh air to fill my lungs. Before I get a chance to make a decision, I'm interrupted by a soft knock on my door.

Excitement hits me, because even a man who never falters under pressure enjoys the idea of a woman waiting for him. Walking to the door, I open it to find an empty hallway, and my eyes travel down to the floor where I notice a card lying on the carpet.

I recognize the logo of The Flower Jar right away and quickly bend down to pick it up and read the card.

My answer is yes, Violet

My grin stretches, and I stand to scan the hallway. I know she's here because I can feel her presence, and I swear I smell damn roses. "Where are you?"

Violet steps around the corner with a subtle smirk on her lips. Her hair is down, and she's wearing another summer dress. It's baby blue, and I make no mistake that there is a strap of a matching bra peeking out on her shoulder.

"I'm here. Really shouldn't be. But I'm here." Her voice is at ease, at least.

She walks toward me, but I reach out to grab her arm and yank her through the entry, closing the door with my foot.

"Where are the flowers?" I joke.

Violet assesses the suite before circling to face me. "You said they were optional, and I think I have something better."

I step closer to her, completely invested in the fact that she showed up. "Oh yeah?"

She nods seductively then crooks her finger and invites me to follow her as she walks backward to the bed. “You’re playing a game.” She grabs hold of my shirt, right before she pushes me onto the bed. “But...” She brings one leg to the side of my waist and swings the other one around to straddle me, and instantly my guy rises to the occasion. “Games normally require two players or more.”

“More?” I croak out.

Violet chuckles and blushes. “In this case, only two.” It comes out as a playful warning while her fingertips push against my chest, inviting me to lie on my back.

I prop myself up on my elbows, wanting to get a full view of her stunning body on top of me, determined about an idea in her head.

She reaches to the side where she had thrown her purse, causing her body to stretch across me and rub friction against my cock. I breathe to keep myself grounded. Pulling a glass bottle out of her purse, my head perks up in full attention.

“Why do you have a bottle of pure maple syrup?”

Violet flashes me a playful look. “Don’t worry, I’m loyal to your family brand.”

“That I can see, but why is that here?”

She begins to drag the fabric of my shirt up my stomach to my chest, encouraging me to take action, and I swiftly pull off my shirt without her moving an inch from sitting on top of my cock.

“I remember you mentioned your fear of maple syrup.”

I chuckle, because I have no idea where she’s going with this. “And?”

She lowers her dress halfway without a thought, revealing the matching bra that caught my attention already. “You see...” She ceremoniously twists the lid off the bottle. “As much as I’m cool with your note on a pillow in swan-shaped form, and your ludicrous requests that I send you flowers, I’m not that easy.”

“Of course not,” I assure her. No, I want to do more than ease her mind; I need to get rid of any doubts that I would even put her on the same level as a puck bunny. My hands rub warmth along her thighs, and not in a sensual way but a caring manner. Before I have a chance to tell her that she can set the rules, a drizzle of sticky syrup hits my stomach.

Glancing down, my jaw drops when I realize that she just poured Grizzly Dash syrup onto my body.

“I kind of like the idea of torturing you a little,” she confesses while she tips the bottle to draw a line of syrup up to my chest.

“What in the world is in that mind of yours?” I’m already afraid of the sticky mess this is going to create. Tree sap is the glue of about ninety-nine problems, and Violet isn’t one of them.

She leans down to press her hot mouth between my ribs and peers up, flicking her tongue along my skin. “Do I lick up or down?” It doesn’t sound like a question, more of a taunt.

I groan from the agony she’s causing me. All options have me anticipating her body underneath me.

The tip of her wet tongue darts out, and she slowly licks up one stroke before moving back down. “Hmm, I love maple.” Her hum is like sex to the ears.

“Your plan is to torture me with syrup?” I close my eyes as I take in the feeling of her tongue tracing a line on my body, up and up, until I open my eyes to find our lips within kissing distance. I attempt to capture her mouth, but she only gives me her breath tracing my lips, fueling a sensitive wave of need inside of me.

“I should lick lower, shouldn’t I?” Her whisper is sultry and teasing.

“You are something, Vi.”

She pauses, and her mouth quirks up. “Nobody calls me Vi, except you.”

“Sorry, I like it. Violet is perfect for you, kind of like you were destined to do something with flowers, but Vi, it’s... like a vow that I’m not sure I should be taking.” I half-laugh.

A beautiful smile appears on her lips. “You’re distracting me from my mission.”

“Oh, sorry, please do continue spreading the goo all over my body and doing wicked things,” I encourage, only to moan when her tongue lands below my heart and slides lower.

Just watching her slither down my body has me about to break my invisible rope that I’ve tied myself in. I want to let her lead because this woman has some plans that I’m on board with.

“Still afraid of maple syrup?” she asks mid-stroke.

“Trust me, it will ruin the moment at some point. Your lips are going to be ridiculously sweet.”

She flashes me a smirk. “Which lips?”

I chuckle because every moment with her is fun. I’ve already forgotten about my last hour of mulling over life choices.

“Lower,” I plead.

She unhooks the button of my jeans and unzips my pants. “Like, this low?” Her mouth skims the rim of my boxers, and I tilt my hips up to brush my bulge against her hot mouth.

“If your plan was to make me painfully hard, then you’ve succeeded.”

A low giggle in the back of her throat has me concerned. Her tongue swirls just below my navel before she pulls away and returns to straddling me. “That’s a point for me then.” She smirks slyly before swinging her legs off the bed to stand over me. “Oh dear,” she pouts. “Declan is all sticky and hard. Such a shame that I only planned to taste the syrup.”

Holy shit.

This is her game?

“Whoa, you’re going to leave me hanging?”

She shakes her head. "I'm debating."

I'm about to hop up off the bed to take control of this situation, but I feel excess syrup running down the side of my body, and if I'm not careful then my sheets will become a mess.

"You're just going to leave?" My voice is filled with disbelief and cracks in fear.

"I guess I could leave a note on your pillow." She quirks her lips to the side.

I roll my eyes, completely taken in by her banter, but after her blatant rule-breaking, I'll gladly take my free shot when I notice a crystalized and shiny substance in her hair.

A winning grin spreads on my mouth, and I throw my arms behind my head to rest against. "You're not going anywhere."

"I'm not sure about that."

"Considering you have maple syrup in your hair, I'm fairly confident that you're staying right here."

Her fingers instantly go to her hair, and she pauses when she feels the goo. "Crap."

"See? Told you maple syrup is evil."

Grabbing my shirt from the side, I hold it to my body to avoid the floodgates of syrup spreading onto the mattress, then I stand and walk straight to her, drop the shirt, and frame her face with my hands.

She seems taken aback by my move, but positive, nonetheless.

Her lips are pink and swollen, sweet for sure. I want to kiss her, but I want to drive her crazy more.

I move to wrap my arm around her middle and pull her flush against me. Her breath catches when she feels the stickiness of my body bond to her skin.

"You're nice and messy now too," I proudly declare, and as tempting as it is to kiss her, I purposely don't.

A chortle escapes her lips. “I need a shower now.”

“By all means, go on, but I think we both need to be cleaned up, and you seem like someone who cares about the Lake Spark water supply and lack of rain this summer.”

Her forehead falls forward into the crook of my neck. “That’s one point to you.”

“So, we’re keeping score?” I confirm.

“We’ll call it a tie.” Violet steps back. “Join me in the shower?” She offers me her hand.

“I mean, if you say please.”

I’m already scooting her toward the bathroom.

THE WATER in the shower rains down, and steam is already filling the room.

We’re both quick to discard our clothes, and I appreciate that we feel familiar enough around one another that it comes easily. Violet isn’t shy, but then again, I don’t think she ever is.

I hold the shower door open for her, as any gentleman should, and she steps in first, followed by me.

“Okay, I think I understand the fear of maple syrup. I just feel all... messy.” She grabs a bottle of shampoo, and the idea of her smelling of my soap is kind of hot as hell.

“Maybe we should just go all out then and get you completely filthy,” I murmur into her hair, letting my fingertips glide along the curves of her body. She swats me playfully, and I respect that she’s keeping us grounded. “It all started with a trip to a tree farm, you know.” I begin to lather soap against my stomach.

She grimaces over her shoulder up at me. “Do tell.”

“I was seven, and my father was insistent that I attend a business meeting with him up in Canada. It just so happened to be at the tree farm where they collect sap, it’s next to one of

the hotels my father owns. There was a bucket of the stuff that was cooling after being boiled, and I'm not even sure how it happened, but I ended up with the glue all over my hands, and then I stupidly put my hands in my hair, and it just went downhill from there. Everything I touched stuck to me, and then we had to rip off things. It was traumatic."

Violet giggles. "That's it? No grizzly bear making an appearance? Just a lot of maple sap? Wow, thoroughly disappointing."

"Trust me, the memory haunts me. There was also a time when my cousin threw a can of maple syrup at me because I pushed him into a pool. Did you know the best way to store syrup is actually in a tin can, just like olive oil? Anyway, I once had a broken nose after a game with Toronto, and I kid you not, after the painkillers they gave me, I was hallucinating about that damn tree and a can."

She bursts out with another laugh. "Okay, okay, I believe you and shall never involve breakfast syrup in foreplay again." She feigns a serious tone.

I gently pull her hair in reaction before tickling her side and drawing her closer to me, with her back against my front and our slippery bodies now connected. My hand rests against her stomach, and I feel her exhale as she relaxes.

"You were a good player," she states.

"Oh yeah? You watch a lot of hockey?"

"How could I not? Even after Ford retired, his house is still hockey central."

A ping of guilt hits me that I'm lying to him. "You're very close with him."

"Yeah, I mean, Brielle is like a friend, and the kids are my nephews. I'm the peacemaker between Ford and our father, as they get along but not always. But most of all, Ford and I are there for one another. It wasn't easy when he and Brielle had Connor so young, and he was there for me when... you know, never mind. Let's not talk about him now. We're all allowed a dirty secret every now and then, so long as it doesn't hurt

anyone.” I get the sense that there is more as to how her brother has supported her, but something stopped her from explaining further.

“You’re close with your parents?” she asks.

I chuckle. “Yes and no. My mother for sure, yes, and my father, well, he likes to put on the pressure that I got my hockey career but now it’s time to take over the family business.”

“He isn’t a hockey fan?”

“At first, no. Then I went to a fancy prep school and played on the varsity team, and the school was really into hockey. Every game, the alumni would be there, and my father loved that. When I turned pro, he would attend a few games but always reminded me that it’s only one chapter to my life.”

“Huh, guess he isn’t thrilled with your latest purchase.”

I look up into the showerhead to wash my face. “Exactly.”

It’s a few moments of us in an embrace, with the sound of water filling the room, when I realize that I haven’t really shared my family situation with many, but it comes easily when it’s with her. I also recognize that I haven’t asked her a simple question, and that maybe I should.

“What made you decide to say yes?”

“I need an escape, just like that night.” Her arm raises behind her to loop around my neck, stretching her body in the process. “A repeat could be fun, and it’s not like I’m occupied with someone else.”

Planting my lips against her jawline, I slide my palm down her abs, wanting to feel her ready for me. “I’m not the kind of guy who can be much more than this,” I warn her, because our boundaries are important.

She presses against the back of my hand to encourage me to move lower, guiding me to what she wants. “You’ve made that clear, yet I’m still here.”

Maybe I should question her answer more, but it’s good enough for me.

Feeling between her apex, I find her ready, and I swirl my finger around her clit which causes her hips to roll. My teeth nip at her shoulder while I feel her pussy. It's as if we're picking up right where we left off that night.

She reaches back to grip my length and give me a stroke. I groan from her touch and become eager to touch her everywhere.

She slowly turns around, twisting our bodies, yet my fingers don't leave her pussy. I marvel at her beauty, hair soaked and droplets of water outlining her face. Leaning down, I take what I've been waiting for.

A kiss.

Hard, yet absolutely tasting of maple syrup and lust.

My tongue swipes her lips before touching her tongue, and it only sets me off because I want more and then some. When she murmurs into my mouth, I steal all the air I can, while I walk her a step back to ensure she has the wall for stability. Our foreheads touch while our mouths part, with the drizzling droplets of water the only barrier between us, and I have no qualms about what I'm about to do to her in the shower.

Kneeling down, I lick between her thighs, and she moans at first touch. Throwing her leg over my shoulder, I enjoy lapping her up and tracing her bundle of nerves with my tongue. I loved having my head between her legs that night, and I think I suppressed the craving, but it's come out with a vengeance in this moment.

Her fingers entwine in my hair as she tilts her body against my mouth, and I like that she's greedy.

"I came here to make you beg, and I'm failing," she rasps.

My tongue stills against her clit, and I pull back to look up at her with a drowsy smile on her face. "I'm on my knees, and that's close enough."

I return to my task, hungry for more, and I dip my tongue inside of her, causing her hips to buck.

"Declan," she gasps.

My name on her lips; it's praise mixed with confirmation that she's getting lost in the moment too.

Images of last time flash in my mind, which only intensifies my drive to please her. I change the pattern of my tongue against her clit, which sends her into a convulsing state against my mouth.

Peering up, I watch as she comes undone until I feel it's safe to return to standing.

Placing my arm by her head against the wall, I can't stop staring at her mouth that's home to a sleepy satisfied smile.

"Hockey, fucking me with your tongue, any other talents?" She's breathless.

I kiss the corner of her mouth because I can, even though it's far too sweet for this moment. "You'll find out."

She laughs before she reaches for my cock, but I tsk her away. "Not today, sweetheart. Your evil maple syrup episode means that you're the bad girl, and now you have to wait for what you came for."

She loops her arms around my neck. "Oh, but I did come."

My response to her witty remark is turning the water off behind her. Otherwise, I may just say hell with it and literally fuck her.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, I'm perched on the edge of the desk in my room as I watch Violet tie her wet hair into a nest on top of her head.

"What do you say? Meet me here tomorrow on your lunch break?"

She's searching for her purse now. "Right, you had this whole meet-every-day-for-a-week proposition."

"You said yes," I remind her before I tear off a piece of paper from the stationary pad and begin to fumble with it.

“I did say yes. Guarantee me a sandwich and I may even show up on time.” I enjoy her lighthearted tone.

“I’ll even throw in a bag of chips.”

“You’re trouble.”

She snags my gaze, and I toss the paper airplane that I just made—my other hidden talent being origami—in Violet’s direction, which she catches. “The best-kept secrets normally are,” I promise.

VIOLET

I hum as I scoop a spoonful of cooked rice into Nugget's bowl then place it in his cage, slightly taken aback that he doesn't seem to irritate me as much today.

The bell above the shop door informs me that someone is here.

"What in the world?" Brielle's perplexed voice causes me to look over my shoulder as I close the door to Nugget's cage.

"What?" I say before closing the container of rice that I brought from home.

Brielle sets her umbrella by the door before she walks over to lean against the counter, with her eyes never parting from my direction. "You're actually smiling while you feed the parrot."

"So?" I shrug as I walk behind the counter. I feel like my sister-in-law came to have a talk. "What brings you by on this dreary Monday morning?"

We both look out the window to see the rain pouring down. "It's supposed to be this way all week. Blah. I guess we needed the rain, and it doesn't really matter, Ford and Connor are at the ice rink all week for summer camp anyway, and something tells me that your free time is spent indoors with a certain former hockey player." She taps her nails on the counter.

My face tightens, and my eyes freeze on Brielle who isn't wasting time and going the direct route, proven by her smirk that she caught me off guard. "Oh? What would make you say

that? Nothing is going on, and with whom? So many hockey players waltz in and out of Ford's life."

Brielle continues to tap a steady beat, with her face poised with confidence. "The one who is in Lake Spark for a week and graced our dinner table over the weekend." She raises a brow at me.

"And?"

"The old lady from the knitting club saw you two a little cozy in your store, then told someone at the general store when April just so happened to be there to overhear, who then informed me before the BBQ, which naturally meant that I was observing you with my lawyer eyes, and you failed, like completely. There is totally something between you and Declan Dash."

My jaw goes slack because that's one hell of a gossip train, and yeah, she's a lawyer, so squirming out of this may be tricky.

But the reality is that nothing is going on between Declan and me. We're only having fun, and nothing will come of it.

"Nothing is happening," I half-lie and pull out my purse to grab my lip balm, only to notice the paper airplane from yesterday, and I can't control the smile that tugs on my mouth.

Brielle, who is now rubbing circles on her belly, doesn't seem to believe me; I can tell by her stoic facial expression. "Look, say what you want, but if anything, whether serious, fun, or who knows what is brewing between you and Declan, then just know that Ford will lose his cool. He's seen every shitty choice his former teammates have made, and as much as Declan is a friend, it only means that Ford is even more critical of him when it comes to women. No, not even, when it comes to *you*."

"Like I said, nothing to worry about. Does Ford think something is going on?"

Brielle scoffs a laugh. "Please, it was the weekend, and we have a sixteen-year-old. His mind was occupied with that, so you're fine."

“You know, even if I was, you know, well, I’m allowed to have a little... fun,” I justify.

“Of course you are, but not with your brother’s friend. When it goes wrong, then it *really* goes wrong. Plus...” She reaches out to touch my hand on the counter. “You deserve a hell of a love story, not some guy who will make you laugh but never commit. Violet, you can keep telling me that life is great, but I know that’s not true. Something is missing for you. Your mom never played a big role in your life, but you made peace with that long ago, probably because you have family here who adore you and need you. But I know you want to *experience* romance and family for yourself. You used to tell me about the husband and kids you want one day. After...”

I close my eyes because I don’t want to hear her reminder of a disaster from not long ago. It’s hard to accept that I have an absent mom and I bury myself into my brother’s family. I’m watching everything that I want on a daily basis.

She licks her lips and takes a beat. “Since the..., you throw on a smile, but I think you believe you don’t deserve more.” Thankfully, she doesn’t repeat the memory that I don’t need today. Instead, she squeezes my hand for comfort. “One day you will realize, and I’m not sure Declan is the guy who would hold your hand and walk you into that happy ever after you’ve dreamed about.”

Abruptly, I pull my hand away. “Geez, Brielle, you didn’t even bring me a coffee from Jolly Joe’s for this deep conversation.” I roll my eyes.

“Want to send the pregnant lady out in the rain to go grab your coffee and a cinnamon roll so you’ll listen?” She grins.

I cross my arms and pretend to be annoyed. “I mean, let’s not get dramatic. You’re probably on your way there anyhow.”

“I am. Why don’t you join me. Don’t you have a lunch break soon?”

I smile awkwardly. “I do, but I have an appointment at one. Tilly is coming in to help this afternoon and will handle this place for an hour or so.”

Brielle narrows her eyes in on me. “Appointment?”

“Yes. I need to deliver some flowers to the Dizzy Duck.”

She scans the room. “Strange. I don’t see any flowers ready for delivery.”

“I still need to make the bouquet,” I lie.

Brielle looks at her watch. “It’s already 12:40.”

For fuck’s sake.

I throw on a fake smile and walk to the middle of my store and pull out a few flowers. “Making it now.”

“Sure you are,” she says, playing along.

With a sharp movement, I pull out a lily from one of the buckets on the floor. “I’d better get moving on this.”

“You do that then, and just remember, fun is fun until either someone catches feelings or Ford discovers that your constant smile today is due to Declan.”

“It’s all fine because nothing is going on,” I call out in an attempt to deter her thoughts once more, knowing it’s pointless, but I felt a need to try.

I SLAM the bouquet of flowers that don’t even match into Declan’s hard chest the moment he opens the hotel room door.

“Don’t get excited, I was trapped and had to make a bouquet to survive, and I’m not wasting flowers,” I explain, and my eyes instantly land on the trays of food sitting on the table by the window in his suite.

Even though I beeline it to the food, I sure as hell notice that the man looks good in jeans and a t-shirt, and his jaw is more defined since he doesn’t seem to have shaved today.

“Trust me, my entire body is riveted with excitement for these flowers,” he says sarcastically as he closes the door. He

sets the flowers on the desk and walks to the table. “You’re late.” He grins.

I’m already sitting down and examining what food we have. “Sorry, Brielle wanted to remind me that life can be puppies, babies, and sunshine.” Looking up, I see that Declan has a confused expression on his face, as he should. “Ignore me. I’m late and starving.”

He indicates for me to lift the cover of the tray, and I do so eagerly to find a burger and fries. “Figured you’ll burn a ton of calories, so I’d better go all out.”

A fry lands in my mouth and tastes heavenly. “I totally skipped breakfast this morning by accident. A bride was waiting at my door because she was eloping at the courthouse and forgot about flowers, then Brielle came by, and hell, I’m not even sure I’m caffeinated today.” I shake the ketchup bottle because hunger is taking over my words and body.

“I’m a little scared what Monday-you looks like on coffee now.” Declan sits down in front of me and removes the cover on his plate and reveals a BLT sandwich. “It’s okay, I need to eat too. I’m training a group of ten-year-olds at 2:30, and something tells me that I need energy for that. I need a relaxing de-stressor too, but I think that’s why you’re here.”

I throw a fry at him, but I can’t help but beam at his humor. “I think you kind of enjoy helping at camp. Is it the first time that you’re on the ice since the season ended?”

His face turns soft as he pauses for a moment. “I guess it is. It’s slightly different, but maybe I didn’t notice since playing hockey comes naturally.” Declan flexes his jaw side to side and seems to be at peace with his realization.

“Kind of cool that you get to do something else with hockey now.”

“I think everyone is waiting for me to fail.” He laughs.

I take a break from chomping on my food and study him for a second. “Curse of a family name or...?”

“Nobody wants the rich guy to succeed. In truth, the whole owning-a-hockey-team thing leaves a lot of room for error.

I'm not used to all these business meetings. It's kind of a relief this week being in Lake Spark and back on the ice."

I prop my head in my hand and appreciate his honesty on the topic. He notices that I'm staring, and his lips twist. "I feel like hockey players take on projects once they retire. When Ford retired, it was full-on Operation Win Back Brielle, and then family and the sports complex, it all keeps him busy. I guess owning a hockey team is your project?" I flash him an odd look. Partly because, for some reason deep within, it doesn't feel like he is convinced of his next chapter.

A sound escapes him, and our eyes lock for a thick moment. "You maybe have a point. It's going to be hard not to bring up Ford in conversation, isn't it?"

"Probably." I sigh.

"How did you end up as a florist?" Declan asks before grabbing a bottle of water.

I set my burger down, no qualms that I can eat like it's a night at home chillaxing. "After college, I wanted to start a business, and I've always loved flowers. I was never great at sports, but I did join a sorority, which might be the reasoning for some of my tendencies." I tilt my head to the side in contemplation.

"That's how you know Charlotte? From your sorority?" He looks at me, purely entertained.

"For sure. Anyway, despite the epic Friday-night parties, we had quite a lot of rules, including a promise to volunteer in the community. I volunteered to be a big sister to a girl in high school, Phoebe. She has Down Syndrome, and she loves flowers—tulips, in particular. Our weekly meetings were always at the botanical gardens, visiting florists, or planting flowers at her house. Her family moved to Vermont, but every year, I send her tulip bulbs to plant so in the spring she has them blooming. So anyway, after college and one business loan with Ford's help later, I put down roots here in Lake Spark."

Declan leans back in his chair, with his eyes surveying me, up and down, but in a way that feels almost captivated, and it sends a wave of warmth through me. I guess I forgot what it feels like to be the object of someone's sole attention; I'm always the one there for everyone else.

"I'm trying to figure out your flaw. Everything you say makes it difficult for me to believe that you have any, except we all have one."

I sigh. "Trust me, we all have cracks, even if you don't see them." I look away because I can't handle his eyes on me, maybe because now I feel that he is watching me closer.

"You're right. Just sometimes we manage to keep it to ourselves." His voice is gentle almost, and I swear I hear vulnerability, or maybe I wish for it because then I would feel even in this conversation.

"I'm pretty sure that I didn't come here for a burger and small talk." I smile nervously because it's best if I attempt to move us on to other matters.

"You're right. Stand up." I'm surprised how his tone switched to an order. Returning my gaze to him, I'm faced with his determination.

Wiping my hands quickly with the napkin, I stand up, very much aware that this man has no problem with dominance, but the playful smirk on the corner of his mouth is inviting and relaxed.

I slowly walk a few steps then plop myself onto the edge of the bed, sitting up straight like a polite woman would. "I believe you mentioned something about de-stressing." My eyes drift down to my finger where I'm tracing the lines of the duvet pattern. Nonetheless, I sense Declan vacate his chair, causing my chest to flutter.

The mattress dips when he sits down next to me, and when his hand lands on my thigh, I nearly shiver from his touch. An unbearable aching ignites between my legs, and I feel my nipples tighten. All of this because he placed his hand on my oh, so sensitive inner thigh.

My breath catches when I feel the pads of his fingers slide up my skin, taunting me of his impending touch between my legs.

Declan leans in to whisper near the shell of my ear. “Do you want to know a secret, Vi?”

“Yes.” My breath feels heavy.

“All morning, you’ve been on my mind and how I want to touch you. I’m trying to be a good guy and let you have your lunch, but I don’t want to be the good guy anymore.” Declan’s lips trail down my neck until he finds my collarbone that he traces with his tongue.

“Never be the good guy around me.” My voice is filled with lust that I didn’t realize could be so overpowering.

His head tilts up, and our lips meet for a slow kiss. An instant sizzle that sets off fireworks inside of me. Nothing is enough right now. I need more of his mouth, more of his hands. I need him to take me the way he’s been thinking about since that night.

Our bodies tangle when he guides my leg to prop over his lap. His tongue is a delicious assault to my senses as he swipes gently the tip of my tongue.

We fall back onto the mattress, and our bodies curve against one another as we’re trying to feel everything at once.

“Clothes off,” I manage to say between kisses.

I’m searching for the straps of my dress that are midway down my arms now. I can’t see because I refuse to let our mouths part.

Declan reaches between us to fumble with his zipper.

But just as we’re about to remove all our barriers, a phone goes off.

“Ignore it,” I plead and struggle to drag my lips away enough to speak.

“Not my phone,” he mumbles into my mouth.

Shit.

I groan and reluctantly pull away. As much as I wish I could ignore it, I can't. It's still a workday, and I told Tilly to call if it was urgent.

Grabbing the phone from my bag, I quickly answer while I look down at Declan who has no plans on moving an inch. "Hey, Tilly." I sound almost out of breath. She answers on the other end and explains the issue that someone phoned in an order because they forgot their wife's fiftieth birthday party. "Yeah, no. I mean, I'll be there as soon as I can. Give me fifteen minutes. Just grab a bunch of dahlias for now. Okay? See you soon."

The moment I end my call, Declan is patting the mattress and inviting me back.

I throw on an over-the-top pout. "Sorry. I have to go. A last-minute order came in, and it's a big one. Need to go save some husband after he forgot his wife's surprise birthday party."

Declan blows out a big breath, and he returns to sitting. "Work of a superhero."

I begin to straighten my dress, severely disappointed in this change of events. "Raincheck?"

"Same time tomorrow?" he suggests.

I nod and rise from the bed. "I'll even come caffeinated and fed so we can skip to the good part."

Declan grins as he slides off the bed and approaches me, placing his hands on my shoulders, with his eyes so damn charming. "I think I like you wolfing down a burger and not afraid to ask questions."

"I have a hundred more."

"And I think I do too." He leans down to capture my mouth for a quick kiss, a sweet parting. "See you tomorrow."

I smile softly at him before I head to the door. "Maybe I'll send you a picture later. An apology for leaving."

"Wouldn't complain. But you don't owe me an apology. I left a note on the pillow, remember?"

I laugh to myself. “And I’m leaving you with a monster hard-on.”

“Call us even.”

I hold the door open as I look back at him. His head is low, and he wipes his hand across his jaw. His sexual frustration just makes him ten times hotter. “Hey, Dec.”

He looks up with bright blue eyes. “Yeah?”

“You said earlier that everyone is waiting for you to fail.” His head perks back slightly at my words. “I don’t think you’ll fail.”

He seems taken aback by my words. “Why do you do that?”

“What?”

“Say things that are actually sincere.”

I slant a shoulder up to my ear. “Why do you say things that remind me I can have the time of my life?”

“Because I’m selfish, and you haven’t left my mind since that night.” His blunt answer lingers in my mind for the rest of the day.

DECLAN

I hook my hands under the arms of an eight-year-old who just fell on the ice. As soon as he is up on two feet, he's gliding away from me as if nothing happened. That's pretty much what kids do, bounce back. Or at least, that's what I've noticed the last two days of helping at the kids' summer camp.

They skate around without a care in the world, and I'm kind of jealous. Being stuck in the crossroads of your life isn't exactly a clear-minded experience.

Skating to the boards, I watch as the group of mostly boys skates around to warm up. I don't have a clear plan about what I'll teach them today, but I feel like taking shots at the net is a basic good start.

"Don't forget that lunch is at one," Connor reminds me from off the ice. I glance at him and see that he's busy surveying his to-do list on his tablet. To my surprise, Ford didn't have to rope Connor into being a camp coordinator; he volunteered. Of course, he negotiated his hourly wage, so it's not exactly volunteering.

"Lunch?" I cock a brow.

He looks at me as if I'm crazy. "Yeah, with the kids. Some days you can do your own thing to have a break, but today is team building, so enjoy your peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, or cheese sandwich if you have a peanut allergy. If you really feel like you want to live it up, then have a juice box too." His tone is mundane.

I rub the back of my neck and blow out a breath. I forgot, and I was kind of looking forward to lunch with Violet. Now I'll have to find a new time and wait even longer to see her.

“Not a problem,” I lie. “Okay, make sure they're all lined up in five minutes. You should get your skates on, I want your help this morning,” I tell him.

Connor looks up from the screen. “Really? You want my help?”

“Isn't that why you're here, Mr. Varsity Hockey Player?” I flash him a grin, as I can tell my request is boosting his ego a bit. In truth, he has talent, and he's going places. I feel confident enough to give him a little responsibility.

“Okay, I'll be right back.”

I nod my head, and I quickly step off the ice to grab my phone from my bag. Quickly, I scroll down my contacts, then touch the screen to type.

ME

How caffeinated are you today? I won't be able to escape for lunch. What about room service at dinner time?

The moment I hit send, I realize that a dinner time slot is slightly risky. It leaves a gray area about what to do for the night—stay or go. It's the ambiguous no-man's land of fuck-buddy protocol. She sees the message instantly, and the dots move.

VIOLET

Oh, dinner...

Huh, she must be thinking it too.

I guess it could work.

7?

Sure.

Alright, see you then. Slightly disappointed I never got a photo...

I throw in a crying emoji.

I had no free hands...

I chortle a laugh and quickly look around to check that nobody is taking notice of me.

I can help you later.

How courteous. ;)

Have to go teach these kids, but I'll see you later, if that bird doesn't get to you first...

Good luck! And if Nugget hasn't killed me by now, then I think we're safe.

I smile to myself and place my phone back in the bag. Violet is someone who I think, when all is said and done, after our little round of weeklong fun ends, that she could be a friend. It's easy to talk to her, never makes me feel a need to impress, and she's funny. The drop-dead-gorgeous factor can't be denied either.

Only this week, I remind myself.

I don't do relationships. Hell, I can't even figure out what makes me happy careerwise right now, but if I ever did a relationship, then I suppose I would want the woman to be exactly like Violet. I guess her future husband will be one lucky man. The idea of her with someone else causes a sour feeling in my stomach, but I can't think for too long.

Connor returns and sits on the bench to remove the skate guards.

"We're going to do two lines. I need your help keeping the kids in order. After everyone has a turn, then we need to collect the pucks and do another round. I don't want too many pucks lying around on the ice, it's too much of a hazard with the kids," I explain.

“Sure.”

Connor heads out onto the ice, but as I begin to move, I hear Ford call my name. I smile when I see him walking down the stairs.

“Go ahead and start, you got this,” I call out to Connor.

“Putting my son to good use?” Ford grins before leaning against the boards.

“Absolutely. What has you in a good mood?” I wonder, as he seems happy today. Then again, Ford is normally very content these days.

Ford glances out onto the ice then back to me. “I was getting my coffee from Jolly Joe’s. Remember the place where they put jellybeans in your coffee, and you never know which color you’ll get?”

I wince from the idea of it, sounds disgusting.

“Anyway, the local real estate agent mentioned that this one house is going up on the market soon. If you’re interested, then she can get you in before it hits the market.”

“Why would I do that?” I play, entertained.

He slaps a hand against my shoulder. “Because if you are serious about the Spinners training here, then the Dizzy Duck Inn just won’t do. Besides, doesn’t the idea of fresh air and a lake house sound like a nice little escape?”

My brows bounce because he isn’t wrong. “Send me the number of the agent, and I’ll consider it.”

“Great. You know Violet was a city girl until she moved here, and I think it’s been great for her. A different scene completely changed her life. I mean, I’m sure having people she knows around helps. But you know people here.”

There is something about his sentence that piques my interest. “Why did she need a change of scene?”

Ford scratches his cheek. “Everyone has a rough patch at some point. I guess I never told you about her car accident.”

Immediately, I'm invested to learn more. "No, what accident?"

Ford waves me off. "It's a long story, but she's fine now." He indicates with his head to the group on the ice. "Connor may need some help. He's outnumbered, and those eight-year-olds are circling him. Time to go awe them."

I'm uneasy now. I want to discover what Violet never mentioned. In a feral sort of way, I feel responsible to know all her secrets, considering I am one of them.

But now isn't the moment for me to play detective. Thankfully, I'll see her tonight.

VIOLET SHAKES out her hair as she steps into my room. "It's pouring out there."

"Luckily, I have no plans of leaving these four walls," I tell her as I help her out of her rain poncho which has parrots on it. That's what I like about her, she brings humor to everything, including the things she hates. "I didn't order room service yet, wasn't sure what you would want to eat. No joke, I ate peanut butter and jelly for lunch."

"Grape or strawberry jelly?" she interrogates.

I scoff a sound. "Grape, of course. To be honest, I forgot how much I missed such a classic sandwich."

She giggles and walks to the table to grab the menu, taking notice of the paper crane I made while I waited for her. "They actually have a really good plate of nachos here. The steak is good too—oh, and the pumpkin tortellini is to die for."

"Just order a few things." I walk to the mini fridge to grab a beer, and I hold up the bottle of wine, but she shakes her head.

"I drove here, and it's raining. And staying the night is kind of out of the boundaries." She clicks the inside of her cheek.

I grin at her logic, because I was wondering if she picked up on the obstacle of a dinner meet-up, but once again, she is making this too easy for me.

She closes the menu. “Okay, you will be ordering us nachos and two steaks.”

“I’m ordering?” I walk to her and grab the menu from her.

Violet pokes a finger into my chest. “Yes, because I already snuck my way up here to avoid Ted at reception. The last thing I need is someone recognizing my voice then starting the Lake Spark gossip train.” She holds her finger up into the air. “Gotta love our little Lake Spark bubble.”

“I guess. But lucky us, the inn went digital, and we can order via the TV.” She gives me an unimpressed pout. “Which I’m excellent at using, so I will handle that order right now,” I assure her, and her smile returns.

Two minutes later, we have food ordered and an ETA of forty-five minutes.

“Whatever shall we do while we wait?” Violet’s tone is flippant as she begins to unbutton her blouse. The view sends a spiral of heat straight to my dick.

My voice lowers, and I step closer to her. “Getting you on your knees is an idea. Just throwing out options.”

Violet’s eyes dance as she tips her chin up. Instantly, I hook my finger under her jaw to bring her lips to mine.

Relief fills me, because apparently the craving to kiss her all day was of a higher magnitude than I realized.

It’s the way she whimpers into my mouth because our lips refuse to part. Better yet, it’s her murmur when our tongues untangle for a second, while she drapes her arms over my shoulders and my hands frame her hips, pulling her tight to me. I like it all.

We fall back onto the bed, and I yank down the blouse, stealing a glimpse of her purple bra in the process. Fucking lace.

I’m far too fortunate.

She begins to tug on the bottom of my t-shirt. “Was my mouth on your cock an option too?” she purrs.

Extremely fortunate.

“Absolutely, but I’ve been dying to fuck your pussy for far too long. Maybe a quick round?” I toss her over my lap to ensure she’s straddling me. I want her to feel my hard dick thrusting between her legs.

But in a split second, the beautiful glint in her eyes entraps me, and suddenly, everything Ford said earlier runs through my brain.

The confident woman on top of me has a past, a puzzle piece that I want to find, when I have no right to.

Her face and movement still when she notices that I’m surveying her more intently, causing her eyes to narrow. “You okay?” she whispers.

An audible exhale escapes me because I don’t recognize this version of myself. Sex always comes first, except in this moment.

I pull her down to me for an embrace and tuck her head under my chin. “I need to ask you something.”

She retreats slightly and our eyes meet, hers fueled with concern. “What?”

“Ford mentioned something today about your accident.”

Instantly, she crawls off me and stands, my body feeling the loss of her, and an inkling inside of me is desperate to get her back in my arms.

“My brother has a big mouth.” She crosses her arms and appears very agitated; her nostrils even flare slightly.

I sit up, and the distance is just right that I can wrap my arms around her legs to force her to step forward. I peer up to her, resting my chin on her belly. “I don’t know. Does he? I don’t know what happened.”

Violet doesn’t seem to want to look at me, but I can see she’s visibly annoyed, and I feel bad that it’s my doing.

“I’m sorry, maybe it’s not my place to ask.” But I’m desperate for an answer, because I’m now too intrigued.

I run my hands along the sides of her body, tracing the curve of her ass, before wrapping around her again so she has no chance to escape.

But she does, because she squirms out of my hold and flops onto her back on the mattress like a starfish, which isn’t half bad, because now I can just lie on my side and stare down at her.

“You want to know what happened?” She stares at the ceiling. “I destroy things. That’s what I do.”

My fingers find her loose hair, and I tuck it behind her ear. She doesn’t flinch, but I can’t seem to not touch her when she’s around me. “I doubt you destroy things.”

Her head turns sharply in my direction. “I was in an accident, with my ex. It was a few years ago. We were having an argument, and he ran a red light. Physically, everyone survived, except I had a broken rib and a few stitches from glass cutting me.”

“Shit, sounds a bit more than a normal car accident.”

I hear the longest sigh of my life escape her lips. “Well, the injuries were kind of the least of my problems. I discovered that I was the other woman.”

My brows knit together as I try to understand. “What do you mean?”

“After the accident, I discovered he had a wife with a baby. The hospital phoned his emergency contact. I swear I didn’t know. There wasn’t even one sign. I met him when he just moved to the city for his new job. Apparently, it turned out his family was still back in Atlanta.”

I cringe for her. “Ouch.”

“I’m a horrible person. I played a role in destroying a child’s family.”

“You had no idea. It’s the asshole’s doing, not yours.”

Violet laughs without humor. “That’s what Ford said. My mom and I barely talk, my dad is fine with me but he sometimes lacks emotion. Ford is... Ford. My brother who is more than a brother, he fills in for what my parents lack. Which is why he was the one I called, and he met me at the hospital. If you ever wanted to see him ready to kill, then that was it. Which is why I’m thankful that he doesn’t know what we’re doing.”

I bite my inner cheek and tense slightly, but it soon passes. “Don’t let the asshole prevent you from moving on.”

“It’s not that I’m not open to dating, Dec. It’s more that I currently enjoy knowing the clear lines of what to expect, less likely to lead to a surprise.”

“Ah, you mean that party. You obviously enjoy sex but don’t want to deal with the thought of getting hurt again.”

She seems to ease. “Exactly. Just like this week, we have a deadline.”

My finger grazes the skin around her navel. “Now I understand why you seem very comfortable with all the situations we find ourselves in.”

Her lips quirk out, and it’s freaking cute. “What about you? What could have possibly happened to make you so opposed to relationships?”

I lie back and bring my arms behind my head. “Easy. Nobody has given me a reason to believe that a relationship worthy of more is possible.”

“That’s called, you haven’t found the one. You never got close to feeling like maybe that person is more than a friend with benefits?”

“Not entirely. I dated someone for a few months a couple of years back. It wasn’t serious but more than benefits, I guess,” I admit for the first time.

It grabs her interest, and now she’s the one lying on her side to watch me. “What happened?”

“I discovered her hidden stockpile of birth control that she swore she was taking, and a lie like that is something you can’t come back from. Trust is a big thing.” Wow, I never realized I was keeping that in, and it feels damn good to have told someone else.

“That is bad. I couldn’t agree more. Trust is everything.” Violet grips the front of my shirt and yanks me, causing me to move until I’m hovering over her. “Look at us then. Two hopeless souls,” she whispers.

“Nah, you still believe in love. Why else would you help people romance through flowers?”

The lines of her mouth stretch into a wry smile. “I never said I don’t believe in love. I’m just on a temporary break from pursuing it.”

I kiss her along her ribs once. “Thank fuck for that. You showed up to a party and ended up with me.”

She hums while she licks her lips, and her eyes gawk at me. “Trust. Tell me the truth...” She’s waiting for me, and I think I know what she’s insinuating, but I’m not 100% sure. “How involved was fate that we ended up with one another’s name?”

A deep chuckle rumbles in the back of my throat. Ah yes, I was wondering if she would ever ask. “Did I rig the magic of the bowls?”

Violet nods once, with the tip of her tongue darting out to the corner of her mouth, and she looks delicious.

“I didn’t know you would be at the party, obviously. I can’t confirm it, but as much as rules are rules, Brent is the one who pulled the names, and he knew that I might have had my eye on you...”

She laughs softly and tips her pelvis up against me. “A secret wink, folding the paper a certain way, the options are endless. Let’s just leave it at that and focus on reliving what we did after our names ended up together.”

I smirk at her suggestion and back off slightly to give myself room to sneak up her skirt and grip her panties. “Then

we better get these off right now.”

Because I won't let her leave until after I've buried deep inside of her.

VIOLET

Declan's expression is hungry and determined. The moment he tosses the flimsy fabric from his fingers, he's slowly crawling over me, causing the heat of his body to spread along my skin.

My entire body pulses from anticipation, only intensified when he kisses my lips for a long firm kiss before backing up. "Naked. Now."

Quickly, I discard all my remaining clothes while he works his shirt off.

"Tell me that you've been thinking about my cock inside of you all day." He coaxes my thighs open with his hand, and he slips his fingers along my pussy that is soaking for him. "I think you have, and I want to hear you say it." His sly smirk is nearly proud that he is responsible for my body's reaction.

"I have, and I'm disappointed that it's taken this long for you to fuck me again."

He growls, rubbing my arousal around my clit, and embarrassingly, I know I won't last long.

Scooting back, he looks down at me, his eyes pinned to my center, and he quickly decides what to do by using his hands to part my thighs wider, but I can't help but notice his tongue darts out to lick a line across his bottom lip.

I'm completely exposed, but it only turns me on more.

"Remember that night? Your heels stayed on, and I watched you. Do it right now, touch this soaking pussy in front

of me.” Declan’s tone is purely demanding.

Without hesitation, I slide my fingers down my flat belly to touch myself. Nobody has watched me with as much intensity as he does. Gliding between my lips, my eyes hood closed as I sink into my own pleasure.

“Open your eyes, Vi. I need you to look at me while I watch.”

I bite my lip because he won’t let me take the easy way out. Forced to view the way he watches me while I touch myself adds a layer of pleasure, although it should make me self-conscious.

My toes dig into the bed, my lips roll in, and I open my eyes to be greeted by his gaze fixed on my pussy.

Slipping one finger inside of myself, he hisses in approval.

“Are you just going to watch?” My voice is sultry, a version of myself that I don’t quite recognize, but I like challenging him.

I’m near a ledge, and Declan picks up on this, which causes him to take hold of my wrist, stopping me.

I’m left balancing on the edge while he brings my fingers to his mouth and sucks with a groan. His breath makes me eager to insist he moves between my legs.

“To hell with dinner. You taste good, and I intend on getting my fill. Are you this wet because you know that tonight your pussy is all mine?”

This man’s mouth, gah! A dirty mouth suits him.

Words don’t escape my lips, especially when his knuckles outline my pelvic bone.

“Hmm, so many options of how to make you come.” My body curves into his touch, seeking more. “I should make you wait, it will make your orgasm better.” His fingers move to my nipples, and he twists both while my hands work his buckle that he finally lets me handle. “Is there any part of your body that isn’t gorgeous?”

I'm on fire, the sensitivity of my nipples sending a tight coil straight to my pussy.

"Please." The breathy plea escapes me.

Declan smirks, leans down, and captures one nipple into his mouth to suck and toy between his teeth.

"I like when you beg. You'll do that a lot tonight," he says against my skin.

I nod like a wanton woman overcome with desire.

He removes his pants and boxer briefs, and his cock stands at full attention. I enjoy watching him prepare himself to take me, with his hand gripping his cock for a few strokes while he grabs a condom from his wallet.

"But begging waits. This round we do quick; next round, not a fucking chance," he grits out while he slides the condom on.

Without any grace, he hooks under my knees to spread me out. "You're going to wrap these legs around me while I take you deep and hard. I know you can handle it." He slides his cock between my arousal and circles my clit, dragging his tip down to goad me, and I whimper in agony because I'm impatient and aching for him to be inside of me. I do my best to move under him to bring him within me. "Someone is needy for my cock. Want me to slide right into you?"

"Yes," I gasp, as I'm about to lose my patience.

He enters me, just the tip and retreats right back out. "Vi, you feel tight and so damn ready." He slides his cock back in and unapologetically thrusts deeper inside of me.

We grunt and moan together from the impact of his movement, and it only intensifies as he keeps his promise.

Fast. Hard. Mind-blowing.

NOT EVEN A MINUTE after collapsing from our orgasm, room service arrived. We had perfect timing, and I disappeared into the bathroom, as I was naked and wanted to clean up. Now, I wrap the terrycloth robe around my body and exit the bathroom to find we're alone, with dinner now set on the table.

I take an extra moment to admire how Declan looks like a man who threw his clothes on, with his hair slightly ruffled, but he wears the just-fucked look well.

He walks to me and runs his fingers into my hair. "Eat quick. We have round two to get to." His voice is gruff and laced with a sweltering request.

"Trust me, you will want to savor every bite of those nachos." I tow him along by gently holding the tips of his fingers.

We find ourselves, again, at a table with food. Dining out in public isn't really an option considering our dynamic, and to be honest, after what just went down, I'm not sure I would want everyone in public to see my glow. We both seem too obvious.

"Okay, you're right. The cheese is melted just right on this," he tells me mid-bite.

"How was the rink today?" I grab a chip.

He looks up at me and rolls his tongue along his inner cheek. "It was actually fun. Kids aren't afraid to be blunt, but it's kind of nice to see a bunch of little eyes staring at you like you can do no wrong."

"Maybe you picked the wrong career path and coaching kids is really your calling."

He chortles a laugh. "Nah, I don't have the energy for that. I need a little more... power struggle on the ice."

My face must turn cherry red because of his words; the only thing that my brain seems to connect is an obvious parallel. "You like power, huh." It's most definitely more of an observation than a question.

Declan narrows his gaze on me until it feels like a piercing sword, and that damn droll smirk returns. “It’s a good thing to have. Something you care to share?”

“Well...” I steeple my hands on the table and sit straight, as if I’m behind a desk. “You felt the need to own a team, and if I recall that night, someone was leading, and it wasn’t me. No complaints.” I smile shyly and avoid looking at him, but I can’t control it, and my smile stretches and stretches until I nearly laugh.

“Okay, someone has another idea in their dirty little mind.” He’s amused.

Clearing my throat, I know I will spit it out even though I shouldn’t. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve had a dominant/submissive relationship with someone.”

Now I have to watch him because it feels like the air evaporated from the room. The smile on his face disappears, and his eyes turn dark with a seriousness. For a few moments, he is lost in thought, and I can’t figure out where his head is at.

He scoffs a sound before he abruptly stands up and circles around the table, and as if I’m weightless, he shifts my chair while I’m in it. His thumb lands on my bottom lip, and he drags my lip side to side.

I’m speechless because he has me completely entranced.

“You think you’ve figured me out. Is that what you want, Vi? To be always ready to go on your knees when I demand it?”

Holy fuck, his tone is pure authority mixed with confidence.

And for a reason I’m not quite sure, my body instantly agrees, with my head nodding once, while he dips his thumb into my mouth, encouraging me to suck.

“You would only ever come when I let you, and I would spank you when I want.”

I’m mesmerized.

“Call you my good girl when we both know that you’re anything but.”

I gulp while my clit throbs, and at this moment, I will agree to anything if it means he touches me more right now. My entire body, down to my toes, craves this man.

His thumb pops out of my mouth, and he unzips his jeans, lowering them slowly as my eyes glue to his movement, and when his cock becomes free, his solid length is directly in front of my eyes, and my mouth salivates.

“Be a good girl right now and open that filthy mouth of yours,” he husks, and with his free hand, he gently grabs the back of my head, pulling my hair to guide my mouth to his cock. He stops for one moment to search my eyes for consent, and I softly nod before he leads me to his cock.

I dart out my tongue and lick his tip.

“Suck,” he demands.

I bring him deeper into my mouth, drawing with my tongue along his entire length, letting him lead when he pushes farther into my mouth until he reaches that sensitive part that warns us of my limit.

I peer up for approval, and the corner of his mouth tilts, while he brings his thumb to glide along my cheek, an almost caring gesture.

“You’re beautiful with my cock in your mouth.”

His words cause me to bob more, my mouth watering, and I have an overwhelming urge to bring my fingers between my legs for relief as I feel my upper thighs get messy.

I attempt to lower my free hand, but Declan ends that sentiment quickly by grabbing my wrist and holding me firm.

“I didn’t say you could, and you didn’t ask for permission.”

Oh yeah, he’s trying to prove a point.

I moan with a full mouth, but I’m mixed with emotion. It feels good to please someone, but I’m miserable that my clit is

going untouched.

Without notice, Declan pulls me off his cock and holds my hair to force me to look up at him.

“To answer your question, you are perfect sub material...”

I blink because I think he’s about to, well, I’m not sure, but my heart is beating extremely fast.

“But I’m not your dom.” A disappointment pings at me, and that’s a surprise, but so are his next words. “I’m nobody’s dom.” A sound escapes his lips, but his eyes don’t leave me; he’s staring at my swollen mouth. “As much I do like the idea of that lifestyle, have respect for anyone who can handle it, but it requires trust, patience, and most of all, time. There are rules, and you’re in a sort of relationship. It’s not for me.” His head tilts slightly to the side. “...At this moment.”

“Oh.” My breathy answer is the only word that I manage to say, and it’s not even a word of substance.

Declan leans down so our eyes are aligned. “It’s extremely hot that you’re open to a lot of things.” He begins to untie my robe to reveal my naked body. “By all means, we can try a few things over the next few days, if that’s what you want.”

“I...” What am I trying to say? “It’s not that I’m into it, I just... really thought if either of us had done that, then it’s you.”

A sinister chuckle escapes him. “Maybe one day. But right now, I need to fuck you again, because I’m still painfully hard, and I know you’re wet and eager.” He opens the flaps of my robe, and I’m splayed out naked, with the fabric hanging off my arms. “How about you ride me until I’m about to come, and then I come all over your beautiful ass that’s red from the spanking I give you.”

His hands travel down my body, spreading goosebumps across my skin.

“Yes, sir.”

I giggle as he pulls me up out of the chair and takes us straight to the bed.

I KICK away Declan's foot as he tries to keep his leg over me to entrap me, but as tempting as this warm bed is, I know better and should head home soon. But one minute more won't cause any harm, I'm sure.

His arm adjusts around me as I lie with my head on the pillow.

"I think we can agree that we need to recover now," I say.

"Pff, speak for yourself. I'm a well-trained athlete with stamina for days."

I roll my eyes. "You're a *retired* athlete."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, because team owner sounds so drab."

Declan rolls to his side and props his head up against his arm. "I might be horrible at it. I can't even properly feed the woman I'm fucking like crazy."

I wave him off. "You'll be fine. I barely remember to feed the bird, and I'm still successful at my shop."

He reaches back with his free arm to grab his phone, and he begins to connect to the Bluetooth. "What are we listening to?" He pauses, and his nose scrunches up. "What's your musical taste?"

"Anything country or indie."

"Ah, you're a country girl. No wonder you like certain positions."

I laugh as he brings up a playlist and hits play.

"I'm curious, how in the world did you get into origami? Trust me when I say that it's the last thing I would ever expect your talented hands to do."

Declan gets comfortable between the covers again and peppers a few kisses along the curve of my shoulder. "My

grandfather taught English in Japan. Picked up the art of origami and taught me.”

“You’re close with him?”

“Was. He passed a few years back. Now it’s just my parents and me. My mom gets along with everyone, and for what it’s worth, my dad isn’t bad. He’s just waiting for me to step up, and I have no plans to take over maple syrup and hotels. I’ve been avoiding his calls all week, to be honest.”

This time, I’m the one to place a kiss along his arm, a sort of caress. “It’s okay, everyone is allowed to have their Lake Spark escape before making key decisions. You know everyone on Ford’s street kind of did that. Now you’re here and can enjoy Illinois summer and coffee with jellybeans before finding your career path and talking with your dad.”

“Illinois summer have just been rain for the past few days,” he deadpans.

I wrap my arms around his bicep. “True, but there is an extremely hot florist on Main Street who might just be able to guide you with indoor activities.”

“You’re guiding me?” He pretends to be offended. “Other way around, sweetheart. It’s more like you have a perfect ass and bring good conversation.”

“A winning combination,” I retort.

He rolls us over so I’m underneath him. “That’s kind of a problem.”

I get the feeling there is something underneath his words, but I don’t want to try and analyze. This is probably my cue to leave, anyway.

“On that note.” I tap his nose with my finger. “I need to go and let you enjoy the warm chocolate chip cookies that they deliver at turndown service.”

Leaving him in bed, I scramble to find my clothes.

“Are they good? I keep declining every time they offer the cookies.”

I look at him, shocked, as I begin to dress. “They’re delicious. I would stay here purely for the cookies. I mean, they are chocolate chip, and they even bring you a glass of cold milk. Come on, live a little.”

He smiles to himself. “For you, I’ll try. Maybe I can meet you for lunch, but I have a few team meetings about moving training here next season.”

I work on the buttons of my blouse. “See? Every day here is getting you closer to your path and will help you let go of hockey-player you and welcome billionaire-team-owner you. Although technically, weren’t you always a billionaire? You don’t seem like one, except for the car, but you get my drift,” I ramble.

“Your perspective is a nice change. People normally hate me or try to kiss my ass. You’re just... blunt.”

He sits up in the bed, and the sheet falls around his waist. *Yikes*, staring at his chest is not going to get us anywhere. I grab my bag from the chair and decide to steal the paper crane.

I hold it up. “I’ll add it to my Declan Dash shrine.”

He grins. “As long as it isn’t a paper flower, then it’s fine.”

“Why?”

“Because the flowers in your store wilt and die. A paper flower lasts forever. My grandfather told me that the most romantic thing a guy can do is deliver a paper flower because it shows the relationship will endure time.”

My eyes go wide as I think I’ve heard that before, but it’s a beautiful thought, and I do my best to erase the image in my head of what it would be like if a paper flower were to appear in front of me.

After all, flings are temporary.

DECLAN

Gliding along the ice, I can't stop grinning as Ford tries to steal the puck as it travels between the passes of my stick. We're playing a little one-on-one before the kids hit the ice. God, I miss this. I really miss this.

"Go easy, we don't have padding on," Ford reminds me.

We're only in jeans and hoodies, but still, I'm putting up a fight with my offense and doing my best with my determination to score a goal.

Picking up speed, we make it across the blue line into the attacking zone, and I take my aim.

The moment the puck hits the net and I get my goal, I let go and slow my skating.

"Damn, you're too good," Ford curses from his loss.

Something about waking up early to hit the ice without any rules or structure is exactly what I needed to start my day today.

I slept great but woke to the smell of Violet in my room, and kind of wondered what it would be like to wake with her in my bed. Not like that night when I left before she woke up, but actually wake up and face one another.

Would she act shy? Or would she lead us into morning sex?

My vote is on the latter.

Stepping off the ice, Ford and I take a seat on the bench. “I think marketing wants to reschedule the photo op to around lunchtime. That’s cool, right?” Ford asks as he grabs his water bottle. “‘New Spinners’ owner teaches kids how to play hockey,’ that’s probably their angle. Good for the facility and great for your team.”

My brows raise. “Sounds about right. Sure, lunchtime is fine.”

I already texted Violet that I wasn’t sure of my schedule today.

“What did you get up to last night?” Ford asks, making small talk while he unlaces his skates.

Glancing up, I take a second more than I should to answer. I don’t feel guilty for what I’m doing with his sister, we’re consenting adults, but nonetheless, lying even when it makes perfect sense to do so doesn’t feel great either.

“The usual. Room service, checked my stocks, and tried to watch a series.”

“Sounds quiet. I’m slightly envious; even the dog was noisy last night at our house.” Yet Ford still has a broad smile as he says that.

I chuckle once. “That’s the way you like it.”

He stands and points a finger at me. “True. One day you will see that hockey isn’t everything.”

“I’m counting the days,” I say in a mundane tone.

He waves me off. “I’ll be in my office and will see you in about thirty minutes to go over logistics for some of the proposals you made for pre-season training camp next year. We can video call your GM.”

“Great,” I call out as Ford heads off.

I arrived in Lake Spark with ideas, from schedules to a list of demands of what would be needed for the team to train well. For one, we need a full commitment for specific dates and office space for the coaching staff. I’m confident that we can make it all happen.

Glancing down at my watch to check my heartrate, I remember I have a little break before heading into the day full force. Grabbing my phone, I pull up Violet's name to type her a message.

ME

No go for lunch. Can we meet later tonight?

I see the dots bouncing in the chat. I know she's at her store, as she mentioned once needing to be there by eight in the morning.

VIOLET

Whatever will I do on my lunch break now?

I love her banter.

I'm sure you will figure something out. Just don't come, it will be better if you wait.

She sends me a few shocked emojis.

Pff. Fine.

7?

Should work. I'll pick something up on my way there. Ruin your room service standards with peasant food.

I scan the area to ensure that nobody notices the beaming smile that I'm wearing.

I'm a laid-back guy, you know that.

That you like to lie on your back? Why, yes, I do know that.

An audible laugh escapes me.

Says the woman who wears ridiculously expensive lingerie... Yeah, I noticed.

It's for a good cause.

I'm a cause now?

No. But my need for enjoyment is.

Just arrive naked under your clothes, then we don't need to debate this.

Nah, I'd only do the whole arrive-naked thing if I was wearing your hockey jersey. Such as shame you no longer play hockey... you own a team instead.

The image of her in my jersey twists me in a way that I don't like. I want to hate it... but damn, I entertain the idea in my head.

My fists form, and I want to bite my knuckles. I won't be able to get her out of my head. I mean, she's already there, but now it's the extremely X-rated version, complete with her moaning in my ear, that won't escape my thoughts.

How the fuck am I supposed to teach the little campers now? You probably don't even know my old jersey number; you're riling me up.

You're right, I don't know. I was too busy touching myself when I watched the games from home and saw you on the screen. Have a good day.

A freaking kissing emoji.

Blowing out a breath, I do my best to bring relief to my body. I'm going to have blue balls all day, and I need to focus on something else.

Violet and I have playful chemistry, that's for sure, but the excitement that's inside me, as if I'm counting down the minutes until I see her, isn't because of attraction. Well, it is and it isn't. But I know being unable to filter what I say around her is a change from my other encounters with women, and the fact that her laugh is so freaking beautiful to hear is another plus.

Violet is the type of fling that if the circumstances were different, then I wouldn't be eager to give us a deadline. My stomach sinks from that thought; we're already halfway through the week.

Scratching my chin, I brush all thoughts aside, as I have a day to conquer.

OPENING the door of my room, I'm faced with Violet standing in the hall in her rain poncho again. It's been pouring all day; not that I went outside, it was meeting after meeting.

She holds up the takeout bag. "Turkey sandwiches from the deli at the general store, plus a bag of chips because I felt you earned it." She attempts to keep a straight face, but her wicked little smile is something she can't control.

As I grab the bag from her fingers, she steps forward, close to my body, and tips her chin up, with her eyes challenging me.

We're not going to move.

I reach behind her to grab the do-not-disturb sign and slide it on the outside handle.

"So strategic," she purrs in approval.

I push the door closed, our eyes never parting, and I carefully drop the bag onto the floor to the side, before I step forward, which causes her to walk back, right into the door.

"I'm not really hungry," she softly whispers.

"What a coincidence, neither am I."

I lean down to kiss her mouth and allow my hands to cradle her head to ensure I get the best possible angle, because kissing her is the best part of my day so far. Her lips are warm, yet there is a subtle taste of freaking blueberries.

"You taste like muffins," I note before kissing her again, because it's like a drug you could get addicted to, or at least I

imagine this is what addiction feels like.

“That’s because it’s blueberry-muffin lip balm.” Violet begins to remove the rain poncho and just throws it to the floor. I’m looking down at her poncho, when she gently clears her throat, and her eyes flash to inform me to take a closer look at her.

The moment I notice what she’s wearing, I step away and rub both of my hands over my face while I groan. “Are you kidding me?”

“It was on the floor of my closet needing a little more respect.” She clucks the inside of her cheek.

A whistle escapes my lips as I take in the fact she is wearing shorts that shouldn’t be legal and an old Spinners t-shirt which looks like it’s been through hell and back, but it just makes it even hotter. It stops right above her belly button and slides off one shoulder, and she isn’t wearing a bra. I know this because her pert little nipples are outlined through the shirt.

I was never into puck bunnies, and this outfit is skirting a few similarities. Many women would wear something similar and throw themselves at me at a bar or party after a game. But Violet? Violet is dressed like this with pure intentions; simply to make me smile and laugh.

So what if the consequences of her attempt will be dirty as fuck, but it’s all about *why* she did this.

And that just makes me want her even more.

Stepping forward, our bodies are flush, and in one swift move, we work together, with my arms hoisting her up as her legs willingly wrap around my waist.

“Screw the bed, I’m taking you right here,” I warn her.

WE EVENTUALLY MIGRATED to the bed and have been talking for what feels like hours. The shirt she tempted me with was

lost then thrown back on after our last round, but the shorts haven't left the floor near the door.

“Happy Accident” by Tomberlin plays on my Bluetooth as we face one another on our sides and snack on chips and cookies, since turndown service stopped by.

“Are you still avoiding your dad's calls?” Violet asks, nibbling on a gooey cookie that draws my attention to her mouth,

I grab another potato chip from the little bag resting between us. “He tried to phone earlier, but I was saved by a photo session. I'll face him soon. I kind of need to switch gears, you know? In truth, the last few months have been... odd. I always knew I would need to retire, but I hate it, nonetheless. Then buying the team, sure, it's a thrill, but...”

“You're trying to fill a void,” she says, finishing my sentence.

My eyes widen slightly because she gets it. “Something like that. Don't get me wrong, I'm excited, but it's not the same as being on the ice with a timer controlling your adrenaline as you try to score.”

“Have you ever thought that now you get to experience hockey through a different lens? You'll probably still feel the adrenaline, but now you get to watch a game unfold and go home without a black eye too.”

I flex my jaw side to side, as I'm slightly in awe that Violet analyzes things so clearly. “You read people well,” I compliment.

Violet lies on her back and turns her head to face me as she rests against the pillow. I take the opportunity to grab a stray section of her hair and twirl it around my finger.

“I need to, in my line of work. I have to determine if flowers are needed for a happy or sad occasion. It's my sixth sense to figure out if a man is buying flowers for his mother, his lover who he is madly in love with, or if he is trying to get out of the doghouse. Then again, when a guy is trying to get out of the doghouse, then it's obvious.”

I huff a laugh. “How so?”

A near evil smirk spreads on her lips that makes me want to kiss her again. “He tends to ask for the most expensive flowers.”

I nuzzle into her neck while I laugh, as that makes sense.

She giggles and further explains, “If he shows up needing flowers for someone who he truly loves, then he normally has an idea which flowers are her favorite or at least gives me her favorite color to work with. But if the first thing he says to me is that he needs the most expensive flowers, then I know, I just know, and I hate it.”

“What do you do?”

“Lie and actually give him the cheapest flowers but charge full price,” she quips.

It sounds exactly like what she would do.

Her fingers begin to trace lazy patterns on my arm, and damn, I’m not sure when the last time was that I just lay in bed with someone and talked without any thought of the outside world. I’m used to gratification and get out. Instead, time slows, and I’m relaxed while we leave chip crumbs in the bed. We’re in our own bubble.

Violet seems to get more comfortable, sinking into the mattress, and her face tells me that another round of questions will be shot my way, though I don’t mind.

But she surprises me and sighs a relaxing breath. “Hear the rain?”

I try to focus, and despite the subtle music, the sound of pouring rain overtakes the background noise.

“Kind of calming,” I admit.

“It’s only June. I hope this isn’t the indication for the season ahead. It’s the high season in this little town, but I guess off-season for you; opposites connect.”

I nip at her shoulder gently, because that’s what our bodies are doing, following movements without thought. “When I

played hockey, I could actually enjoy off-season, would go on vacation even, because I knew hockey training would be waiting for me at the end of the summer. I'm so out of my realm right now." I gently shake my head in irritation from that fact.

She taps her finger against my bare chest. "You're not. You're *adapting* to your new normal. Where is that confidence that you ooze? Throw it into your new chapter."

She steals my gaze because the conviction in her voice sounds far too natural.

"The confidence is there, I just seem to let down a wall or two around you." My voice grows soft and our eyes lock, hers filled with admiration and mine must show a fondness that I'm not used to feeling.

A long moment falls between us until Violet twists her body to look over her shoulder at the clock on the bedside table. "It's almost midnight." She begins to stir. "I need to get home."

I don't like the idea of her on the road at night in this rain. Hell, I know that's only partly true. I hate the idea of her leaving.

When her cute little ass is about to slide off the mattress, I quickly grab her arm to stop her. "You don't need to go."

Her brows knit together, and her eyes grow wary but are misted with a hint of delight, the perfect contradiction. "I should..." Her sentence hangs open.

"Nah, stay. I mean, it's raining, it's late, and I hear the foxes on the roads in this area are a complete killer this time of year." I list many reasons but none of them are the real reason.

Her mouth opens then shuts before a sound squeaks out. "I guess one night wouldn't hurt."

"We did it once before," I highlight.

Violet chuckles. "Kind of a different scenario, as we basically did the same thing, all night, over and over, thinking it would be a one-night kind of thing."

“I won’t even leave a note on the pillow this time,” I promise.

She tries to suppress her smile from my remark, but I see her cheeks heighten. “I am kind of tired.”

“You’re staying. It’s a demand.”

Violet nods once and returns to the mattress, crawling on all fours, with the sultry look on her face shooting me a warning. “I guess I’m staying, so we can definitely...” She straddles me and leans down to run her lips down the line of my stomach, tracing my muscles. Her breath spreads lower and lower, causing my cock to twitch. But just before she moves the sheet hanging low on my waist, her body slithers back up to align our eyes together. “Sleep. We’re totally sleeping.”

She flops to the side with exhaustion, grabbing my arm like a freaking teddy bear.

I lick my lips at her effort to always tease me. “Then the only question left is if you will be sleeping naked or want to borrow a shirt? Either way, you will be accessible so I can slip right into you when I wake up.” I smirk, relieved that she’s staying.

Because I’m selfish, and if I can stretch our boundaries for this week, then I damn well will.

VIOLET

Waking up on my side, I instantly feel a delightful heaviness between my legs. The feeling of skin-on-skin contact, so warm and firm. I murmur as I stretch my body out, which only gives a certain man's hand better access to my clit where Declan is currently working with his finger.

"Is this your way of waking me up?" I wonder and yawn.

Where Declan's lips are dragging along my back feels extra sensitive this morning or maybe it's the fact he hasn't shaved yet and is sporting some stubble. I'm in a daze, trapped between the heavenly sleep I had in this man's arms and his method of waking up which feels like a dream, because it's so damn good.

"I warned you that I needed you accessible." His gravelly morning voice is pure sin, and I feel my inner walls clench, even tighter when I feel his cock against my ass.

"You're a man of action." I look over my shoulder, and I wish the damn sun would come out to peek through the curtains and give me a better view of his face, but instead, it's raining out, and Declan looks serious, on a mission.

I chuckle to myself because that's not bad either. A blissful breath escapes me, that is until I notice the clock. "Shit, I need to get moving like now."

"We can do that." Declan teases my opening with the tip of his cock.

I groan with the struggle between giving in right now and responsibility.

“As in, I need to run home, shower and change, and grab my coffee before I open the store,” I clarify, yet I don’t make any effort to move.

“Shh, baby.” He grinds his body into my hips.

Oh no, he said baby. The female population’s weakness.

Five minutes later, after an orgasm to start my day, I’m getting dressed, and Declan emerges from the bathroom where he started the shower. He seems to be searching for some fresh clothes.

“Are you sure I can’t order some breakfast for you?” he double-checks.

“No, I really need to head out, plus Jolly Joe’s is calling. It’s kind of an essential part of the day, otherwise people send out search parties if they notice you don’t check in.” I tie up my hair. “You haven’t been yet since you’ve been in town? Yikes, you may want to fix that, otherwise people will talk.”

“Maybe I’ll stop by then. I would hate for people to think I’m some billionaire asshole,” he jokes, but I hear the hidden truth, I think, because he does care, since he is the opposite of what many people think.

I shrug a shoulder. “You should.” Looking around, I note that I have nothing left to throw on, and this is my moment to leave. “Well, I’ve gotta run.”

We stare at one another, a giddy smile preventing us from saying any words, and the warm air wraps around us, pulling us closer in a magnetic force because we both take a step closer to each other.

Declan makes a sound, reaches out to snake his arm around my middle, and pulls me close. “Have a good day.”

“You too.”

He doesn’t let me go, and I take the opportunity to run my fingers along his bare chest, staring at my actions before my eyes strike up to meet his.

“Morning-you is... different.” Tender.

He rumbles a laugh. “Nah, I’m just admiring the view.”

“I’ll see you around.” I feel butterflies, and it’s preventing me from saying anything clever.

Our eyes linger, and we’re making no effort to part.

“Get out of here before I throw you in the shower.” At least Declan has the courage to move us along.



I’M lucky that on Thursdays, Tilly is at the store from open to close. It meant I had a little time to spare, which I’m thankful for, as I needed a long shower to recall all the ways my body was touched last night. Also, dry shampoo only gets you so far.

Stepping into Jolly Joe’s, I’m in awe how half the town seems to cram in here in the mornings for breakfast, and again later in the day for ice cream. A retired judge created this place that resembles an old soda shop.

Walking straight to the counter, I order my flat white and an orange roll.

“What would you recommend?” Declan’s voice surprises me as he arrives to stand by my side and pretends to look at the menu on the wall.

Instantly, my body eases, and my closed-mouth grin spreads. “What brings you here?”

“Someone mentioned this is a must, and I kind of worked up an appetite.” He doesn’t look at me and continues his ruse of studying the menu.

I straighten my posture and follow along, even though the edges of our arms just grazed and a breath that I didn’t know I was holding releases. “I’m a fan of the orange rolls. Cinnamon roll base with an orange kick, it’s a twist on a classic.”

“I’ll give it a go.” He steps forward to order.

Looking around the place, it's noisy and a mix of people chatting and others in a rush. Nobody will notice us, or rather, it's easy to explain a coincidence that we are both at the best spot for coffee in town at the same time.

"Hey, Violet." A deep voice startles me, and I nearly jump in my spot. My attention transfers away from Declan, ahead of me ordering, and lands on Carter, the sheriff in town. "Usual order?" The man smiles at me.

He's Ford's age, and he does get points on the handsome front, if you go for the hundred-pushups-a-day kind of thing.

"Good morning, Sheriff." He's told me many times to call him by his first name, but I feel like I might get in trouble if I don't address him by his title in public. The rumors would spread like wildfire if someone heard me call him Carter.

"Flat white and an orange roll?"

My eyes narrow. "Yeah, you know my order?" I'm surprised.

"It's the little things that you should notice," he mentions.

A tap on my shoulder causes my eyes to dip to the side, and I notice a hand with a coffee in a to-go cup.

"Your order was ready," Declan mentions, with his eyes set on Carter.

"Thanks." I notice both men sizing one another up. "Uhm, this is Declan Dash. He played hockey with Ford, and he's here this week to help with the kids' summer camp."

"Sheriff Carter Mills." Carter offers his hand for a shake to Declan. "I've seen you in Lake Spark before. It's great that you're volunteering."

"Of course. I was stopping by for a coffee and ran into Violet. We go way back, thanks to her brother. I would trust this lady here with my life and coffee choices." A protective arm lands around my shoulders, I swear an act of possession.

Something Carter notices, as his eyes dance between us for a good beat. "Only in town for a few days?"

“Yeah, but I’ll be here more in the future.”

The testosterone of these guys is nearly overbearing.

I laugh nervously. “Well, it was great chatting with everyone, but I really need to head to The Flower Jar,” I announce.

“Sure, I can walk you there if you like,” Carter offers.

“Oh, that’s not needed. A quick power walk and I’m there, considering it’s only two blocks away.” My eyes dart between the men in front of me.

Carter smiles politely at me. “You have a great day then.”

“You too.” I nod.

“See you around, Dec.” I avoid looking at him and walk out.

But the quick stroll to The Flower Jar turns into a near sprint. As soon as I arrive, Tilly heads out on an errand, and I’m glad for the moment to breathe. I sigh, because I realize that I forgot my orange roll. I walk to Nugget’s cage and see that Tilly handled replenishing his water and food this morning.

“Handsome,” the bird chirps.

“Who is?” I ask, as if the bird understands me.

The bell rings, and the door to my store opens. “You forgot your breakfast,” Declan announces.

I look warily at the parrot. Maybe he does understand more than I realize. He must have seen Declan through the window. It’s a little too coincidental.

Ignoring the bird, I walk to Declan and take the bag. “Thanks.”

“Your sheriff wanted to deliver it, but unfortunately for him, I was already holding the bag.” He seems proud of himself. “Plus, I told him that I’m responsible for replenishing your nourishment since you had a *long* night last night.”

I stop mid-bite, slightly concerned, because Declan probably would say that, but when he grins, I know he's messing with me, so I resume my path to calorie heaven.

"He's a good guy," I say with my mouth full, and I'm not sure why I said that.

Declan looks down at the cup of coffee in his hands. He doesn't want to respond to my statement, probably because we both know that I'm testing us to see if any jealousy arises. We're human, that's what we feel sometimes.

"This is good coffee."

I lick the corner of my mouth. "What color jellybean did you get?"

He shrugs. "I'm not at the bottom of my coffee yet. Is there a meaning if it's a particular color?"

"No, but rumor is that the purple ones are rare."

"Purple is violet, right?" He pulls up his phone from his pocket when it dings.

"It is. Shouldn't you be at the rink? I love having you here, but this is slightly jarring. I'm not used to guys delivering me carbs in my store, especially considering their tongue was inside me not even two hours ago."

Declan appears satisfied before he looks up from his screen. "Just enjoying an easy morning in this small town, perusing along Main Street with my coffee, and doing a good deed for a local citizen."

"Sure you are." I bring my hand to my hip, my smirk permanent.

"I don't need to be at the rink until ten. The real estate agent sent me an email that I can view a house later." He begins to type on his screen.

My breath catches. "Oh yeah, you might be moving here?" Fuckity ducks, that might be a little bit of a twister to our dynamic.

Declan's eyes lock on me when he realizes my brain is connecting dots. "More like a weekend house, when I need to be here for the team." His attempt to justify how this might not be awkward in the future is just that, an attempt, which means it doesn't always work.

I hum a sound. "Right." My T is sharp. "What house are you looking at?"

"It's on the other side of the lake, you can kind of see your brother's house from it. It's on..." He scrolls his email for the street name.

But I already know. "Owl Hill Lane," I say and take another sip of my coffee.

Declan's face screws up when he looks at me. "That's a very... storybook name. How did you know?"

"The landlady to this place used to live on that street. The house you're looking at is a great house, though it probably needs some changes."

"Will you come with me?" It shoots out of his mouth, taking us both aback.

"Tie her up," Nugget calls out.

We both look at the bird and back to one another. "He's super talkative in the mornings, ignore him."

"Who taught him that?" Declan is entertained.

I hold my palm up, urging him not to press with the questions. "I was too scared to ever ask. But, uhm, the house..."

Declan steps forward. "Come on, you know the area. I could use the advice."

"Is that a good idea?" My voice raises an octave.

He runs his thumb along the line of his jaw. "A horrible idea." He grins to himself. "But I don't care. Plus, if we weren't sleeping together, then you wouldn't hesitate. Besides, the agent is from Chicago selling on behalf of an estate, so

they don't even know the quirky little details about this area. Please?" His eyes are pleading, with mischief thrown in.

A long sound escapes my lips as I puff out a breath. "Okay."

Not what I was going for.

"Great. I'll meet you there at 4."

"Yep." But my eyes turn cautious.

WE SLOWLY TRAIL behind the real estate agent dressed in a suit. Jimmy is in his forties and reminds me of the guy from that reality television show about California real estate that I watch. Everything he says feels like an upsell.

The house is empty of furniture and is incredibly big, but the view of the lake is to die for. Owning waterfront property is nowhere in my future. It's far too expensive, but I have a brother who lets me drop in at their pristine lake house at any time.

We all stop when the agent opens the sliding doors to reveal the backyard overlooking the lake. It's pouring rain yet again, so we admire the view from inside.

"The weather isn't cooperating, but on a good day, you'll get the sunrise and full sun until about mid-afternoon. The dock was renewed only a few years ago, and it's possible to add a pool if you really wanted, however the hot tub and sauna are perfect all year round. You've seen the house now. There is room to negotiate, I think, as they're looking for a quick sale," Jimmy explains.

"The only neighbor is the house up on the corner by the main road, right?" I ask to confirm. "The Joneses, and they're snowbirds, so they head down to Scottsdale in the winter," I add, as privacy is important for Declan.

"Something like that, I think. How about I leave you two alone for a few minutes to discuss?" Jimmy suggests.

I was introduced as a friend, but Jimmy has given me a few questionable glares about that definition, especially when Declan made a joke about the master suite shower being the right size for two, with room to bend over.

Declan nods. “That would be great.”

I cross my arms and offer Jimmy an appreciative smile. The moment that he’s out of sight, I roll my eyes at Declan.

“This is ridiculous,” I inform him, yet I’m entertained. “One, that I’m here, and two, that you would need a house this size. This is a family house.”

Declan smirks before he takes a step, right to the doorframe edge. “I need a house for entertaining.” He seems to be reflecting.

I point out to the yard. “With a treehouse?”

He side-eyes me and shrugs. “I always wanted one. My parents were against it, always afraid I would fall out.”

Huh, I wonder if he is attempting to grab hold of something he missed.

“Okay, but what are you going to need five bedrooms for?” I challenge.

Declan raises a brow at me. “I’m sure I’ll have parties where people need to stay over.”

My jaw drops, and I gasp. “Oh. My. God. You also host *those* kind of parties?”

His eyes grow bold, and he chuckles. “That’s where your mind went? I was thinking of people staying over because they’ve had wine or beer and can’t drive back to the city.” Declan wraps his arm around my shoulders as he walks us back to the kitchen area. “And no, to answer your question, I leave the hosting to Brent.”

Ease hits me, because for the past thirty seconds, an unknown jealousy boiled inside of me at the thought of him with someone else, both in his past or future.

I can't think about it, I have no right to. "What do you think of the kitchen?" I ask to keep us on the friends-looking-at-a-house situation.

We stop in the middle of the kitchen and lean against the island, and Declan purses his lips out as he studies the area. "I would probably need to update the appliances, and I'm not so sure about the countertops."

"You're right about the appliances," I agree. "But what's wrong with the counters?"

He rotates his body, with his hands instantly landing firmly on my waist, before he lifts me up onto the counter, stepping between my knees and leaning in with his hands on either side of me. Our body heat collides, as he is dangerously close, and our eyes hold in what feels like a fire starting.

"I'm not sure if it's sturdy enough for kitchen activities."

"You mean cutting vegetables?" I pretend not to understand.

Declan glances down at his finger skirting the edge of my dress. "I was thinking along the lines of straddling or bending over and holding onto the counter for support," he rasps.

"I don't want to know your future plans." It comes out playful, but really, it's the truth. Is he lost in this moment or thinking about his future romps in the kitchen with whoever isn't me?

"My only future plan involves grabbing dinner after this," he says it so casually, but his damn thumb is circling my inner thigh.

I scoff. "I'm kind of tired of room service and takeout. How about I'll cook at my place?" And twice in one day, we get the award for surprising us both, because I'm changing the scene on us and inviting him to my place, to cook. I'm not sure that's in the fuck-buddy manual, but whatever.

"Sounds good." He doesn't seem to mind, nor does he seem worried about the rulebook.

“Okay.” I shake my head before thinking too deep. “But this counter, it’s your deciding factor?”

“Would it be comfortable to lie on?” He sounds far too serious.

“I think you’re going for uncomfortable, no?”

“Can you get a good grip?”

“I guess,” I volley.

“Sturdy then?” He questions again before he slides my body to the edge.

This man is so inappropriate, and I love it.

The clearing of a throat breaks our little scene, and we both look to the side to find Jimmy.

“It’s Naples quartz, that’s the best of the best,” he announces.

If only the earth would swallow me whole right now.

Declan smirks proudly then speaks directly to me in a low voice. “Let’s get out here and head to your place.”

DECLAN

Looking down at the wine bottle in one hand and a baguette in the other, I smile to myself. This day may go down in the record books for being notable. I sure as hell didn't plan on asking Violet to join me on my real estate appointment, but logic seems to go out the window when she's near. It was fun having her with me, even if she pointed out the obvious, that the house is fit for a family, not exactly something I'm planning on.

I was going to follow her in my car to her house, but I wanted to stop at the store to pick up some wine, and she asked if I could grab some fresh bread from the bakery section.

The door opens, and she has a lopsided smile and has changed into yoga pants and a t-shirt. "Welcome to my humble abode." She steps to the side to allow me to enter her house. It's small but has curb appeal.

I lean in to kiss her cheek, and I'm a guy that is throwing out moves that are not my usual, as proven by the fact that she makes a sound of surprise.

My eyes assess the living room, and it's not bad at all. It seems quite updated, and there is plenty of space considering she lives here alone. The design is simple, and I'm surprised that there aren't more flowers. In fact, all I see is a cactus when it comes to plants.

"I don't understand, where is your vase of flowers?" I say as I follow her to the kitchen, and my nose enjoys the smell of

a home cooked meal.

“I’ve barely been home this week, that’s why.”

She gets to work on cutting the bread, and that’s when I notice the parrot-shaped cookie jar. “For someone who told me that they hate birds, you’ve only been proving me wrong.”

Violet quickly checks what I’m looking at and smiles softly. “Ford found it at an antique market with Brielle and thought it would be great for me. I hated it at first, but it’s a damn good cookie jar, and I tend to bake cookies once a week.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Uh-huh.” Violet quickly looks over the pot with tomato sauce. “I don’t really cook much, unless you count snacks as a meal, but you can’t really go wrong with spaghetti.”

“Sounds great.”

She grabs a bowl for the bread. “So, are you going to put in an offer for the house?”

“Not sure yet. You may have had a point about the size.”

Violet looks up at me with an arched brow. “You mean that the house is for a family, with a dog and maybe even chickens?”

Taking the bottle opener that was resting on the counter, I work the cork out. “Something like that. I have my place in the city, and that’s admittedly a bachelor pad, but at some point, it would be nice to have a house with a yard.”

“You mean a home?” She offers me two empty glasses.

“I guess.”

“I know what you mean. I’m at Ford and Brielle’s far too much, but I like sitting amongst their chaos and admiring their home life. One day I hope to have that, complete with kids and a dog.”

Right, because she *is* the relationship type, once she’s ready to head back to the market after she’s over her break.

“My parents gave me a good life, and let’s be honest, hockey isn’t a cheap sport, but growing up, the house and all of that always felt... superficial.”

“No treehouse either.”

My cheeks tighten. “That too. Anyway, I’ll think about the house. Tomorrow is my last day with the kids at camp.”

Our eyes connect as we both suddenly remember our deadline. The sound of the pots simmering on the stove fills the void of our words.

“Better make tonight count then,” she mentions softly.

“I’ll stay another night tomorrow but then head back to the city on Saturday morning. One of the team sponsors wants to have dinner this weekend, and I can’t really say no to that.” I hand her a wine glass. “Hope you don’t mind, but I intend to finish this bottle with you, which means I’m staying over. I would hate for the sheriff to go on a power trip and pull me over.”

Her response is to laugh, and that makes me happy. Maybe the sheriff is potential for her, but this week, Violet is mine, and I don’t tolerate any other man attempting to take what currently belongs to me. In hockey, your mission is to protect the puck, never let it out of your sight. That’s Violet in this moment.

Violet walks into my arms and takes hold of one wine glass. “I would say we should toast, but this day is already one bizarre situation after another, so my money would be on that this would be an awkward toast.” She sips from her glass.

I enjoy her straightforwardness. “Maybe.” I take a sip of my own wine, bitter with a hint of berry.

“I think if the house will make you happy then go for it. Life is one big adventure, isn’t it?”

God, I admire her positive outlook on life. She’s just a good energy to be around. I need more people like that in my circle.

I set my wine glass down because I want both my arms around her; if our week is almost up, then I will glue myself to her tonight. She looks up at me and must sense that I have a lot on my mind.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks.

“Hockey,” I lie. “This week, I got to physically do something, but now my association with hockey turns to corporate meetings.”

“You’ll get used to it. I guess your social calendar will open up too, so go check out some concerts or take a vacation. Decompress.” She’s listing ideas, but they’re all enjoyed better if joined by someone who makes it more fun.

I don’t like myself softening. It’s happening. I feel it.

The water boils over on the spaghetti pot, and Violet is quick to take action, stepping out of my hold and giving us the space that we probably need. “Look at me, about to kill our meatless dinner. This is why Ford doesn’t trust me with dinner duty.”

Ford. The gentle reminder that Violet and I are supposed to be off-limits to one another. Then again, not many people share the details on who their current friend with benefits is. We also have to question if the thrill of him finding out plays a role in this attraction between Violet and me, because our chemistry is high and seamless, maybe even uncontrollable.

“Are you frowning? For a man about to eat the best sauce from a jar, you seem kind of down,” she comments.

“I’m just lost in a lot of thoughts, and starving. I guess I didn’t eat lunch today. There is this boy who wouldn’t stop talking about his favorite player, and I got excited and listened, assuming it was me. Turns out his favorite player is Erikson, who is a forward. A shot to my ego, but I couldn’t stop smiling. The kid has his whole future ahead of him and so much optimism. I’m kind of jealous.”

Violet tips her hip out and gives me a knowing look. “Your problem is that you only look at the near future and not the far future, and your far future may just hold the dream that makes

you optimistic again. Use that logic when you make your house decision... and ask for proof that the counters are quartz.” She winks.

Of course she would be supportive, she’s a team player. Except I think we tossed out the rulebook a few days ago, and I’m no longer sure what game we’re playing.

SKATING BACKWARDS, I do my best to steal the puck from Connor, but the guy is fast and sharp. We decided to play a little one-on-one since it’s my last day volunteering at the summer program, and the kids are eating their lunch before we do a round of working on coordination with a partner.

“Come on, old man, give me a challenge,” Connor snickers.

In a flash, I overreach my arm to grab the puck with my stick, and although successful, I feel an old injury in my shoulder flare from the effort.

“Respect your elders,” I chide through labored breath as I begin to circle my arm.

Connor gets the clue that we need to take a break, and we both pause near the crease.

“If it’s any consolation, you’re better than my dad on the ice.”

I look up from leaning over with my hands on my thighs. “Thanks.” *I think.*

“You look kind of tired, to be honest.”

That’s because I spent last night with your aunt.

After dinner, we attempted to watch a movie, then ditched that idea and headed straight to her room where we had a round before sleeping until early hours. Violet had to get to her store at seven because she had to prepare flowers for a wedding.

“I’m not tired,” I lie. “I’m distracted.” The moment it slips off my lips, I realize my error.

Connor shifts his stick to his other hand. “Why?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Well, figure it out, because your focus on the game sucks.”

My eyes pop out at his boldness. “I’m not playing anymore; I don’t need to have my head in the game.”

“Yeah, you just own the team now, so I’m pretty positive you need to focus on that.”

My head wobbles side to side, as the guy is right and I need solid concentration.

“You know that if you’re distracted in Lake Spark then something is seriously screwed up. My dad says if you can’t clear your head and enjoy your family in this town, then no magical place will save you.” I hear his sarcasm.

“I will take that into consideration when I figure out if I’m fixable or not,” I respond dryly.

“Won’t you be back more often? You better figure it out fast.”

Again, this sixteen-year-old is on point today, because the reality is that I will be back more regularly, and I’m not entirely sure where Violet fits in on the distraction front. I asked for a week, and our timer is up, but she won’t be out of my life.

And that very much weighs on my mind for the rest of the day.

IT’S eight in the evening, and tomorrow, I check out from the Dizzy Duck Inn. Violet had to stay late at The Flower Jar, so we skipped dinner together. But the moment she walks through the door and sets the do-not-disturb sign on the

handle, my hands frame her face to kiss her hard, as if I need to seal the imprint of her lips on mine.

She murmurs a sweet sound which is a contrast to my low, rumbled groan.

Pulling away, I cup her jaw with my hands, and she peers up at me, her eyes sparkly in this dimly lit room. “That’s one way to welcome me,” she rasps.

“No reason to hold back tonight.”

She nods gently while our eyes lock, and this woman has me completely mesmerized.

“How do we end this week of fun?” Violet is searching for a clue of how tonight may go. Slow or fast? I don’t have an answer.

Walking us back to the bed, I debate within myself how I like to take her the most... but I like every way.

But it’s probably safer if we stick to our adventurous side.

“All fours, Vi. Show me that ass of yours.”

A devious smirk appears on her lips before she complies, even going so far as making a show of lifting her skirt to indicate that she took off her panties at some point between her car and my room.

I go nearly feral and spank her with the palm of my hand, and her yelp turns into a whimper because I dive right in to lick her slit, nor do I begin with gentle strokes. Her body falls forward and her fingers claw the duvet. This is the way I like her.

At my mercy, knowing I will reward her.

Violet knows how to take, but she much prefers following my cues.

“I swear you taste like pure maple syrup.” I rise up on my knees and run my finger along the corner of my mouth.

She glances over her shoulder with a mischievous look. “You hate maple syrup.”

“Not if it’s on you.” I rub a circle on her ass, and I get another idea. “Can I take a photo of you like this? A little keepsake.”

Violet flops like a pancake to her back and rests against her propped arms, her foot drawing a line up her leg, stopping mid-thigh. “Yes, but I thought for sure you would much prefer one with me touching myself.”

I blow out a breath. “You *are* a wild little thing.”

I’m hovering over her in a flash, and I decide the photo will have to wait; being buried deep inside of her takes priority.

All night becomes one long event of sex, rest, and sex again. Sometime around one in the morning, we finally zoned out for the night, but by six in the morning, I woke to find her peacefully sleeping. I couldn’t help myself and decided to wake her up the one way we both enjoy. We go slow until I’m thrusting into her, because I won’t let her leave this morning without a proper goodbye.

“I can’t,” she breathes out as I spoon around her from behind. That drowsy smile gracing her lips is beautiful when she turns to look back at me.

“You will come again, Vi. On my cock. Now be a good girl and squeeze.” I push in deeper, with her arm looped back around my neck, while my other hand holds her hip in place.

“Dec, I’m going...” Her eyes hood closed while her pussy tightens around me.

The sound of her long moan is broken by my lips crashing down on hers as I feel her spasm.

My own release isn’t far behind, and then we lie there in an entwined mess, making no effort to part, because this embrace with my dick relaxing inside of her feels too damn perfect. It should send me running when Violet lets go of my neck to link our hands together, but I only pull her closer to me.

WE DOZED OFF AGAIN, until I woke the moment that Violet slid out of bed.

Nature is playing a joke on us; bright sun and blue skies. That's not exactly how I feel, but then again, rain every day for the last week was as if nature were encouraging us to stay inside and do what we've done.

Violet emerges from the bathroom, pulling on her dress. I can tell she's avoiding me, or at least keeps her eyes angled away from my direction, even when she sits on the side of the bed.

"Were you going to sneak out?" The corner of my mouth stretches.

"Maybe. It's easier."

I touch her arm and invite her to look at me. "I guess this is..."

"Mm-hm." It's a long moment of holding one another through a gaze. "I'll be in Chicago next weekend to meet a friend," she nearly spits out.

"Will you?" Excitement underlines in my tone.

"We could meet for a coffee if you want? During the day. Public place. As friends do." She nibbles her bottom lip, but her face remains impartial, rather unsure.

Adjusting my body, I lean to kiss her shoulder and flash her my eyes that have won me fans. "I'll be seeing you for a coffee then."

A coffee meeting is one ambiguous setting because it could mean so many things. But at least I'll get to see her again, because going cold turkey on this woman seems too difficult to fathom, and at least this buys us a little more time.

VIOLET

The taste of cranberry hits my tongue as I take in the scene around me. Jupiter is the bar and restaurant that everyone wants to be at when you're in Chicago if you're young and successful. I've been a few times with Ford, as a lot of his former teammates would hang out here. The exposed brick walls with industrial lighting makes this place perfect for cocktails, and cosmopolitans are my favorite. It's late Saturday afternoon and there isn't an empty seat.

Looking up from my glass, I see Charlotte swallowed her martini in no time and is now sucking on her olive.

"I miss dressing up and drinking overpriced cocktails sometimes," I admit with a relaxing sigh.

"Small-town life not treating you well?" She gives me a skeptical glare before taking hold of her long hair to play with.

I grin to myself. "You won't be able to convince me to move back to the city. I'm very content where I am. It's just nice to be around all of this buzz and dress up." I give myself the once-over, and I'm rocking it in a tight black dress with a zipped V heading dangerously low between my cleavage. I matched the look with hoop earrings and black wedges with ties that wrap from my ankles up to my knee.

"We should totally check out this club that a friend recommended, he can get us on the list. It would be a lot of fun." Charlotte attempts to persuade me with her smile and flashing eyes.

“Maybe. I mean, I’m staying at your place, so why not.” I shrug. “I’m meeting Declan tomorrow at ten for coffee, so I don’t want to be out too late.”

Charlotte instantly scoots to the edge of her seat and rests her chin on her propped arms resting on the small table, clearly invested in our conversation. “Tell me *everything*. I mean, I know how it all started. I still can’t believe you convinced me to get you an invite to that party. I’m so proud of you,” she nearly coos.

“I still can’t believe it, but I’m happy I did. I wanted to be free for a night, and it was an adventure.” Maybe to start with... “You know, I’m kind of relieved that I ended up with Declan’s name that night. A stranger wouldn’t have been the same.”

Charlotte listens with a gaze of admiration. We can’t talk specifics because of the NDA we signed, but we just know we both had an evening of satisfaction and happened to witness the names we pulled.

“But what happened the other week with Declan?” she presses.

My cheeks warm, and I can’t help but blush. “We just had a little fun, that’s it. Nothing more.”

“But you’re meeting for coffee tomorrow. Near his place?” She tips her head slightly to the side.

“I don’t know, we still need to text details.”

“You’ve been texting all week?”

I shake my head. “No, which is for the better, as maybe a Declan detox is good for me. We had a...” I can’t even describe it.

Charlotte indicates to the waitress for another round of drinks by circling her finger between us and giving her best beaming smile, but Charlotte quickly diverts her attention back to me. “So, you just did the whole friends-with-benefits thing for a week and expect to move on?”

“Why not? You do it all the time,” I challenge.

Charlotte chides with a sound. “That’s because I don’t ever see myself being in a long-term relationship. I don’t believe we are made to be tied down to one person. You, on the other hand, moved to freaking nowhere just so you can take part in family dinners at your brother’s house until you find Mr. Right and push out your own little monsters of joy.”

I’m quick to justify. “I’m on a break from trying to find Prince Charming.”

Charlotte grabs my own drink to sip. “No, you’re not. Your thoughts still dream away, and since there are no prospects in town, then you allow yourself to have fun, but as soon as you realize that the future father of your kiddos is right in front of you, then I’m sure you will be hoping for the chance.”

“Exactly. Declan isn’t relationship material, plus Ford would freaking lose it.”

Charlotte widens her arms, causing my drink to spill slightly over her hand. “Oh my God, the brother’s-friend angle is hot. Totally forgot about that. Probably adds a layer to the sex appeal.”

“I mean...” My face must make an odd look. “You’re not wrong.”

The waitress returns with our new round of drinks, and I’m eager to get a sip of my fresh cranberry cocktail.

“Do you really think that Declan is a no-go on the list of future prospects?”

I nearly cough up my drink. “Yes. He has stated it a few times that he can’t be more than a fuck buddy and that was for a week. Besides, now he’s busy with owning a team, which will entail travel, and he can’t even decide on house purchases or what his next few months will look like. Imagine where a woman would come into that.”

Charlotte nurses her fresh martini and leans back on the lounge chair. “Nothing happened to make you think maybe it could be more?”

His warm glances, the way our fingers entwined, the movement of our bodies as one flawless fit, natural

conversation, laughter, and my chest fluttering. “Nope,” I lie and drink from my glass to distract my thoughts.

“Okay, I just... I don’t know. Everyone wants to see a gamechanger where the player turns lovestruck.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t we all, but I will just guard my little heart, thank you very much.”

Charlotte’s phone dings, and she picks it up from the table to view. “A friend is nearby; I’m just going to mention that we’re here in case they want to drop by. I think if we aim to be at the club by ten, then that should be good.”

“Sure. I probably need to grab something to eat if I hope to have any chance of pacing myself.”

“For sure, the food here is to die for. Let’s order a bunch of appetizers.”

Fifteen minutes later, we’ve ordered and are talking about planning a girls’ getaway, when Charlotte throws on a leer that I recognize from our college days as flirty to someone over my shoulder. She is quick to stand and welcome her friend with open arms, and I instantly recognize that it’s Brent. It’s not too surprising, as they do hang out, amongst other things.

“There you are,” he greets her and kisses her cheek, pulling her close, and I swear he squeezes her ass in the process. He looks at me with a suave grin. “Hey, Violet, it’s been a while. I’m sure you remember Declan.” He winks at me.

On cue, Declan appears at his side, and instantly my body feels transfixed. Like Brent, Declan is wearing a dress shirt, blazer, and dark jeans, with no tie, which means the top buttons are undone, and I could drool over the peek of his chest. Declan’s piercing blue eyes strike my own, and his grin is perhaps the smoothest of the two men.

I stand because I was the only one sitting, but it gives ample opportunity for Declan to snake his arm around my middle and pull me close into a side hug. He presses a kiss on my cheek, near my ear, which sends a sensitive vibration all the way to my toes.

“Vi,” he speaks my name with so much possession and heat.

It feels like everyone is staring at me, probably because I’m flushed. “I wasn’t expecting you here. Thought I would only see you tomorrow.” I smile.

“Truthfully, I didn’t know you would be here until I was two blocks away and Brent got a text from Charlotte asking if he wanted to meet for drinks.”

Charlotte reaches out to touch my arm. “I swear I thought Brent was flying solo tonight.” I hear the sincerity in her tone.

“Don’t want me here?” Declan teases me and ignores any response that I may have as he’s guiding us to sit down. We both find ourselves seated tightly next to one another on the oversized chair, albeit a chair built only for one.

I nervously tuck some of my hair behind my ear. “It’s actually a nice surprise. We just ordered a bunch of appetizers and are enjoying our drinks.”

“I’ll order us a round of whiskeys, be right back,” Brent announces, and Charlotte follows him to the bar, probably to leave Declan and me alone.

Declan’s eyes examine the room before settling on a view that seems to be me. “You’re gorgeous tonight.”

“Thanks. You look like you have plans this evening.”

“Not particularly. Brent and I were heading for drinks and were going to see where the night takes us.”

His fingertips land on my knee, and I shiver from his simple touch. “How was your week?” I ask.

“Meetings and more meetings, not to mention I asked the agent for an inspection of the house.”

“Oh?” I grip my cosmo and take a quick sip. “Moving to Lake Spark seems likely then, even if only part-time.”

A soft half-smile appears on his mouth. “Probably. Ford and I need to sign off on a few agreements, but the Spinners will have training next season in Lake Spark. How was your

week? Nugget behaving? The sheriff checking in?” His jaw tenses for a second, and I can tell he’s both teasing me and curious.

I clear my throat, kind of enjoying that I could make him squirm right now. “Nugget said duck it, which I think he meant fuck it, and I didn’t see the sheriff, nor was I looking. My mission was coffee, bouquets, and letting my thighs rest after a week of strenuous exercise.”

He nudges my shoulder with his. “Not forgetting about me?”

I look at him, a bit taken aback by his comment. “Is that what you want me to do?”

“No, not unless it’s better for you.” He isn’t joking, and I don’t like that.

“Well, it’s not. Besides, I’ll be running into you more often, so let’s consider tonight practice, right?”

“Sure. This place is packed with people in the hockey industry. Have to keep my hands to myself unless we want rumors to fly.”

“You’re doing a poor job then,” I tease him.

His response is to squeeze my knee. “Still up for coffee tomorrow? I was thinking of this little spot up near Lincoln Park that has an indoor conservatory with tropical flowers and birds.”

It feels like he put in thought. “My favorite things, flowers and birds to give me nightmares, I love it.”

He takes his scotch that Brent offers him as they reappear, but I still feel Declan’s hand on my knee, and I don’t think he has any plans of removing it.

Brent and Charlotte sit down across from us. “Charlotte and I have decided that after a few rounds here, we can all move on to the club,” Brent explains with his arm hanging off the back of Charlotte’s chair. I really need to ask her if more is going on between them.

“Which club?” Declan asks before his lips hit the rim of his glass.

“Eclipse,” Charlotte states.

Declan’s mouth pauses on his glass before he slowly lowers the drink, and his body seems to tense. “That’s where you want to go?” he double-checks with Brent who smugly nods a yes.

“Violet already told me that she would go with me.” Charlotte smiles tightly at Declan, nearly proud.

“It would be fun with these two,” Brent adds.

Declan snaps his gaze to me. “You said you would go with Charlotte?”

“Yeah, why not?” I shrug.

His face turns serious. I swear I see a vein pulsing in his temple, and his eyes, good Lord, those eyes, so incredibly dark with possession.

Declan takes hold of my arm. “Excuse us for a second,” he informs Brent and Charlotte.

He pulls me up before I can protest. Declan walks in a fast stride straight to the bathrooms, dragging me close behind. He scans the area to find that it’s quiet and pushes me into a small bathroom with stone walls and acoustic music playing on the speakers.

“What the hell?” I say when I break free from his hold.

He locks the door, marches straight to me, and cradles my head in his hands. I’m beginning to believe that city-Declan is a man fueled by power, and when he’s in Lake Spark, he is a man who lets down a wall or two. Both versions of him, I seem to adore.

“Why would you go to Eclipse with Charlotte?” His voice is clipped.

“Why not? I didn’t know the name of the place. Charlotte just mentioned that she wanted to go to a club, and I said yes.”

His face softens slightly. “Wait, what kind of club do you think she wanted to go to?”

“Music, dancing, I don’t know.” I’m trying to understand what is happening.

Declan pinches the bridge of his nose and smirks. “I can assure you that’s not the kind of club she wants to go to.”

“What do you me—” Then it hits me. “Oh.” It drags out of me.

“Yeah, oh. Charlotte and Brent go there together. They like to have a lot of fun, the more the merrier. They also love to watch. My prediction is that Charlotte was going to spring this on you later in the night.”

“I guess after the last party I went to with her, I might appear willing to tag along.” Charlotte is spontaneous and likes to push my limits, but if we got there and I said no, then she wouldn’t be mad. I glance down at my shoulder to avoid his gaze. “You’re familiar with the club?”

He glances to the side. “In a past life, yes.”

“What if I *do* want to go?”

“Not happening on my watch.” He steps closer, heat radiating off his body. “It seems we both ended up with our friends either lying to ensure we met up tonight or they really are eager to watch us.”

I chortle a laugh because, knowing Charlotte, it’s probably option two. “Should we be flattered?”

Declan slides my hair to one side to expose the curve of my neck. “You should be. Me? I want to kill my friend out there.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to share you or have anyone get a front-row seat to watch the way you come.” His fingers glide along the skin of my shoulder, and I feel my panties getting wrecked.

My breath hitches when a ripple of arousal rolls through my body. “We were just a fling, right? I’m not sure you still get to stake a claim,” I manage to rasp.

Declan dips his head down, and his teeth make contact with my skin to gently nip at my shoulder. “About that... what if we don’t stop?”

Our eyes meet again. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not the guy for romantic sunsets, but I don’t want this thing between us to end. Tell me you feel that way too.” His hand grips my hair behind my neck to hold me in place, while his other hand skims up my thigh. “Tell me,” he whispers with assertion.

“Were we really going to have coffee tomorrow?”

A sinister chuckle rumbles in his throat. “I was going to try. I do enjoy listening to you talk but how long we would have lasted there, I’m not sure. I had a busy week, but you stayed in my head. God, I hate the idea of anyone getting to see you looking like this.”

“That’s kind of how this goes when you’re not with someone,” I highlight the fact.

“I know, but I don’t want our week to end. We’re both single and enjoy one another, so why not keep it going?”

I smile, as I was hoping tomorrow at coffee that he would tell me he was miserable the last week without me, and it appears that is the case.

This time I’m the one stepping closer to him. “What are the rules this time?”

His thumb pushes against my bottom lip. “I don’t know. We keep going, and when one of us can’t handle it anymore, then we’re open with the other and stop.”

Risky. I know it is. But it’s also exhilarating.

I nod gently in agreement.

“I guess no coffee tomorrow.” He begins to grin and lolls his head gently to the side. “Or maybe that depends on when

we actually get out of bed.”

“I’m supposed to be staying with Charlotte,” I counter with a grin.

In a flash, he spins my body to press my front against the sink, and our eyes lock in the mirror before his hand lands at the base of my throat to keep me in place. He urges my body to bend forward as he yanks at my panties under my dress.

“You’re not staying with her. Nor are you going anywhere with her.”

“What if I want to watch or be watched. Can we go if I promise nobody can touch me but you?” I’m challenging him or maybe deep down a desire swirls and inches to the surface.

The feeling of his hard cock nudges my lower back. “Are you trying to test me?” he grits out. “Not funny.”

“Whatever will I do to occupy my Saturday night then?” I play coy.

The sound of his buckle weakens me in the knees. “Allow me to take you right here because fuck their idea of fun.”

Staring at us in the mirror, I appreciate the fact that both of our faces demonstrate a lustful need for each other.

His hands dig into my hips to position me better in an angle, with the tip of his cock sliding along my slit. “Shit, condom.”

“Pill,” I answer. Concern flickers in his face, and I remember what he once shared with me. “I take it religiously, you can check my purse.”

His face softens as he scoffs a sound. “Of everyone, I trust you the most.” His tone is full of reverence.

“And we know that we’re both safe, since...” We both look in the mirror and laugh. We had to prove our health check before the party, and we’ve only been with one another since.

“Watch in the mirror while I fuck you, Vi,” he demands.

The moment he pushes into me, I’m thankful for the sink as my support.

“Watch us,” he encourages. “We look good together.”

Yeah. Yeah, we do.

Everything inside of me shoots a warning flare, but equally, instinct tells me to hang on because just maybe this could be more.

DECLAN

W *hat have I done?*

That's what comes to my mind when I stare down at Violet sleeping in my bed like she belongs here.

It slipped out of my mouth last night that we should keep seeing one another. I can't even blame it on a cloud of lust; it's what I want deep down. One night wasn't enough, one week wasn't enough, and whatever our timestamp will be from now on, I'm not sure that it will ever be enough.

Maybe I'm in the infatuation zone.

I gently trace my finger along her arm like a feather, careful not to wake her. I'm sure she could use the rest after what went down last night.

After the bathroom tryst, it was a quick change of plans. We had our fun in the bathroom, then quickly rushed out and said goodbye to our friends to move onto other plans. Our friends seemed to have been anticipating that, as they waited for us with smirks on their faces, although they seemed slightly disappointed that we wouldn't be joining them.

In another time, I would have been disappointed too. But I simply hate the idea of anyone watching Violet. It's a protective wave that just comes over me whenever she's involved. It unnerves me, as I'm not used to that.

A soft smile spreads on my lips as she snuggles closer with the pillow. Deciding that she isn't going to wake anytime soon, I throw on some shorts and a t-shirt then head to the kitchen to

grab a coffee before I sit in my home office and flip open my laptop.

I might as well go through some work emails, because there are a lot. Between marketing, strategy, coaching staff, and a calendar that is getting filled with so many appointments, I'm getting drowned in the business.

My feet don't even get to touch the ice for any of it. At least I was able to help at Ford's summer camp, that gave me a few hours at the rink.

Pulling up the search bar, I type in my name to click on a few highlights of my old games. It's not so bad watching your past life.

That is until a voice points out the obvious. "Sending yourself into a bout of depression?" Violet walks into my office, wearing my shirt. I didn't leave one out, but I like that she dug through my drawer as if she owns the place.

I open my arm to invite her to sit on my lap. "You caught me. I should probably find a documentary on owning a team or something."

She slides right onto my lap, with her palm pressing against my chest. "Probably, but you do things your own way. Are you at least excited for your new adventure? I mean, sometimes I wonder."

"It's the next best thing to playing," I say honestly.

"Not coaching?"

I snicker a sound. "You know what I'm going to say, right?"

Violet shakes her head, oblivious.

"There is a hierarchy with a team, and owner trumps coach. I want to be on top."

She struggles to contain her laugh, but then it escapes her mouth, and the sound fills the room with a lightness that I need in my life.

"That is not a surprise," she reaffirms.

My head tilts to the side. “Thought you would think that way.”

Her fingers play with the hairs at the back of my neck while we take a few seconds to stare at one another, because we didn’t plan on this. A lopsided nervous smile appears on her mouth. “Uhm, about last night...”

“Yeah?” I’m curious how she is going to lead us into this conversation, which causes her to gawk her eyes at me because she knows that’s exactly what I’m doing.

“It’s okay if we got caught up in the moment...” She’s struggling to beat around the bush.

“We can do casual.” I swipe some of her hair behind her ear.

She bites the inside of her cheek. “Yeah, so casual... without Ford finding out.”

“Probably wise.” I’m not sure he would appreciate the sentiment of not being serious with his sister. “Which means I need to scrap the whole ‘will you be my plus-one for a few social events I have coming up.’”

“What will you do then?” Her head perks up.

“Go solo.”

“Okay. And the moment that I feel this isn’t good for me, then I tell you.”

I lean in to kiss her neck. “Likewise. Now, how about we go grab breakfast from that spot I told you about.”

She lets out a laugh. “I think being with one another in public when we’re not platonic is kind of against the point.”

I grin at her. “Lucky for us, I have enough money to rent out their private room and ensure we have privacy. In an hour?”

Violet’s arms loop around my neck to pull herself closer to me, her tits right below my face. “I have nothing to wear since you destroyed my clothes somewhere between the elevator and the kitchen.”

“Two hours then, and I’ll buy you a new outfit.”

“Ooh, big spender, you should definitely make me earn it.” This is her way of leading us into trouble. I know, because great minds think alike.

“Damn straight. Now sit on top of me and use my cock the way you want to.”

Her sultry smirk informs me that she’s on board and stands up only to swing one leg to the other side of my lap. In one swoop, she lifts my shirt off her body to be fully naked and on top of me.

I free my cock from my shorts and allow my mouth to trace the curve of her breasts.

“You know, last time I was here at your place, you left before I woke,” she softly comments.

It catches me off guard, and I stop my trail on her breasts. Guilt hits me, but then I know it’s a distant memory, because for some reason, I feel like something else defines us. I latch on to her nipple to kiss while her head falls back.

“I’ll make it up to you, I promise,” I say against her nipple. “Use me the way you need, Vi.”

She aligns me with her opening and sinks down, her warm heat wrapping around me like a perfect glove.

No condoms with her is going to mess with my head, I know it, because I can never go back with her, and this feeling is pure indulgence, even more that it’s a type of closeness that is intensified when you already care for someone.

“Declan, is this what you want?” Her sweet moan follows the rhythm of her slow thrusts.

I use my hands to bring her breasts together as she moves on top of me. “Yes, baby, exactly like this. Clench harder,” I urge.

She clamps down, and my eyes nearly roll to the back of my head. This woman is sexual dynamite with a heart of gold. And I hate the fucking guy who will claim forever with her.

But right now, she is mine, which is why my lips crash against hers to ensure we are completely one, until she convulses around my length, taking my own orgasm with her.

I FASTEN my watch around my wrist, and Violet emerges from the bathroom in a summer dress that I had sent over from a boutique a few blocks down. I had them send over a few options, plus lingerie, in case we lose this dress too somehow in one of our morning escapades.

Violet looked concerned that my call to the boutique was so simple, then she eased when I assured her that I knew of the place because my cousin stayed here a few months ago and she studies fashion.

“Okay, I think I’m ready. I got a text from Charlotte that I can just get my car from her place whenever by asking the doorman for access to her garage. She’s not at home, surprise, surprise.” Violet’s tone is the opposite of her words.

We look at one another with a knowing thought.

“They probably went to an after-party, and who knows where they are,” I add.

Violet holds a hand up. “I don’t want to know. Besides, I’m starving.”

I walk behind her and gently pat her ass to scoot her out of my room. “As you should be.”

My phone chimes a sound, and I pull it up from my pocket to see Ford is video calling me. “Shit.” I show Violet the screen, and her eyes blaze.

Yet, instead of ignoring it, I answer, since Violet is out of view. “Hey, man.” I smile. “What’s going on?”

Ford looks like he’s lying by his pool. “Just wanted to check if you’re going to the team reunion leading up to pre-season games. I got the email from the team, and then another email from marketing about a press conference. I don’t know, I

just go with the flow, but thought I would touch base that you also got it so that we're on the same wavelength."

I scratch the back of my head while I balance the phone. Meanwhile, Violet smirks at me while she reaches for the buckle on my jeans to mess with me.

"Yeah, I saw something come in but didn't open it." I attempt to shoo her away to no avail, and I do my best not to crack a laugh in front of Ford, but he must pick up on something, as his face changes to entertainment.

"I think I'm interrupting?" He smirks.

Violet's face is pure mischief.

"No, it's okay. I was just heading out, need to get my day moving."

Her fingers curl into the waistband of my jeans, and I do my best to keep my face straight.

"I'll let you go then, and just give me a call next time you're in Lake Spark, we can grab a beer."

"For sure." My voice is strained.

The moment the call ends, Violet's head falls back as she laughs. Immediately, I tickle her which only causes her laughter to grow. "Are you kidding me? With your brother on the other end?"

"Oopsies." She flashes her eyes at me.

"What happened to a peaceful breakfast?" I ask.

She clings to the front of my shirt to yank me gently in her direction. "It went out the window the moment you joined me in the shower earlier."

"No, it went out the window the moment I saw you last night in that dress," I reply.

A lie. I've been thrown upside down since I pulled her name all those weeks ago.

DECLAN

Not going to deny it, there is a bit of pep to my step as I walk along Lake Spark's Main Street holding a tray of two coffees, intending to surprise Violet.

The sun is out, and my mood is great.

But since the other week after agreeing to keep seeing one another, then I've been in a damn good mood. We've been texting all week, but still, she doesn't know that I'm swinging through Lake Spark today.

With a satisfied grin on my mouth, I balance the tray of coffees, and with my other hand, I swipe my sunglasses off my face as I use my back to push the door to The Flower Jar open, with the bell announcing my arrival.

But then I instantly stop in my tracks when I hear Ford's voice deep in conversation about babies as he leans against the table where Violet is cutting a few stems.

Ford's head turns in my direction, while Violet looks up and smiles, but her eyes turn slightly fearful when they bounce between her brother and me.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Ford, at least, seems happy to see me. "Didn't know you were in town."

"Hey." My greeting isn't as steady. "Yeah, I... was going to do another walkthrough with my realtor before placing an offer. A last-minute kind of thing."

"Sounds like you're ready to settle here, which is great." He looks around the shop then back at me. "What brings you

to The Flower Jar?”

“I...” I’m not sure how to get myself out of this one. Violet is behind Ford’s view and begins to gesture with her hands a steering wheel then points to Ford. “I... noticed your car.” I think that’s what she was going for, and she nods. “Yeah, noticed your car parked nearby and thought I would stop by to say hi.”

“Cool.” He hikes a thumb at his sister. “I was just telling Violet about the latest doctor’s appointment for Brielle. This baby is going to be huge, the biggest yet.”

“Fun,” I simply state.

Ford’s eyes turned puzzled when he notices the coffees in my hands. “What’s with the second coffee?”

“Duck it,” the parrot chirps.

We all look at the bird then awkwardly at one another, with Violet letting out a nervous laugh.

“Thought I would bring a coffee to my real estate agent,” I lie.

“Jolly Joe’s, excellent choice,” Violet adds, but her eyes tell me she appreciates the effort that I’m bringing her favorite.

Ford walks to me and places his hand on my shoulder. “See? Lake Spark is rubbing off on you. I bet you’re like the rest of us and on a mission to get a purple jellybean.”

“Yeah... I heard they’re rare,” I reply. Just like Violet.

“If you want, you should stop by the rink later,” he offers.

“Thanks, but I’m a bit short on time today, but I’ll be back soon,” I promise him.

Ford looks between Violet and me, and maybe he picks on the fact that I can’t keep my hands off his sister when he isn’t around. I’m not sure, but he seems to have a peculiar look flash across his face as we have a break in conversation.

That is until Violet disrupts the silence. “Just text me what time you and Brielle want to leave this weekend, and I’ll be there.”

Ford glances to Violet with appreciation. “Thanks.” His sight lands on me again. “She’s helping us out with babysitting. She’s special, this one.”

Okay, now I’m certain that he is trying to transmit a secret message to me.

I stand a bit taller as he says goodbye, looks at me skeptically, and walks out.

Violet and I look at one another, holding our breath, until she heaves a sigh when she feels the coast is clear.

Stepping forward, I bring the coffees to the table. “Wasn’t anticipating him being here,” I admit.

“Wasn’t anticipating you being here.” She smiles softly.

Offering her the coffee cup, I state the obvious. “That’s called the element of surprise.”

“Do you really have an appointment?” she wonders as she takes a sip of her drink.

My head bobs side to side. “Yes... only after I arranged it. I was hoping that I could steal you away for lunch.”

“We might be destined to hide in the closet in the back since Tilly called in sick, so I’m here alone.” She sits down on her stool to get comfortable.

“Doable.” I allow myself to drown in the view of her for a few extra seconds. “Everything okay with Ford?”

“Yeah, he was just stopping by, going over the rules for the kids, and checking if I’m ready to hit the dating scene, as he would like to see me get out there more. That’s when I told him that he shouldn’t worry, as his hot friend is banging me against walls on a regular basis now.” A smirk curls on her lips which informs me that she’s messing with me, at least for the last sentence.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I hold up a finger to indicate for Violet to wait a second. Glancing at the screen, I groan when I see my father’s name.

Violet scoffs a sound. “*Still* avoiding your parents?”

Tucking the phone back into my jeans pocket, I roll my eyes. “Kind of. My mother not so much, but my dad... It’s just... I don’t want to disappoint him or appear overly selfish, even though I know that is 100% what I am.”

“Ah, so it’s your issue, not his. You’re afraid of what you might feel when you see him face to face and confront the fact that Declan Dash will not be taking over the family empire, despite being the only child and getting everything he normally wants.” Her wry smile doesn’t fade.

“Something like that.” Swallowing the last sip of my cortado, a little pebble hits the lid. I take the lid off and have to grin. “A sign?” I show her the cup with the purple jellybean that must be covered in who knows what food coloring to have survived my coffee.

“Maybe.” Violet swirls off her stool and walks around the counter to stand in front of me. “I guess things we believe are impossible don’t seem so hard once it happens.”

I narrow my eyes at this beautiful vixen in front of me. “Are you trying to connect the jellybean to my parents?”

Her lips quirk out. “Is it getting the wheels in your head turning?” She slips her arm around my waist.

“Maybe.”

“Trust me, you will focus better once you face your parents.”

I pinch her stomach and pull her closer. “I know you’re right. I’ve been holding off on seeing them, but they want me to have dinner with them this weekend. What are the chances I can see you after to recover?”

“Zero, sadly. I’m babysitting my nephews and plan on enjoying the pool after they go to sleep.”

I wince at the thought of her in a bikini alone and me nowhere in sight. “What an image in my head now.”

“You know I appreciate that you stopped by and brought me coffee, it’s cute.”

“Babe, I’m not cute.”

“You kind of are,” she argues. “My point is that I wasn’t sure when I would see you again, but here you are.”

“Want to know a secret?” I whisper.

“Yes.”

“I have no clue what I’m doing other than I had an urge to see you.”

She checks nobody is outside. “Well, I *may* know the feeling. Now, follow me to the closet and let me blow your mind so you have something to think about when you see your parents.”

MY MOTHER CAN’T STOP SMILING as she grabs a few vegetables from the tray on the table. She’s a contrast to my father who hasn’t said much, nor blinked as he continues to stare at me.

“Carrot?” She offers me the plate. I can tell she went to the salon today, as her blonde hair is partially curled, and her nails seem freshly painted.

I shake my head. “No, thanks.”

“We are so happy you’re finally joining us for dinner. I know you’ve been busy, but we always appreciate when you make a little time for us.”

My lips stretch from her sentiment, and I glance at the wall of their dining room which has my signed jersey and a photo of me holding a trophy. “New?” I indicate with my head.

Dad chuckles. “You mean the shrine to our beloved, only, and firstborn son? Why, yes. That is exactly what your mother was going for.” Even with his face stern, he manages to execute sarcasm with perfection.

It causes me to grin. “Should we just lay this all out on the table? I’m not planning on taking over the business. You know it’s not about money, I have that from my own doing.”

My mother touches my hand on the table. “We know, it’s about what you enjoy. Right, Walter?” Her eyes aim a warning at my father.

He grabs hold of his scotch. “We let the boy enjoy his hockey career. He can’t take a little time to give back to this family?”

“You have people who are by far more suited to handling maple syrup,” I explain. “Besides, I’m still young and need to ensure I enjoy my life ahead.”

Maybe Violet was right, and this isn’t as bad as I had built up in my head. After the initial look from my father, walking into the dining room to a well-spread meal seemed like a piece of cake. Now words just flow out of me.

“You’re the only one who can carry on the name,” he nearly grumbles, “unless you get to work on settling down with someone to give us grandkids, but nothing you have done has ever indicated that’s on your mind. Hell, you’ve never even introduced us to a woman.”

“Now isn’t the time to pressure him to settle down.” My mother flashes him an unimpressed look before turning her attention to me. “Your father just had it in his heart that after your hockey career, you would spend more time with him to take on the company. But you kind of took us by surprise with your grand purchase.”

“You mean the hockey team? Yeah, because if I can’t play, then I still want to be involved. It’s too much in my blood,” I clarify.

“Of course, dear, but maybe you can find a way to balance your time a little.” She’s trying to offer an olive branch to the two men at this table.

“Heaven help us, Pearl, I probably would have to have a heart attack before Declan even considers.”

I rub my forehead, now getting aggravated. “This is beginning to feel like a bad idea that I ca—”

“No!” my mother cuts me off. “We have to start somewhere. Your father’s pride is just a little hurt that you

don't want to take interest in his company. After so many years of watching you succeed on the ice, we thought you could bring that passion to the corporate table now that life will quiet down for you."

"I will succeed, on the business side of hockey. You both love maple syrup and dancing bears, while I love hockey; let's just agree to disagree. I'm sure we will eventually find something that we can all enjoy together," I say before I grab a stick of celery from the tray, because it's desperate times if you grab the freaking celery.

"What a wonderful way to look at it. So tell us, what will you do with the Spinners?" Give this woman an award for trying hard.

I crunch on the celery. "I'm moving trainings out to Lake Spark for better focus. I'm going to get a house there too."

She claps her hands together. "Get out of the city, that's a great idea."

My father makes a low grumbly sound. "A house there is always a good investment." Damn, he just gave me a compliment.

"We should go visit, Walter," my mom suggests.

"Suppose it's a good spot for a weekend away from the suburbs. Haven't been that way in years." Huh, he's more agreeable.

"Ford, remember him? He lives out there, along with a few other athletes," I add.

"Always liked Ford, he's a family man. You know, there used to be a maple syrup festival out there. Wonder whatever happened to it." He seems to be lost in thought, although calm.

My mom smiles widely at me, as it seems we are finding neutral ground, and seeing them does make the situation slightly easier to handle. Of course, I feel guilt that I'm not following my old man, but looking at these two, I know with certainty that they do love me. We just need to navigate our road a little better, and I sure as hell shouldn't shut them out.

A cheese plate is offered in front of me, and as I'm about to tuck in, my phone goes off on the table.

"No phones at the table," my mother chides.

I see an incoming video call from Violet, which is odd, because I know she's babysitting.

"Give me a minute, I kind of need to take this," I say before sliding off my chair and hitting the green button with my thumb. "Hey, Vi, what's going on?"

I vaguely hear my mom say, "*Ooh, a woman,*" in the background before I manage to leave the room and find a quiet spot in the main hallway at the bottom of the wraparound stairs.

"I'm totally fu—" She looks at Wyatt who she's bouncing in her arms. "Ducked. Totally ducked." Violet sets the toddler on the ground, and her face is a mask of pure panic, and she looks exhausted.

"What's going on?"

She attempts to breathe normally. "I told him he could have two friends over. Two guy friends and they could chill by the pool. Two." Violet grabs her hair in frustration before her eyes catch something off screen. "Oh no, Wyatt don't eat Puck's food." She sets the phone down on what seems to be the kitchen counter and is propped up against something so I get full view.

"Puck? What? Violet, you're scaring me."

The screen shows me that she rushed to Wyatt who is eating dog food from the bowl while a Labrador runs across the screen. She takes Wyatt into her arms and returns to the phone.

"I went upstairs to do bath time and get the cute kid ready for bed, only an hour later I came downstairs to find that the bad kid had multiplied two to God knows what number, and it's freaking Project X outside, with every teenager in a ten-mile radius."

"Shit. Connor is throwing a party?"

She nods her head repeatedly. “This is so bad. I swear I saw Spencer’s daughter out there, which means he will go through the roof. I don’t have it in me to call Ford. This is their last chance to be alone before they’re a family of five, and hell, I know they volunteered for that, but Brielle doesn’t deserve her weekend of relaxation to be ruined. I mean, I was sixteen once, I just need to think like them and be one step ahead. I can beat them at their little game.”

I give her an awkward look. “What would sixteen-year-old you have been up to?”

Violet takes a moment to think as her lips curl into her mouth. “Bad. This is very bad.” She glances off-screen again. “Puck, what do you have in your mouth? What the fuck is that can?” Violet looks back at the screen with her eyes blazing with more loss of what to do.

Her night is a disaster, far more than the mini storm happening in my parents’ dining room.

A shaky breath escapes her mouth. “Maybe I just hose them all down?” Her voice squeaks.

In my mind, I walk through what I just talked about with my parents. I know they were subtly calling me out on my selfish move, but I’m ready to prove them wrong. Not just with hockey but also with the people that I care about.

I refuse to let Violet go through this alone.

“I’m at my parents’ house, which means I can get to you in forty-five minutes. Hang on, I’m on my way.”

DECLAN

I mmediately, I rush to Violet who is walking down the stairs, while the music's pulsing base is low in the background.

"You didn't have to come," she says as she scratches the back of her head.

"I wasn't going to leave you alone in the trenches." I squeeze her arms for comfort.

"I got Wyatt to sleep, but I have no idea if the party outside will keep raging. It's so stupid, I know all I have to do is head out there and demand they all leave, but then..."

"You're no longer the cool aunt. Plus, in all honesty, I think the odds of a group of mostly 16-year-old-boys listening to the hot twenty-something woman are kind of slim. They might be distracted." I attempt to make her smile.

"I'm so angry. Connor has never put me in this position." I can easily sense that Violet is deeply disappointed.

I bring my arm around her shoulders, and we walk to the kitchen. "Let's come up with a game plan."

We head straight to the window by the kitchen sink to peek outside. The florescent-blue pool light gives us a view, along with the outside lighting around the deck where teenagers are gathered.

"At least they have good taste in music," Violet attempts to joke.

I listen closer, and my head naturally bobs. “Imagine Dragons are a solid choice. Heard they put on a good concert.”

Violet focuses on me for a second. “I wanted to go, but tickets are hard to get.”

I scoff. “I’ll make it happen. Now let’s focus.”

We both examine the scene again.

“There are boys and girls, just great.” She scowls. We both angle our heads as we observe the jungle outside. “I’m pretty positive that make-out central is happening over on the chaise lounge by the pool.”

I grimace at the scene, but I search for Connor who is sitting on the top step of the pool, laughing as someone passes him a drink. Then his eyes dart across the pool, and I recognize Hadley, the next-door neighbor, who is Spencer’s daughter.

“Could be worse, at least it’s not our guy making out. What do we do about Hadley?”

“Sneak her back to her house, maybe I text April, but Hadley is harmless. She has a crush on Connor, so she stops by a lot. What are the chances they’re all drinking alcohol?”

“Uh...” An awkward sound is the only thing I manage to respond with.

Violet groans. “I hope zero, but yeah, sixteen-year-old me knows better. I mean, I think Connor is responsible enough not to drink, but I can’t say the same for his friends.”

“The boat keys?”

Violet shakes her head. “Ford keeps the keys locked in his home office.”

I blow out a long breath. “There is only way to do this...”

“Turn off the electricity?” she retorts.

“I’ll be the bad guy.”

“What?” She looks at me.

I nod. “Yeah, I’ll be the bad guy and go out there and shut this shit down right away.”

“We’re a team in this.” She wants to debate.

“There is also a sleeping toddler upstairs and a Labrador hyped up on who knows what.”

She tilts her shoulder up. “Puck is always hyped up, he likes people.”

I comb my fingers through my hair. “I’m going in.”

Violet protests, but I’m already enraged on adrenaline. I kiss her forehead then walk away, noticing the fruit bowl, and I empty it before bringing it with me as I dart outside through the sliding doors.

The moment I’m outside, the music grows loud and is mixed with laughter. I charge straight for Connor, demanding on my journey that phones and keys go in the bowl to anyone who crosses my path, and I ignore the eyes all following my line of travel.

“Connor!” I yell out.

He glances up and then grins. “Hey, Declan, what are you doing—?”

I interject with a seething voice. “Ending this. Now.”

Connor stands up and seems to be unfazed. “Come on, it’s just a little gathering.”

I yank the plastic cup from his hand. “Really?” I sniff the cup, and it smells like a mix of Kool-Aid and alcohol. “What the hell is this?”

“Just punch.”

My eyes grow bold. “Screw that. We’re not going to play stupid right now, so don’t even try it. Hurry up, everyone, phones and keys in the bowl,” I call out, then resume my conversation with Connor. “Where did you get this?”

His eyes dip low. “A friend brought it,” he mumbles.

“Music off,” I call out to the crew, and a few seconds later, the music fades. I have no misgivings that all eyes are on us or that someone is probably filming this as I heard a few people whisper, “*Oh my God, it’s Declan Dash,*” but chose to ignore it.

“This isn’t even your house, what are you going to do about it?” He stands tall, ready to challenge me.

I pinch my nose, purely entertained yet pissed, and I step closer to him. “Don’t mess with me, Connor, I hold all the cards. Now is the time to send all your little friends packing, after you tell me who the hell is driving so we can ensure everyone gets home safe.” I’m in a death-stare competition with a teenager, and this is not how I thought my night would go.

“You know how it is. Can’t you just let us have a little fun?” he tries again.

My face doesn’t flinch. “No. By all means, have fun, but not when your aunt is being kind enough to take care of you guys for the weekend because your mom and dad are away to enjoy a little quiet time before your new baby brother enters the world, which means, let’s not upset your very pregnant mother. So wrap. This. Shit. Up. Now.”

Connor grumbles but nods to a friend somewhere behind me. “Party’s over.” He sighs, and everyone begins to stir.

“This is how this is going to go. First, nobody gets their phone or keys until I’m 100% sure whoever the hell is driving is sober. Those phones? I don’t want to see one single photo or video from this evening on it. Second, I’m not going to make you snitch who the hell brought the jungle juice, but I want to see every damn drop thrown out. Finally, I don’t care how hungover you are tomorrow, because trust me, you will be, but you know it doesn’t matter, because you’re going to clean this place up, then you’re going to volunteer at your aunt’s flower shop for the next three weeks. I’m sure Nugget will appreciate you cleaning his cage. Now move.” I cross my arms, proud that I’m standing firm, because this is every version of myself that I would have hated at his age.

He groans but gets moving.

HEAVING AN EXHAUSTING BREATH, I close the front door behind me after making sure the last of the teenagers are headed home safely. I'm pretty sure it's the eighteen-year-old with older brothers or a good fake ID who brought the punch, but I'm picking my battles tonight.

Violet's sitting at the bottom of the stairs with so much appreciation glazing over her eyes that it's not a surprise when she jumps up to throw her arms around me and plant a kiss on my lips, which I gladly take as my reward.

It's a long, hard kiss that nearly makes me forget the last hour.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." She peppers kisses along my jawline.

"No problem."

She chortles. "Liar."

The sound of Connor entering through the back door breaks our attention, yet we seem to forget to detangle our arms. I made him walk Hadley to the property line next door because it's close. Spencer may kill us, and I wanted to throw Hadley one bone for the evening since she was the easiest of all the kids.

"You know there are baby monitor cameras like everywhere inside this place," he informs us, rather cool in tone.

Violet backs up like a hot potato. "Shit, forgot about that."

Connor slides onto a stool. "You guys are such amateurs. Lucky for you, I hacked the system and turned them off earlier this evening. Looks like I saved your little secret budding romance." He throws his feet up on the counter. "Oh, whatever will you do to repay me for that... or shall I just share the news with Dad tomorrow? He will *love* it."

“Oh my God, the jungle juice created a monster,” Violet mumbles under her breath.

I walk straight to Connor and knock his feet off the counter with my hand. “Blackmailing me? Is that what you are trying to do?” I’m unfazed by his attempt.

“Let’s call it even.” Connor attempts to square off with me.

I wave my finger side to side at him. “Nope. Call it another stupid choice on your evening of bad decisions because...” I step into his space which seems to irritate him. “This game that you want to play, only I can score. First off, you didn’t see anything, your aunt and I are friends who gave one another a hug. Alcohol confuses you, clearly. Also, you know that little hockey career that you want so badly? You’re playing varsity this year, right?” I tap my finger on my chin. “I’m old friends with your coach. In fact, he often calls me for advice on players and rosters, and I would hate to forget your name in a momentary lapse of judgment.”

Connor’s face falls when he realizes that I hold the upper hand. “You wouldn’t.”

“I love a challenge. Oh yeah, and then there is, of course, the fact the Spinners will start training here in Lake Spark. That could be a total bonus for you... if you keep your head above water, that is.”

He growls before he slides off the chair. “Fine. You two win... this round.”

Connor storms off, and then I notice Violet with her jaw low and her eyes wide with amazement.

“Who are you tonight?” Her jaw snaps shut, and her lips curl into a smile. “Are you really friends with his coach?”

“Nah, I have no clue who he is, but Connor doesn’t know that.” I take a few steps and walk straight into her open arms. “He’s going to be a little out of sorts tomorrow morning.”

“I know. You’ll stay? It’s late, and I don’t want you on the roads.” There is so much care in her tone. “Nothing exciting will happen, since this is kind of my brother’s house. There is a teething toddler upstairs, an overexcited dog, and a teenager

who may just burn the world down, but ya know, we're just keeping it real." She pops her lips.

Something about that scenario sounds kind of appealing right now. I'm right where I should be.

"I'm not going anywhere," I promise.

WE STAYED up only for a little bit, recalling our own teenage years, which caused us to come to the same conclusion that we were both kind of wild. We fell asleep on the couch, which is for the best, as it appears more platonic, in case Connor was looking for more evidence. Now, we've been up for an hour thanks to Wyatt who decided seven is the ideal time to wake on the weekends.

He's bouncing on my lap as we sit at the dining table with his craft box. Wyatt is drawing with a thick crayon, while I fold paper and create a few origami animals for him. Occasionally, I glance up to watch Violet tidying up the kitchen, and to be honest, I kind of enjoy this whole setup.

I mean, even Wyatt's plate of cut-up toasted waffles and fruit were kind of tasty when he decided to feed me a few bites.

The feeling of wet slobber on my thigh brings my attention to Puck who just delivered his tennis ball to me... for the hundredth time.

"Hey, Vi, what's up with this dog? He won't stop chasing the ball."

"Well, he is a *retriever*. But you're right, and Ford is training him for some competition." Violet walks to the table with two fresh mugs of coffee. "Here you go, my superhero."

"Thanks."

This is a nice little routine. I don't remember my parents ever being this way. I mean, they love one another, but my dad's head would always be buried behind a newspaper while

my mother looked on. It was never everyone at a table doing something together. Hell, even the dog wants in on the action.

Violet grabs a sheet of paper and attempts to fold, but then gives up. “I’ll leave it to the pros. Anyway, I can’t thank you enough.”

“No problem. Are you going to tell Ford?” I wonder.

Her eyes flick to mine. “About us?”

I gently shake my head. “Connor,” I clarify.

She sighs. “It’s the responsible thing to do since he was drinking. I might leave out a few details. This will for sure take me down a notch on my nephew’s cool list.”

“And... about us?”

The tip of her tongue hits her upper lip. “I don’t think Ford would think us being together is a good thing unless we are together-together. No brother wants to hear about the friend with benefits, especially if it’s with *their* friend.”

“Right.” I don’t have an answer, nor do I like hers.

She smiles at me. “We never got a chance to chat about your parents. How was it?”

I pass another crayon to Wyatt. “Not bad at all. You were right, it was more in my head. I think we can find our way and maybe meet in the middle. I know I’m disappointing them, my dad for sure, but seeing one another face to face helped. They even got a little excited about Lake Spark.”

Her face turns elated. “That’s great. I’m so happy for you. I can only imagine that being the only child makes it more... sensitive for them. Can I ask if they wanted more children?”

“They did and tried, but it just never happened, unexplainable. I’m lucky Mom doesn’t push the whole grandkids thing... yet. I can imagine that it’s something she wants. I guess I don’t win many points for being son of the year when it comes to them.”

Violet props her foot up on her chair, bringing her knee up to her chest. “Don’t assume. I’m sorry I took you away from

them over something so silly. I feel like I should send flowers as an apology or something.”

I chuckle. “My mom would lose her cool and get excited that a woman I know sent her flowers.”

Violet laughs. “We can’t have that, now, can we?”

Yet I wouldn’t mind if they met Violet. She would make them smile and bring us all peace through her sunny perspective on life.

“Green,” Wyatt says and points to another crayon.

Violet picks up a paper swan and examines it. “You have a lot of hidden skills.”

“You know about my paper talent.”

“No, I mean with kids too.”

Before I can ponder, a grumbling Connor arrives down the stairs. “Aunt Violet, I don’t feel too good.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s called regret.”

Violet chuckles softly and gets up off the chair to walk to her nephew. She gives him a hug, even though the guy doesn’t deserve it, then guides him to the kitchen island. “I made you a hangover cure.” Violet grabs a glass with green liquid and a bottle of tabasco sauce.

“What the hell, why do I need that?” Connor sounds horrified.

“Trust me.” She dabs a few drops of hot sauce into the glass then hands it to him.

Connor takes a quick sip then begins to gag. “I think I’m going to be sick.” He runs to the bathroom down the hall.

Violet lets a relaxing breath escape while her shoulders lower. “Works every single time. He will feel so much better after it’s all out, and then he will spend his morning cleaning up the backyard. What fun.” She claps her hands together.

Looking around, I decide I’m comfortable right where I am. “I’ll stick around... if you want.”

She walks back to me, leans down, covers Wyatt's eyes with her hand, and kisses me quickly on the lips. "Let me make you a real breakfast then, because I would love if you stayed."

Me too.

Because apparently this chaos is a side of life that I didn't realize could be appealing, especially if it has Violet shimmying her fine ass to the kitchen to cook us eggs.

VIOLET

I flop onto the couch, causing goldfish crackers to spill out of the bowl next to Wyatt who fell asleep beside Declan while they watched Cocomelon. This is a side of Declan that I wasn't expecting to see. Hell, I couldn't have predicted that this was how the weekend would go. I'm not sure why I called him in my moment of panic, but I felt like I could rely on him for advice or anything, and he delivered in full.

He could have rushed off by now, but instead, he's hanging out with us, and my heart warms at the gesture. I glance outside and see Connor is finished cleaning up, as he is walking with a full garbage bag to the back of the garage.

My eyes dart back to Declan while he squeezes a tennis ball, with Puck sitting at full attention and drool running down one side of his mouth.

"I really can't thank you enough. I know this is the last place you want to be." I feel like I'm repeating myself, but it's worth it.

Declan shrugs it off. "It's fine. Ford would want me to help you out during your dire time of need. Plus, this isn't so bad." He leans in closer to me and lowers his voice. "I mean, have you seen the snacks in the pantry here? It's a goldmine!"

I laugh softly, aware that Wyatt is napping, and we didn't have the heart to move him. "That's what happens when you have kids; your pantry becomes the key to utopia."

Declan leans back against the sofa with a wry smile. "You're really in your element now. I mean, the whole family

thing. It suits you.”

“Really? Because I feel like I sprouted a gray hair last night.”

He finally tosses the ball for the dog who goes running. “Nah, you like the chaos. I kind of get it. I mean, you can’t get lost in your own thoughts when you have all of this around you.” He points between Wyatt and the dog, then looks for Connor.

His point of view isn’t far off. “I think you’re right,” I agree.

“Some people have career aspirations on the forefront, and others have family aspirations. You and I are opposites.”

“Hey, who says I don’t want to start a flower empire?” I protest in jest.

He gives me wide eyes. “Do you?”

I think about it for not even a second. “No. I’m happy with one store and a talking parrot.”

“Exactly, and I’m happy with anything hockey.”

Right, this guy doesn’t have his personal life as a priority anytime on the horizon. The reminder is good for me, otherwise the scene in front of me will begin to offer a slither of hope. How can I not be affected by Declan showing me his family-man persona, even if he has no idea that he seems to have it. He’s been nothing but, well, swoony since he got here.

Connor enters the house, interrupting our conversation, luckily.

“I’m done,” he declares.

He walks to the big chair opposite the sofa and flops onto it. “My head hurts.”

Declan and I look at one another, knowing the familiar feeling.

“It will for a little bit, but I already ordered pizza because carbs are your friend.” I know I should go harder on him, but I’m a softy when it comes to Connor.

“Drink more water. Just remember this feeling, because trust me, you never ever want to show up to practice or a game like this. You’re way too young to go down this road,” Declan conveys to him while he wraps his arm around Wyatt to pull him close in a snuggle. I’m not sure he even realizes what he’s doing, it appears so second nature to him.

Again, I shake off the thought, because he’s stated many times that he only does casual.

Connor crosses his arms and nestles deeper into the chair. “I know. I said I’m sorry, and it wasn’t me who brought the alcohol.”

“Hopefully you learned a lesson from this,” I add.

“Yeah,” Connor mumbles.

The sound of the front door opening and the dog running draws all our attention to Ford and Brielle entering the house. They’re home early.

“Hey,” Ford draws out while he sets their bags on the floor. He notices Wyatt sleeping, so keeps his voice low, and although he observes that Declan is here, he doesn’t seem bothered.

Brielle saunters behind him with her natural smile, and her eyes dance between Declan and me. That’s when I notice she’s confident with her theory about us that she presented to me a while ago, as her lips roll in to hide her smile from Ford before she takes a few steps in front of him.

“Has Wyatt been sleeping long?” she asks as she studies the scene and does her best to keep the jumping Labrador at bay from her growing belly.

“Half-hour. You guys are home early,” I say and stand up, nervously tucking my hands in the back pockets of my shorts.

“We left right after lunch and didn’t have any traffic. Looks like Wyatt made a new friend.” My brother’s eyes land on Declan again.

“Yeah, do enlighten us with your explanation on Wyatt’s new friend choice,” Connor remarks to completely mess with

us.

My eyes snap to Connor with a disapproving look. “How about you go grab another water, huh? You know how this is going to go.” I indicate with my head that he should get out of here.

He groans but stalks out of the room, leaving his parents confused and looking curiously at me.

“We had a bit of a situation,” I begin, and Brielle instantly looks panicked, so I hold my hand up to calm her. “It’s fine, all fine. Connor got a little carried away with his friend quota for the evening, and it might have involved a little alcohol, but hey, he learned his lesson.”

“What?!” Ford looks furious.

Damn it, I knew the easy story wouldn’t work.

“I went to give Wyatt a bath, returned downstairs to find a party. Luckily Declan saved the night by ending it and making sure everyone got home safe.”

Ford swipes his hair with his hands, while Brielle’s head dips low.

“It was bound to happen. We were all his age once,” Declan attempts to comfort them.

“I’m so sorry.” Brielle seems mortified.

Ford glances off into the kitchen, and I can tell he is debating which talk to give. He lets out a breath and turns his attention to Declan. “Thanks, man, I owe you. I can imagine man-to-man worked better in that situation.”

“It’s no problem, you would have done the same.” Declan gently moves Wyatt out of his way.

“You guys didn’t call us?” Brielle wonders.

I offer her a sympathetic smile. “Now you know. *After* you enjoyed your little getaway.” Her face is full of fondness and appreciation.

Declan stands and rubs a hand across his jaw. “I think I’m going to head out.”

“Me too, since I think you guys have a fun evening ahead. Pizza should be here soon.”

“Don’t you two want to stay?” Ford asks.

Brielle places a hand on her husband’s arm. “I think they want to run away after this.”

“Exactly what she said,” I tell my brother.

Declan and I begin to walk out of the room.

“Wait.” Ford stops us in our tracks. We both look at him, slightly concerned. “Is something happening between you two?”

The question instantly makes my stomach swirl, as if we’ve been caught out, and I think it excites me, if I’m honest.

“Of course not.” Declan is quick to laugh off his suggestion.

Even though I know it’s for the best, I wish we didn’t have to lie. “I knew Declan was in the area, and I needed a manly touch to deal with the varsity hockey team,” I add.

Ford nods slowly and seems to buy it. Brielle, meanwhile, hides behind her hand over her mouth because she knows exactly what we’re doing.

“Okay, I mean, if there was, I’m not sure I would be cool with it, to be honest.” Ford still eyes us with caution.

I offer a fake smile. “Nothing to worry about then. Just friends.”

He seems convinced, but I know we’re leaving having told the biggest lie of the century.

UNLOCKING MY DOOR, I enter my home, with Declan hot on my heels. I’m lucky he had a weekend bag in his car when he went to visit his parents, because he didn’t have to hesitate over logistics about staying at my place. After last night, I want to do something nice for him. He followed me home in

his car, and I'm sure his Maserati will draw the attention of my nosy neighbors, but I don't really care.

"If you give me twenty minutes, I'll shower then cook dinner. I'm positive I have a stray Cheerio somewhere in my hair," I mention as I toss my keys into the bowl on the side table.

I feel arms wrapping around me from behind, because how dare I forget how insatiable this man is when the setting allows.

"Go enjoy a warm bath, and food will be here in a bit."

I glance over my shoulder with a raised brow. "What do you mean? I'm cooking."

"No, you're not. You deserve to rest and take it easy after what went down. In the car, I called the chef from the Dizzy Duck to send over some stuff." He says it so casually.

Twirling on the balls of my feet, I come face to face with Declan and rope my arms around his neck. "You should be the one taking it easy, and the chef from the Dizzy Duck just won a bunch of awards, and now you're saying he is sending over food?"

"And wine."

My mouth opens then closes. "Is this a connections thing or a threw-some-money-at-them kind of thing? People wait weeks for a reservation there." This is crazy. And expensive. But mostly sweet.

"Not us, babe. Now go relax." Declan slants his shoulder up while he encourages me to walk forward.

I don't unlink from around his neck, and instead, I stand on his toes as he walks, with me hanging off him. "Look at you. If I wasn't wise, then I would call you a romantic. You know, this really ruins my ability to thank you tonight. You've outshined me."

"That's hard to do," he promises.

But a few hours later, and it feels like I'm a tiny speck on the ability to impress. I'm for sure relaxed, and the food was

delicious, right down to the drizzle of sauce on my chicken. I know thought went into the order because we got extra chocolate chip cookies that the inn leaves on pillows but are not on any menu. I feel like Declan asked for that just for me.

Drinking the last sips of wine from our glasses, we stand by the sink.

“Thank you for staying. I would have felt bad if you went back to the city and I didn’t get to give you at least one orgasm this weekend.”

He chuckles. “I’m swamped with meetings this week, but this is a perfect way to head into a new week. Besides, I kind of felt ending the weekend between us with brother bear giving me the stare down wasn’t the way to leave things.” Declan tips back his wine glass to finish the drink.

My eyes enjoy the reality that he’s standing in my kitchen after a dinner where we laughed and talked. “Fun, right?”

“If he ever were to find out, because I’m not sure Connor is going to stay tight-lipped with his theory, then we need to come up with a story.”

“What do you mean?” I hold my glass to my chest.

Declan folds his arms over his chest and leans against the edge of the sink with a suave grin. “Well, we can’t exactly say how we started, now can we?”

“True. Nobody knows about that night except us, which means we are free to make up our own version of events.”

“We ran into one another at the stadium, then...” he begins.

“Again, at a bar in the city...”

“Where I asked about things that scare you.”

My cheeks warm because it seems neither one of us wants to change our sequence of events. “And we got to talking, then you showed up in Lake Spark at my flower shop, relieved that you would never have to impress me with a flower...”

“The bird said to tie you up, but you just wanted to tie me down, and your charming ways kind of wore at me.”

The way he says it, with his eyes locked on me, sends a chill down my spine. It’s a blur between what’s real or pretend right now, especially when he steps closer. Only when I hear the glass clink against the bottom of the sink do I realize that Declan slid it away from my fingers. He cups my face between his palms, and he lowers his mouth onto mine to kiss me.

The kind of kiss that feels confirming.

I’m not sure for what, but I return his kiss with the same force.

My fingers curl into his shirt because I feel like I’m going dizzy or crazy, and I don’t seem to mind.

Pulling gently away, his eyes have a glint that gives me no answers, other than the desire I see.

I interlink our hands, and without any words, walk us to my bedroom where I guide him to sit on the edge of my bed. He watches my every move as I lead, pleased when I drop down onto his lap to straddle him.

Declan’s hands follow the curve of my hipbone down to my ass before he hoists me snug to his body, and instantly, I feel his cock through his jeans.

Our lips fuse together in a kiss that feels far more intimate than it should.

But it only fuels us because he rolls us until I’m on my back and underneath him. Then it feels as though the air snaps between us, a calm after a long day.

We enter a pattern of a kiss, then our eyes dancing, before planting another kiss at random spots on one another’s body.

No need to rush or say anything, because our eyes say it all.

Sex isn’t our priority, yet this feels like something to cherish.

We take our time caressing one another's bodies for what feels like forever, until Declan holds my gaze while he brings two fingers inside of me, and his thumb circles my clit. It's like a magnetic pull that neither one of us can control as my body follows his movements, writhing under his touch.

Slow, we never rush. We enjoy the taste of one another at the same time, and when he pushes inside of me with his cock, I get lost in him.

Because when I see our hands connected against the mattress as Declan moves inside of me—no dirty talk, just our breaths and moans merging into a synced sound—then I realize we're entering new territory that I'm not sure either one of us anticipated.

VIOLET

I trace my finger over the words on my phone.

DECLAN

I'm going to be in Lake Spark tomorrow.

That wasn't on the calendar. ;)

Fuck the calendar, we freeze time. I'll see you tomorrow. Spread yourself wide and be ready.

Some of us need to work, Mr. Impatient.

Fine. I'll pick us up dinner and you can meet me at my place. I got the keys. We have surfaces to test. ;)

What an offer...

And you love it.

I do, I really do. A smile dances on my lips as I place my phone flat on the table, as Ford will be here any moment. I'm waiting in Catch 22 for dinner with my brother. He wanted to meet up after last week's babysitting weekend turned into an adventure not for the faint of heart. It's a little messed up, but despite my teenage nephew ending up with a hangover, I'm kind of happy that the weekend ended the way it did.

I got to experience another side of Declan, a softer side.

It's a big problem too, because it's hard to see the guy you're only supposed to be casual with as just that, when you were already feeling things, and then he swoops in like a knight in shining armor. Not to mention, when we came back to my house and we slept together that night, it felt as though our connection deepened.

We text every day, and when he was in Lake Spark a few days ago for a meeting, he came to my place after. I ate dinner while sitting on his lap because he wouldn't let my hand go.

"What has you in a good mood?" My brother greets me by placing his hand on my shoulder.

My body jolts as my brain tries to rewire my focus. "Oh, hey, you're here."

"Yeah, we said we were meeting at seven." He offers me a goofy look and slides onto the chair across from me.

"Sorry, I had a lot of orders today, and my brain is a little foggy," I fib.

He nods in understanding as he gets comfortable. "It's okay. Did Connor stop by on time to do his clean-up duties?"

"Yes. Nugget very much appreciates a new servant to his kingdom," I reflect with sarcasm.

My brother laughs. "I always appreciate your positive view of the world. Again, I'm sorry he got a little unruly. I assure you, I have him on Nugget, house, and training center duty for another week."

I wave him off. "Stop apologizing. We were all his age once, and I think he learned his lesson."

Ford smiles at the waitress who arrives at our table, and we both order our drinks, keeping it to soft drinks for now. When she walks away, my brother grins at me peculiarly.

"What's up with you?" I wonder as I grab a piece of bread from the basket.

"Nothing. It's been a while since you and I had a little one-on-one time. I haven't checked up on you enough lately—"

I hold up my hand, indicating for him to stop. “For that, I count my blessings,” I tease.

Ford rolls his eyes. “I just mean, I felt I didn’t need to, as you seem pretty happy. There isn’t anyone new in your life?”

My heart jumps into my throat and gets stuck. I internally question why it’s my heart and not my words, but I don’t have time to analyze now; I need to deter Ford. I rip my bread into tiny pieces. “Nobody. It’s just summer in Lake Spark, how can you not be happy?”

“It’s been raining more days than I care to count.” He looks at me blankly.

“And? Dancing in the rain can be good for the soul.”

“Right.” It drags out of him, as he doesn’t seem to be buying it. “No idea what you’re up to in your free time, but I hope it’s nothing illegal. I would love for you to find someone to settle down with, you deserve it.”

The waitress drops off our drinks, and we thank her but indicate we need more time to order.

“Where is this coming from?” I take a sip of my drink.

Ford rests his arms on the table. “I just... you kind of punished yourself for your last relationship, even though you are not to blame, and I’ve been waiting for the sign that you’re ready to move on again. Lately, you seem to be in a good place, so I have to ask. Are you ready?”

My mouth opens but only air escapes. He has caught me off guard, but then honesty overwhelms me, along with a gushing smile. “I think... I am.” Ready for a relationship, a real one. There is someone who has unintentionally given me a taste of how great it could be.

Ford wiggles his finger in the air. “I was hoping you would say that.” He smiles to someone over my shoulder, and suddenly, I feel as though this is an odd situation. “Don’t kill me. Brielle mentioned you might. But I kind of invited someone to dinner.”

Oh my God, did he figure out that I'm seeing Declan? Is this his way of testing me?

"What do you mean?" I ask with caution.

Ford doesn't have the opportunity to answer, because he stands to greet the man arriving at our table. My eyes roam up, and I think I might kill my brother.

The sheriff.

"Hey, Violet, I was hoping to run into you." Carter smiles at me like I'm treasure. He's out of uniform, in dark jeans, and I notice a few eyes land on him, as natural good looks don't get ignored by humans.

Quickly, my eyes dart between both men before me and quickly connect the dots. "Hi. Let me guess, my brother mentioned I would be here..." I nervously smile.

Ford answers for him. "I ran into him at the general store and invited him to join us. Please, have a seat," he offers.

My entire body tightens from disappointment that the wrong man is in front of me, and the fact that Ford, although with good intentions, sprang this on me. To be fair, I may have mentioned months back that the sheriff could be a contender, but that was before Declan entered my life and raised the bar so disproportionately high that I'm not sure anyone can compare.

We all sit down, both guys in front of me very much ready for this evening that I've been tricked into.

"How was your day, Sheriff?" Ford asks.

Nervously I twirl hair around my finger. "Bet there were a lot of cats in trees to save," I attempt to joke, but my stomach feels numb.

What the hell do I do? I can't exactly say I'm taken, because then Ford would want to know by whom. Can't exactly say I'm sleeping with his friend, because no sister wants their brother to know about their sex life. Besides, Declan doesn't want more than this, whatever it is that we're doing.

Carter chuckles. “No cats today. Actually had to appear at the county courthouse to testify in a case on speeding tickets. I wasn’t working the big bad streets of Lake Spark today.” I hear the humor in his tone. “How is the flower business going?” Carter asks with interest.

“The usual. Men phoning in to ask for the right flowers to apologize. Brothers ordering flowers after their sisters threaten murder. Oops, shouldn’t share that info with you, as I may soon be involved in a crime.” A short laugh escapes me because this is just beyond bizarre.

“I’ll go easy with the handcuffs,” Carter jokes.

My brother chortles, while I stare blankly at these men.

Someone save me.

“You’ll what?” A deep voice with an undertone of rage fills my ears.

No. Nope. This is not who I meant to save me.

My eyes turn to saucers and snap in the direction of the familiar voice that I love. “Declan.” I sound unsteady.

Declan looms over our table, with his jaw tight and his eyes blazing with fury.

“Hey, man, I didn’t know you would be here.” My brother smiles while he stands to greet his friend with their ridiculous team handshake.

Declan looks at Ford, completely unimpressed. “I told you when I was at the rink earlier that I would be in town for the weekend, and you mentioned we should meet for a drink tonight.”

My head gently falls into my hand as this is one colossal setup, and I shoot a death stare at my brother.

“You’re right, perfect timing. We can leave these two alone and go grab a drink at the bar,” Ford suggests.

Declan ignores him and grabs a free chair from the table next to us and slides it between Carter and me. “Or we could stay here. I’m sure your sister doesn’t need two guys

chaperoning her *date* from the bar. Might as well make it a group dinner, less awkward, you know.”

Ford blinks then shrugs. “I mean, I guess.”

I wave to the waitress passing. “Can I have a Chardonnay; I think my iced tea isn’t going to cut it right now.” I take a deep breath then briefly catch Declan’s gaze directed at me which causes my body temperature to rise. “I thought I was having dinner with Ford, then by coincidence, our local sheriff showed up.” I smile tightly to the table but feel a need to subtly explain to Declan.

“Well, this is fun,” Carter lies, as the atmosphere of our table shifted the moment Declan showed up.

“Thrilling.” Declan’s gaze is a dagger at the sheriff.

“So, you’re in Lake Spark tonight?” I ask Declan, confused because he told me that he would be here tomorrow.

“Yeah, sorry to crash this fun-filled evening, but your brother and I only want the best for you. Have to check the sheriff’s intentions, don’t we?” Declan offers a sweet vindictive smile.

Ford passes the breadbasket to Carter. “Forgive my friend. He looks at Violet like a sister, it’s kind of hockey-team code. He’s protective like me. But I’m sure the local *sheriff* is not the guy we need to worry about.” Ford shoots Declan a warning glare.

“You know I’m off duty. I’m just Carter now.” The poor guy seems to grasp the awkward situation that he unknowingly volunteered for.

“Lucky us,” Declan mumbles. I kick his leg under the table because he isn’t helping.

My wine arrives, and I puff out a breath before taking a long sip. “Uhm, so uh, Carter, what happened to the kindergarten teacher? I thought you were dating her for a while.”

“She moved to Indiana about a year ago. You know, I can tell this evening kind of caught you off guard. I thought you

weren't seeing anyone, and we run into one another all the time, then Ford mentioned we should all hang tonight..." Bless Carter for trying to smooth this over.

"Cute," Declan mutters under his breath.

"My sister isn't seeing anyone, otherwise I wouldn't dare try anything like this," Ford mentions.

I want to scream that I'm taken, but the man next to me is giving no indication that I can. Another sip of wine calls my name instead.

Ford's phone dings, and he pulls it out. "Sorry, I need to take this, it's Brielle. Be right back." Ford leaves me in the shark tank with the man I want who is emotionally unavailable and a man who wants to date me.

None of us take notice to Ford leaving, instead Carter bounces his gaze between Declan and me.

"What would a first date with you look like?" Declan asks. "Did Ford already check that off his list?" He's stiff beside me.

Carter smiles and doesn't seem tense about the atmosphere that could be cut by a knife. I guess the police academy taught him to stay cool under pressure. "I'd probably go traditional. Flowers, dinner, a rowboat out on the lake."

"She owns a flower shop. What kind of man buys flowers for the woman who sells flowers?" Declan counters.

I roll my eyes, wishing I could be swallowed whole by the ground underneath me.

Carter leans back on the chair. "The kind of man who seems to be more observant than Ford. You obviously feel you have a claim to Violet here. Clearly, something is going on between you two." Carter doesn't seem fazed and continues to smile softly.

Declan looks at me with serious eyes, and I know mine are pleading with him... and it's not to keep our secret, which surprises me.

My brother reappears in my sideview. "Sorry, I need to run. Wyatt isn't falling asleep, and Brielle is exhausted," Ford

informs us all as he arrives back. He looks up from his phone and notices that the mood has shifted. “Drinks will have to wait. Declan, want to walk with me out?”

Carter cuts in, “You know, I need to run. I got a call from the station.” He begins to stand.

“Oh, that’s a shame. Maybe you two can meet for lunch or something soon,” Ford suggests.

Carter looks at Declan for a few ticks then to me, yet we say nothing. He’s giving us an opportunity to come clean, but we don’t. “See you around, Violet.”

“I’ll call you.” Ford waves goodbye to me. “I’ll settle the bill on my way out. Make sure she’s okay to drive home,” he requests of Declan who nods once.

A few moments later, Declan and I are alone at the table, but I don’t want to talk to him. A fury that I didn’t know was brewing comes to the surface inside of me.

“I’m fine. I didn’t even finish my wine.” I grab my purse and stand. “I’m leaving.”

“Why? You seem angry, when I’m the one who should be pissed.”

Declan trails behind me as we leave the restaurant. Every step adds more power to my mood that’s about to burst if he prods me too hard. All it takes is his hand landing on my elbow when we reach the parking lot, and I turn to face him with complete irritation.

“Why the hell should you be pissed? I had no clue that Ford was trying to set me up. I’m as surprised as anyone that the sheriff was here.”

I notice Declan’s tongue slide inside his mouth as his cheeks heighten. “You could have said you were seeing someone.”

I laugh bitterly. “Is that what we’re doing? Openly admitting this thing between us? Because last time I checked, you didn’t want anything more than casual.”

“We’re not seeing other people,” he points out.

“You could have told them back there that we’re seeing one another, but you didn’t. That just means that you want me to keep being your little secret. I was following your cues,” I bite out and yank my arm from his hold.

I’ve never seen Declan angry except at a hockey game when he wanted to rip out the opposition. But right now, he looks furious, with a touch of disappointment and attachment that it’s me he is dealing with.

“Don’t put this all on me. You’ve also said that we are staying under the radar. Is that what you want? For me to tell Ford? Because you know he won’t be thrilled. Even if I said that I would get down on my knee tomorrow with a ring and promise you ten kids, he won’t be excited. And while I don’t care so much about his opinion, I know you do.”

I sigh. “But it doesn’t mean that... I think tonight was the realization that you and I are at a crossroads.”

Declan steps forward to rest my hands affectionately in the palm of his. “What does that mean?”

I lick my lips while I try to format my thoughts, as I have many swirling in my head, but then it hits me like lightning. “You’re the guy who doesn’t want a future with anyone, which is almost hysterical, because you’re the guy who made me realize that I’m ready to have a future with someone.”

The lights of the parking lot highlight the invisible punch to his gut as his face drops in sadness. “What are you saying?”

“It’s hard to be casual with you because you give me a hint of what I want,” I admit softly.

Silence overtakes us, and everything feels heavy, or at least my heart sinks to somewhere inside of me where it probably doesn’t belong.

Declan releases an audible breath before he steps forward to kiss my cheek. “Okay, I hear you. I’ll see you tomorrow.” That’s all he says which only infuriates me more.

I need more words from him, to understand where his head is at. Instead, he leaves me cold with no clarification.

My patience for this evening has run out, so I scoff a sound and walk away.

I BARELY SLEPT LAST NIGHT, yet here I am on a Saturday morning, having managed to smile while I had a few 9am pickups. Even Nugget has left me in silence, probably picking up on my dreadful mood.

Deep inside, I had hoped that Declan would follow me home and confess what he feels. But maybe I have it all wrong. I'm not even sure how we pick up today. We're at a turning point, which doesn't feel great because it's not going to end well for me, but damn, I've enjoyed our time together.

My phone rings, and I pick it up when I notice it's the reception from the Dizzy Duck Inn.

"Hey, Ted, what can I do for your today?" My voice lacks energy, but luckily, we have a good working relationship and are in contact throughout the week, so we've both had our bad days shown.

"Hi, Violet, I have a last-minute order from a guest. She would like a bouquet delivered here in town, something masculine, whatever the hell that means."

I grab a card from the pile. "Okay, what should the card say?"

"Thank you for our special night, and I can't wait for this evening."

I frown. At least someone is having a better weekend. "Fine. Sounds romantic. I'll whip something up and have it delivered by two. Where am I sending it?"

"Apparently, that hockey guy moved into his lake house. Declan Dash."

My pen freezes on the card, and my world feels like it might break, which means I'm far too emotionally invested in

the man who clearly had a great time last night after we argued.

I swallow a cry that wants to escape, say okay to Ted, then hang up and throw my pen across the room, before deciding that I will hand deliver these.

DECLAN

I sign the tablet for the delivery man who just dropped off my new mattress, along with linens. The rest of the furniture and my stuff will arrive next week. The man thanks me and heads back to his truck. Yawning, I take a look out at the lake, thankful it's sunny today. I stretch my arms over my head and reflect how no amount of coffee will cure me of how tired I am after last night.

What a disaster.

Murder came to mind the moment I realized that Violet was on a date. Even though it quickly became apparent that she was set up, I hate the idea of any man thinking Violet is available.

She's not. She's mine. And she's made it clear that she wants more.

I couldn't answer her, because I'm not good at digesting my feelings in a flash. Time to process, and a solid scotch is how I assess. So, I went to the Dizzy Duck, and over a scotch had the most unreal experience that's changed the road for Violet and me.

My head turns when I hear a new car arrive, and damn, my heart thumps with exhilaration because it's Violet.

I wasn't expecting her now, and I've been debating all day about how to approach her. Yet again, she is making this easy for me.

A smile begins to stretch on my lips, because she's in my view, getting out of her car with a bouquet of flowers that look

like roses but are not. Her sneer is sexy as hell, and I can tell she is still pissed, which she has a right to be.

“Vi.” Her name on my lips still feels far too good.

“You asshole!” She stomps my way before she throws the flowers at me, and my arms instantly come up to guard myself.

What the hell? She’s plain vicious. I’ve never seen her this way. And it’s one hell of a turn-on.

“Violet, what’s going on?” I look at her with concern.

Her hands shove against my chest. “You have some nerve! We have one little argument and you—you...” She can’t finish her sentence, instead she stomps on the flowers on the ground, destroying them further.

“Was it a little argument? I would hate to see your reaction after a big argument,” I note in astonishment at what she’s doing.

She shakes her head, and she looks near crushed.

“How dare you try to make a joke right now. I’m not the one who went to someone else when things got a little too real,” she seethes out, with her hands on her hips.

“What in the world are you talking about?” My brows pinch together.

She scoffs a sound of disbelief. “Really? You’re going to pretend nothing happened? The flowers are not from me, by the way. They are from someone who had a *special night* with you last night.” Violet seems to be mocking the note that must be for the flowers.

I’m even more confused. “I’m so lost.”

Violet with purpose opens the card and reads it aloud. ““Thank you for our special night, and I can’t wait for this evening.””

I try to puzzle piece last night together. What the hell did I do to have someone send me flowers and a card like that?

Oh.

She rips the card into a thousand pieces, while my confused state turns to watching her, because I'm entertained by her anger. It's cute and hot, slightly crazy, but I like that about her.

"Stop smirking. I can't believe this. This is how I find out that you..." She points a finger at me.

"That I what?" I step closer to her and wait for her answer.

A woman's voice interrupts the stare-off that Violet and I are having. "Declan, I don't know. I think we should go with a Portuguese-style backsplash in the laundry room." Her eyes peer down to the ground at my feet. "Oh, you got my flowers, I see. Well, kind of."

Violet glances at the woman then back to me, then returns to study the woman who smiles when she notices Violet. Her smile fades, then lines form on her forehead when her eyes fall again to the flowers on the ground, and she stares at them in bewilderment.

A laugh rumbles in my throat. "You sent me flowers, Mom?"

Watching all color drain from Violet's face is priceless.

My mother smiles shyly. "I did. Though, I was going for whole flowers instead of pieces."

Violet's hands cover her face, as she's horrified. "Your *mom* sent you these flowers?" Violet whispers.

"Why don't I give you two a minute," my mother suggests and pivots to head back into the house.

I tilt my head gently to the side as I watch guilt spread over Violet's face. "My mom came out to Lake Spark to see my house since my dad is away on business. She was getting in last night after dinner, that's why I didn't ask to see you. But I did see you, and then I was pissed and ready to kill the sheriff. To my surprise, my mother was a listening ear while I drowned myself in scotch."

Violet touches her forehead. "The special night?"

“She and I haven’t had a good conversation like that in years.” I shrug. “Maybe it was special.”

“Oh no, I feel mortified.” She glances at the flower graveyard at her feet. “I even went for the carnations instead of roses.”

“You devil woman,” I reply, while a smirk stays on my mouth. Her eyes meet mine, and I can tell that she feels guilty. “You really think that I would jump into bed with someone else?” Disappointment is apparent in my voice.

Violet lowers her head in near shame. “Truthfully, deep down, I don’t. On the surface, I was angry, and then the flowers. It seemed easier to be furious.”

I hook my fingers under her chin to guide her sight back to mine. “I just walked away.”

A somberness glazes her eyes. “I didn’t enjoy last night.”

“Me neither.”

“What’s tonight? According to the card that I just shredded, your mom is looking forward to tonight.”

A warm wave spreads across my chest, and even though I’m about to make a move that I’ve never done before, it feels right. I cup Violet’s cheeks and her eyes turn soft. “I wasn’t planning on my mom staying, but she’s in town until tomorrow because I asked her to stay. Want to join us for dinner?”

Surprise flickers in her eyes, but a gentle smile appears. “You want me to meet your mom?”

“Yeah, you can’t really say no now. I mean, you destroyed her sweet gesture,” I tease.

Violet laughs, and her head falls forward to rest on my shoulder. “What a first impression. I’m so sorry.”

“What do you say? I’ll get us a private table at the Dizzy Duck.”

Her beautiful eyes search my face for a clue because this is unfamiliar territory for us. “Are you sure?”

I don't hesitate. "Yeah. I was about to head into town to ask you, but you showed up here in a rage first."

"I killed the flowers. What kind of florist willingly murders flowers?" She's in a dazed state, either because she really does feel sorry for the flowers, but my money is on that I've thrown her off by my invite.

I stroke her cheek with my thumb to assure her that I'm sincere. "You know, I've never had a woman meet my mom." I try to sweeten the persuasion, realizing to myself that Violet is special.

It's not a clear answer to her question from last night, but it gives us a little direction. To where? I'm still not entirely sure, but I can't let her walk away just yet.

VIOLET SMOOTHS her light pink dress while she sits across from my mother. I can tell she put in effort. Violet has natural beauty, and she doesn't wear a lot of makeup, but her lips have a little gloss, and I think she curled her hair slightly. Violet apologized more times than I can count for destroying the flowers my mom ordered. They were quick to ease into conversation with one another.

"This is exciting, Violet. I've never had the privilege to meet someone in Declan's life. I've only seen pictures in the media of past... dates. Last night, my son couldn't stop talking about you," my mother explains, and already I might be regretting my decision about this evening.

"Really?" Violet is curious, and she rests her chin on her propped palm, intent on getting the full intel. "What did he say?"

"More wine, anyone?" I interrupt.

Both women tsk me away in unison.

"Well, I'm not sure a mother should break that trust, but you have his head in knots, for sure." My mom dips her fork into her salad.

My mom and I exchange a look of affection. In truth, I went to the Dizzy Duck, ordered a scotch, and found my mother in the bar having ordered a martini. Within two minutes, she asked if my bitter mood had to do with the woman I rescued the other week when I left their house, and I caved and admitted yes. Then the floodgates just opened, and it felt as though we could bond over something; the state of my dating life.

“Well, I can very much understand having your head in knots. It sometimes leads to a pool of flower petals at your feet.” Violet plays with her food.

My mother laughs, as she’s been enamored with Violet since moment one. “I should have realized that there is only one florist in Lake Spark. The dots just didn’t connect in my head.”

“It’s okay, next time flowers are on me. You’ll be back often?” Violet asks.

“Maybe. My son said I can decorate his new place as a project to keep me occupied and out of his love life,” my mom teases.

Violet smiles and looks at me, confirming that this is all going well.

“My mom has a talent for interior design,” I mention.

“Declan, stop. It’s not a talent. More that I know where to hang all of your hockey photos and throw some fancy tile around it,” she says, brushing me off.

I shake my head. “Nah, she’s good at it.”

“Figuring out where to place Declan’s thousands of photos is a difficult task. Have to go in chronological order,” Violet comments with a bit of tongue and cheek. “Don’t even get me started on the trophies. Shelving is key, but it’s already carrying his big ego.”

My mother eats it all up, and I have to grin that these two women are having a good time at my expense.

Violet gently touches my shoulder. “I’ll be right back, just going to head to the ladies’ room.”

I stand up and pull out her chair before placing a kiss on her cheek, watching her every step, with my mouth in a permanent stretched line.

“She’s a delight,” my mom says to break my attention.

I sit down again and look at my mom. “She is.”

“I can understand why you were out of sorts last night after you two had a disagreement. You look like a man captivated, and most of all, happy. Why would you let that go?”

I grab my glass of wine that I’ve been pacing myself to drink. “I don’t want to, but eventually, we’ll hit a wall where she wants more. There are a few things. I mean, her brother, I’ll be traveling for games, and most of all, she wants the whole family-and-marriage thing.”

My mother sits straighter in her chair as she makes an agreeing sound. “The thing is, Declan, you don’t need to rush into things, but since you’re taking little steps, then maybe you’re curious. You’ve never been remotely serious about a woman, but here I am meeting Violet. That’s a step that you don’t seem to mind. Sometimes the things we think we don’t want, we just haven’t looked at close enough...”

“And the only way to get close is to take steps in that direction,” I reflect.

“Ah, so you were listening last night. I wasn’t sure if the scotch drowned out my voice or if you actually cherished my wise words.”

Setting my wine glass down, I admit that last night made me ponder. “I can’t believe I’m talking to you about her.” This is something I would never have anticipated.

My mom brings her hand over her heart. “Me neither. But sometimes someone enters our lives that strengthens other relationships. You are totally besotted by her, it’s so refreshing to see. Your eyes never leave her, and I’m not blind, I know you two are playing footsy under the table.”

“Stop it. Like, please, let’s talk about something else,” I plead but can’t stop grinning.

“Fine, but somewhere inside of you, you’re too curious, that’s why you’re not running away.”

I lick my lips, aware that’s what my mind is doing.

Violet returns to the table, and I pull out her chair. “You saved me,” I whisper.

“From what?” Violet murmurs.

“His mother. Now tell me, are you a fan of maple syrup?” Mom asks Violet.

Violet laughs. “Of course. I think I can ease him back onto the stuff.” Violet points her thumb to me.

“No, you can’t,” I interject.

She makes a sound of doubt. “I think I can. We’ve been trying a few meal ideas with syrup to see if we can bring back his taste for maple.”

“Such as what?” My mother appreciates Violet’s playful demeanor.

“Afternoon snacks.” She winks at me.

Great, now I can replay the maple-syrup fiasco in my hotel room from our weeks way back... freaking love it.

“You know, I’ve talked about you a lot this weekend, but now I realize that I don’t actually know when the spark between you two happened. What was the moment that started it all?” my mother innocently asks.

Violet and I look at one another and try to suppress our grins. We sure as hell can’t tell my mom about the type of party we were at.

“It was a party, actually,” Violet seriously states. What? For so many reasons, nobody can know how we started, it’s going with us to the grave. Violet notices my panic, but then a playful smile curls on her lips. “A murder mystery party, and he had the clue on a piece of paper.”

Smooth move.

“What was the clue?” My mother drinks from her water glass.

“The one you are after is closer than you think,” I softly answer, while Violet’s eyes catch mine.

“I’LL SEE YOU TOMORROW, MOM.” I hug her goodbye as we stand from the table, since we just wrapped up dessert.

“You’re going back to your house? All you have is a mattress.” She’s puzzled.

I grin. “That’s all we need.”

Violet’s face turns cherry red, and she covers her face with her hand.

“Well, you two have fun then.” My mother gives me a humorous discerning look.

The two women of my life also hug goodbye, and I tell Violet that I’ll pull up my car so it’s a quick escape.

The moment Violet slides onto the front seat, she’s near bashful. I don’t think I’ve seen her this shy.

But at last, I can kiss her senseless, and I don’t hesitate and crash my mouth onto hers which she responds with a purring sound and her tongue asking for entrance. As much as I want to make out with her in the parking lot, we need to get home.

“Hi,” I greet her into our calmness.

“Hi,” she whispers.

I reach over for the seat belt and pull it across her body to ensure she’s secure in my car, because I may need to speed us back.

The click of the buckle warns me that I have to leave the warmth of her body that I touched in the process with my own,

and it sends an array of emotions around me. I shiver and realize I'm in deep with her.

Straightening in my seat, I lean my head against the headrest but look to her. "We probably have a lot to talk about after this weekend."

Her fingers interlace with mine on the middle console. "We do, but let's get out of here."

"Agreed."

I hit the accelerator with vigor, and we're off on the road around the lake. I'm aware that any wild animal may run across the road, but still, I take the initiative to drive one-handed and rest my other hand on Violet's thigh to drag up the hem of her skirt.

"Declan, careful, or I may just drive you crazy." Her voice tells me that she loves it.

"Be my guest."

Her hand slides to the side and cups my cock through my pants, and now I'm aching to spring free.

With my eyes on the road, one hand on the steering wheel, I allow my fingers to slide into her panties where I feel her warm and aroused, which sends an eager wave of want through me.

"Have you been this way all night?" A sheepish grin forms on my mouth, but my eyes remain on the road.

"Yes," she breathes and squeezes my firm length.

"Watch it, I'm the one driving. A hard-on has the same effect as driving under the influence."

She laughs before she slides off her panties then parts her thighs open, inviting my hand back. "No, it doesn't."

My head bobs to the side. "There must be truth to it."

"Fine, then I'll tell my mouth to behave." That seductive voice of hers can burn the whole world down.

“Great. Doesn’t mean I need to. Ride my fingers, Vi,” I demand, seeking more when my long finger gets coated in her need for me.

A moan escapes her lips, while she wiggles around my fingers. Her one hand never leaves my cock and the other wraps around my wrist for support.

“Don’t you want me to wait until we’re at your house?” she breathes but continues to guide my fingers.

“No, you will come many times tonight.”

“But I want my first orgasm tonight to be *with* you.”

I quickly glance her way to find her face flushed and her dress ruffled by her waist. Christ, I’m going to lose focus. She’s perfection, and it’s making my dick go near senseless. A fog of lust is taking over me.

“Well, aren’t you such a good girl,” I rasp.

The flashing of police lights appears in my rearview mirror, and then the sound of the siren goes once, indicating that we need to stop.

Shit.

“What did we do?” Violet sounds panicked.

My fingers sadly retreat out of her. “You’ve been a bad girl, and public indecency is calling your name,” I tease while I pull us over, reminding myself to stay calm. To my surprise, Violet just laughs. “They’re probably just checking that I’m under the limit,” I assure Violet who tries to adjust her dress.

Lowering my window, I wait for the police officer to arrive.

When he arrives, I have to roll my lips in tightly because I’m trying not to sneer at this dude.

Of course, it’s Sheriff Wants-My-Violet Carter.

DECLAN

“Well, well, well, isn’t this surprising.” There is pure cynicism in Carter’s voice as he leans against my car with his arm against the side of my window frame. “Of course, it would be you two that I pull over.”

“Hi.” Violet awkwardly wiggles her fingers for a curt wave.

I want to tell him to back the fuck off my priceless car, but I’m in no position to do so. Instead, I throw on a fake smile. “What can we do for you, Officer?”

“You two been drinking?” The headlights from his car allow us to see that this guy is enjoying his power trip.

“I’m the designated driver,” I say. “I had one glass of wine while we had dinner with my mother.”

Carter’s eyes grow wide. “Already meeting the folks, Violet?” He whistles his surprise.

“Something like that.” My girl politely smiles and folds her hands on her lap.

“You two move fast, considering yesterday was denial central.”

“Do we? We could just be two friends who go for dinner with one another’s parents,” Violet says, playing it cool.

Carter knocks on the hood of my car and glances away, seeming to be a bit disappointed that we’re the people he pulled over.

“Were we speeding?” I ask to try and figure out what is going on.

“No, just at the limit.”

Violet gently touches my arm as she leans in to get a better view of Carter. “We’re being mindful of the deer that cross at night.” She smiles.

“I bet you are.” He studies us, and his eyes catch the sight of something in my car, but I’m not sure what. He stalls for a second before he bites his cheek then purses his lips out. “Let me guess, Ford has no clue you two are in this expensive car together on a Saturday night post dinner time?”

“It’s a Maserati, not even on the market yet,” I correct him. “And Ford doesn’t need to know every detail of our days, now does he?” I give Carter a soft warning glare, realizing he kind of has the upper hand right now.

“It would make one hell of a story, the Spinners owner gets pulled over with the sister of his former teammate,” he highlights.

Fuck my patience, I’m getting annoyed, but Violet senses it and squeezes my arm to keep me at bay. Instead, my nostrils only flare slightly as my knuckles tighten around the wheel.

“Your point?” I calmly grit out.

He sighs and rolls his eyes. “No point. Just you two are really shit at keeping under the radar.” His fist knocks on the hood of my car. “Well, your not-yet-on-the-market car has one of the taillights out, you should have that looked at.”

Carter begins to step away, clearly done drawing this all out.

“That’s it, Officer?” Violet asks, clearly puzzled.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Oh,” she pouts. “I was kind of looking forward to the locked-in-handcuffs part.” Violet smirks to herself, while my mouth parts open at the brazen fearlessness this woman has; it makes me proud. This is the kind of person that makes every

day an adventure, and that gives you something to be excited for what tomorrow may bring.

Carter steps back on his heels to study us. “I strongly urge you both to get on home, otherwise I will write you both up for indecency.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” I spit out.

He shakes his head, clearly exasperated with us. “Clean up the floor of your car,” he informs us before he walks away, mumbling something inaudible in the process.

My head turns to Violet who is repeating his words, as if she is trying to solve a riddle, then her eyes dart to the floor of my car and she gasps. “Oh my.” She leans over and picks something up, then holds it in the air with a wide smirk.

A satisfied grin takes over me, because I have no problem with the sheriff witnessing the proof that Violet is all mine.

“He saw your panties.”

Violet bursts out laughing, and it grows hysteric.

I turn the engine back on, soaking in the last few minutes, with an uncontrollable smile on my face. “Let’s get out of here. I can’t believe you made a handcuff joke, you’re trying to get us arrested.”

Her laugh vibrates through the car, and damn, it flows through my body, awakening the obvious.

I don’t enjoy my days without her.

IT SHOULD BE me leading Violet, yet I’m following her as a man completely captivated by her beauty and spirit.

The moonlight outlines her gentle smirk that feels defenseless to me as she tugs me along. We walk into my bare bedroom that only has a mattress on the wood floor, plus some linens because I thought ahead. Hell, we couldn’t even turn on a light if we wanted because I’m waiting for the electrician to

install the new lighting. But there is something special about a mattress on the floor in an oversized master bedroom, with high ceilings and the night sky the backdrop of the woman guiding us as if she's the queen of the house.

Violet is the image of someone who belongs here.

I stop to watch Violet walk to the French doors to observe the moon reflecting off the lake and outlining the trees surrounding the water. I rub my fingers over my jaw as I admire the view, and I don't mean of the lake.

The past month or so, I've been letting go of physically playing hockey on a professional level, and my time has been replaced with Violet floating into my life. She occupies my thoughts and makes me feel free in the moment.

I'm lucky.

I take a few steps and wrap my arms around her from behind, feeling her melt against me as I rest my chin on her shoulder. "I believe you said we have surfaces to test," she rasps and sways in my arms.

We both look out into the sky, soaking in this moment of our embrace. "That can wait. I'd much rather take you right here."

She slowly turns to face me before snaking her arms around my middle. "Also a good idea."

I comb my fingers through her hair and settle to hold her head before leaning down to kiss her on the lips. Slow, tender, and giving her a side of me that I can't seem to shake, nor do I want to try.

If a kiss were a breath, then this is the only thing I would need to live, and that isn't half bad.

Violet croons as she reangles her lips before kissing me back with a firmness that feels like it carries far more than a physical need.

We part only to gather air, but my lips stay near, tracing the corner of her mouth while I inhale her floral scent.

"Everything lately..." she whispers.

My breath halts somewhere in my chest before a smile ghosts my lips. “I know.”

“Declan—”

“Shh,” I soothe her before backing her up against the glass to kiss her with more insistence.

My lips are cemented to hers while I unbutton my shirt, starting with one button and moving slow, but halfway I give up and speed up my movement. It allows me the chance to yank and pull at her dress and bra until it’s mostly off her body, and she voluntarily makes a move which enables her to step out of the pool of fabric at her feet. She’s so incredibly stunning, and she’s naked and showered in moonlight. I lift her up to ensure her back lands against the window, with her arms linking around my neck for stability or just to pull me close to her.

“You’re too beautiful,” I remark between hurried kisses.

“You’ve mentioned a few times.” Her legs tighten around my waist which adds friction to my already-eager cock that presses against her belly.

All day I’ve been imagining plunging inside of her, and I’m not quite sure why it hasn’t happened yet, except I want to enjoy every second with her and drag this out.

I bury my head into her neck before trailing my lips down to her breast.

Violet throws her head back in a moan and offers it all to me.

“Please,” she begs. “I just need all of you tonight.”

“You wouldn’t get anything less,” I promise before spinning us around and heading straight to the mattress where we fall.

I slide down the mattress and take hold of her ankles to part her legs. “This isn’t bad at all, Vi. The image of you in the middle of my new bed, naked, with my head between your legs.”

Violet gets comfortable, wiggling her body to settle into the mattress, with her hair splayed out against the pillow. She brings her arms above her head as she peers down at me. “Is that what’s happening,” she taunts me.

I growl before I drop onto my stomach, and I slam my mouth against her center, instantly causing her body to buck from contact and her mouth to call out my name. My tongue and fingers work her into a state that has her completely surrendering to me, and it only ups my own keenness for more.

Her toes curl into the sheets and her nails dig into the pillows when I finally send her trembling underneath my touch, but I don’t let her come down from her release.

As she quakes, I move to hover over her, offering her a soft kiss against her lips while my hand aligns my cock with her opening.

“I need to bury myself in you and never leave,” I whisper against her cheek while I push into her.

She whimpers as her pussy wraps around me, the best possible fit. “Don’t say never.” Violet isn’t teasing, she’s honestly beseeching, before she leans up to capture my lips for a kiss.

We move together as one, careful to soak in every moment of our turning point. Words are on the tip of my tongue, but I’m not sure what and they don’t come out.

Which is fine, as we drown in one another anyways.

THIS IS SOMETHING SPECIAL, lying on the mattress with a naked Violet against my chest and her head tucked under my chin, tangled in a sheet, while the sun begins to rise outside the curtainless windows.

This house is mine, but my first night in it will always be ours.

Ours.

The tickle of her fingertips painting lines against my skin reminds me that we've been shadowing one another. One of us wakes, then so does the other. One of us falls asleep, and the other follows.

But something about daylight is more confronting.

"Dec," she says my name softly, and her gaze rises to study my face.

"Sleep."

"I can't, and you can't either."

The faintness of a smile forms on my mouth. "True." I kiss the top of her head, and I stroke her long hair with my fingers.

"This weekend has been... a lot. I mean, there was the sheriff on two incidents, our disagreement, murdered carnations, dinner with your mother... last night. For most people, it would be whiplash, but for us, it feels... like us. It makes sense somehow; I just haven't figured it out."

I snort a laugh. "Trust me, in no universe does this weekend make sense."

"Oh." She was expecting me to say something else.

I roll us so she's underneath me, and I lie on my side to look down at her. "Tell me what's really on your mind."

"Our lines... they're blurry."

"I agree... but this feels right."

Finally, a line forms on her mouth that pleases me. "What are we doing?" Her question is like a song, as her tone is floaty. She's trying to hide how scared she is to ask.

This time, I think I'm the one who may blush as my head falls forward and the tip of my nose nuzzles her shoulder. "Everything we never meant to." I'm being honest.

God, I love when she wraps her arms around my neck.

"I meant what I said. I do want a future. I can't see someone casually forever, I'll want more. You're giving me

pieces, mixed messages, acting like we're more than we are. But stop it if there is no thought behind it."

I collapse to my back in defeat. "I don't think when I'm around you, that's new."

Violet straddles me while she holds a knotted sheet by her breasts. Her on top of me like this doesn't help us. My dick is going haywire, and my mind is hypnotized by her.

"Declan, we're over the blue line because we are no longer casual, and you know that too."

I plant my hands on her waist while I lick my lips and contemplate what to say exactly, especially after she just threw in a hockey reference. "You're telling me that we're heading for the big game now?" Why the hell don't I feel petrified?

She nods, with a cute wry smile, then to add more damage, she swirls her finger against my chest, reminding me how I can't get enough of her touch, her pure radiance that she gives us which feels like it's all for me. "You know, hockey is a really fast sport. Always go go go, but we don't need to move as fast as hockey. All I'm saying is that things have changed."

When she lifts her finger, I capture it between my teeth for a little bite and growl before kissing it softly. "What if I say I agree?"

"Then we should probably talk about what that means." She rotates her pussy on top of my cock.

This isn't fair, she's using her bewitching powers. I love it.

"You're no one else's."

She chuckles. "I haven't been since our names were written on two pieces of paper."

"You can tell the sheriff to take a hike."

"I think he got the clue that I'm sleeping with a possessive billionaire."

"Possessive billionaire *boyfriend*," I correct her.

"Ooh, boyfriend," she counters and fails to hide her laugh; therefore, I tickle her side.

Why is this conversation flowing so easily? We're playful yet serious, and my body is relaxed.

"I don't want to hide you," I say.

Her long finger taps my mouth. "You told your mother about me."

I blow her finger away. "Don't make a big deal about it." I roll my eyes and grin because it's completely the opposite.

"Yes, sir."

I come up to sitting so we're eye to eye, our bodies tight together with the sheet still wrapped around her. "I don't want to hide you," I repeat.

Her smile fades, but she seems content as her head gently tips to the side. "You know what that means."

"Yeah, I do," I confirm.

"When do we tell him?"

"Next time I'm in town. I have to head back to the city later, and I think Ford requires a bit more of a thought-out process."

"Okay."

We hold one another, with our eyes set and our smiles mirroring one another.

"Good, now let me take you the way a boyfriend should." I slap her ass and tilt my body up.

"You act like it's your first time doing that." She flashes her eyes at me.

I groan from how she has the ability to tease me.

Yet again, I flip us so she is caged underneath me. "You're right. But you're the first one that matters," I tell her sincerely. Because I care for her, I see more than just now with her, but it's too cloudy to define what our future holds. Her eyes pierce mine with recognition and affection. "I want you, and I will give you more. I can't make promises, but I can't let you go just yet. You get that, right?"

Her hand comes up to touch my cheek in that way that always instantly gives me warmth and lights something in my chest. “I know.”

It’s a few long seconds of staring, with the glimmer of fondness apparent in our eyes.

“Now let’s figure out a way to untangle you from this sheet, it’s in the way.”

She squeals in delight as my hands begin to roam, while we both ignore the fact that maybe we should think this through more.

DECLAN

Pacing my living room, I look out onto the lake on this sunny summer day. My cell phone is to one ear while I listen to my assistant list what is on the agenda for the week ahead, mostly media opportunities as we begin to gear up for the new season.

“I need you to make sure the team dinner is moved here to Lake Spark. I want both veterans and current players to meet here in the area. We need to set the team up for a new mindset and focus. The coaching staff should be there too, all team staff really. Oh, and make sure I meet with the head coach and general manager in the next week; it’s time to set out what I expect and warn him of what happens if he doesn’t deliver.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Violet sitting on the sofa, leaning over to buckle the clasp of her shoe around her ankle. Violet notices that I’m watching and flashes me a sexy smirk.

How I managed to get furniture into this house during the last week, I’m not entirely sure, but I’m positive money played a role, and I don’t exactly mind, because it meant I could focus on other things, including the dark-haired beauty in front of me.

My mind whips back to my assistant who promises to send me a short list of locations for the dinner by end of day. “Thanks,” I say. “I’ll be back in the city tomorrow, and we can meet at ten to set up the agenda for the months ahead, especially aligning with away games.” After a quick goodbye, I hang up and walk eagerly to the couch where I lean down to steal a warm kiss from Violet.

She gives me a pointed look with a grin hinted on her lips. “It’s Sunday, and you’re all business. Your poor assistant.”

I sit down and drag her legs over my thighs to help with her other shoe. “Rex can handle it; besides, I ignored him all week because I was occupied with you.”

After leaving Violet last week to head back to the city, I had a constant need to see her again. I missed her, if I’m being honest. When I drove up to Lake Spark yesterday, then that was it, we didn’t leave my house since the second she arrived. We ate, laughed, and moved together slowly, except for that moment in the shower which was out-of-this-world intense.

Violet taps my shoulder and fails to control a smile. “A rather good choice.” Her head lolls slightly as she studies me. “I’m also happy to see that you’re stepping into your role. Business-Declan may just surprise you with how much you enjoy it. I’m sure your father would be impressed too.”

“Or upset that I’m flaunting my skills for other uses.”

“Nah, you have a certain element when you’re on the phone discussing your team that’s only admirable. To the point, yet sentiment undertones your demands. It’s kind of hot as hell too.”

I interlace our fingers and approve of the sight of us connected. “I have a big dinner coming up. Will you come as my plus-one?”

Her lips role in but her smile stays put. “It’s kind of public.”

“You no longer mind. You’ve been seen at your brother’s games before. I sure as hell love this.” I’m used to the cameras and also the numerous times the press decided whoever on my arm was a worthy news story. This time I’m casual about it, because with Violet, it feels like the logical next step, and I want to flaunt how lucky I am.

Her brows raise at me. “Which leads us to the elephant in the room that we said we would conquer this weekend.”

I grimace at the thought. “Ford.”

She nods gently. “It’s Sunday morning, so he’s with Connor at the rink doing a little one-on-one time. I told him I would stop by like I sometimes do.”

I swipe my hands through my hair and blow out a breath. “I’ll grab my keys and we can head there.”

Her delicate fingers from her other hand plays with my hairline along my forehead. “I’m not nervous,” she states calmly.

“I don’t get anxious.”

She squinches her face in doubt. “Never?”

Getting lost in her eyes, I realize she’s right. Violet makes me nervous. She makes me want things that I never gave much thought, and I’m not even sure what those things are. When I’m with her, even the happiness outweighs the scary feelings that occasionally breach my bubble where I’m completely enamored by her.

I swallow and pretend she isn’t seeing through me. “Never,” I lie.

Gently, I slide to my side so her back lands on the sofa cushions and I can enjoy Violet underneath me for a minute more. Her eyes twinkle with wonder, and I’m just reminded of how beautiful she is, and as cliché as it is, that goes for both inside and out.

“How am I doing on the boyfriend front?” I run my hand along her curves while I stare down at her.

“You had breakfast delivered after you wore me out last night and had chocolate chip cookies from the Dizzy Duck delivered before bedtime. Meh, can’t complain.” She’s teasing me.

I kiss her again real quick. “I can’t buy you flowers, and the hot air balloon was already booked last night,” I deadpan, and she chuckles softly.

Violet does that thing again, where she glides her fingers down my cheek and soothes me whether she is trying or not. “I prefer lying in bed, wearing your shirt, and reading a book

while you go over hockey articles... The cookies were a nice touch, though.” Her honesty creating the perfect answer slays me every time. She seals her sentimentality by tipping her mouth up to kiss me. “Declan,” she purrs against my lips.

“Hmm?” I return the move.

“I...” she begins then pauses for a second. Whatever thought she had leaves, and she kisses me again, this time with a little more fire.

We make a good team that way. We both give and take, letting the moment lead, but always ending with both of us satisfied.

It’s a balance.

For the first time in a long time, I feel grounded, and that’s a damn fine feeling.

“WE’RE REALLY JUST GOING to wing it?” Violet asks as we walk through the sports complex. There are people here, but it’s by no means busy.

My shoulders slack. “I guess. Is there a good way to say, ‘Hey buddy, I’m seeing your sister, and that’s been happening for a while now. By the way, she gives amazing head?’” While I’m serious, it’s only on the surface. She *is* amazing but for so many reasons not even related to her talents in bed.

She playfully nudges my arm. “I feel like we should have prepared ourselves for this a little more. Oh well, I see him up ahead by the entrance to the ice.” Violet now seems a little anxious, but I think it’s more because she’s been waiting all week for us to do this, not so much because she’s worried for Ford’s reaction.

We both assess the scene and notice that Ford has his arms crossed as he watches his son on the ice.

Connor brakes with his skates. “Is that better?”

Ford narrows his eyes at his son. “Connor, I don’t care how you play today, not every moment is about preparing for a hockey career. I’m more concerned that you’re tired, and I’m wondering if you were really home in your room at midnight last night.”

“You’re always on my case,” Connor rebuffs and begins to toss the puck side to side with his stick.

“Because you threw a party,” Ford exclaims, with his hands coming out.

“That was weeks ago!” Connor counters before he skates away.

Violet and I approach Ford with caution. “All good?” Violet touches Ford’s shoulder. “I thought we were past the timeline for party punishment.”

He sighs. “Oh, we were. That was until I discovered he borrowed my Jaguar when I was sleeping the other weekend.” Ford gives us a forced smile. “What brings you two here? Did you run into one another on the way in?” he wonders.

Ford and I look out on the ice and see Connor make a sharp swing with his stick, and the puck lands in the net. Damn, that guy is fast and sharp.

Connor skates back to us. “Look what we have here.” He waves sheepishly as his eyes bounce between Violet and me.

Violet isn’t having it, and she rolls her eyes. “Heard you’ve been giving your dad a hard time.” She gives her nephew a knowing glare in a fun sort of way. He knows she loves him like crazy.

“Dad’s being unreasonable.”

I reach out to nudge his arm in comfort. “It’s his job,” I reiterate the obvious. “Good move out there. You should try coming a little more from the left.”

Connor fumes, and his face turns hard. “I don’t need your critique.”

Violet interjects. “Cool down, he was giving you a compliment and a pointer.”

Ford shakes his head at Connor. “I don’t know what’s up with you, but I think we’ll wrap up this session,” he suggests, circling his finger in the air and huffing a breath.

Connor throws his stick on purpose.

“Why don’t you skate it off and let your dad have a moment,” I suggest.

Biggest fucking mistake ever.

Connor drives his sight to Ford. “Dad.” He grabs his attention. “Declan and Aunt Violet are hooking up.”

Violet’s face drops, and I shake my head that this is how this is going to unravel.

“What?” Ford stammers.

“Yeah, and Declan threatened my career,” Connor proudly announces before skating off.

Violet puffs out a long breath before she drops her head to hands. “That’s not... not what Declan did.”

My jaw clenches side to side as I take in the fact that a hormonal teenager just outed us.

Ford’s fists form balls as they hang by his sides, and he turns his gaze sharply to me. “What the hell is my son talking about?”

I scratch the back of my head then sigh, as the best way forward right now is to own up to the situation. “Violet and I...” I take her hand to make a statement. “We’re together.”

Ford’s eyes laser focus on our hands. “What?”

“Ford, don’t be ridiculous,” Violet says. “We’re adults, and we’re allowed to see one another.”

“How?” he grits out. “How did this happen?”

“We ran into one another that one time at the stadium a few months back, and then we...” My face screws up. “A murder mystery party.” I throw that out there, and Violet tries hard to hide her chortle.

“The colonel in the kitchen with the wrench kind of thing,” she adds.

Ford’s eyes change to pure venom. “Fuck you, Declan.” Before I can process, Ford lunges forward and takes hold of my shirt.

“Ford!” Violet gasps.

“What the hell, man.” My words fall on deaf ears.

We stumble onto the ice in a scuffle, sliding around, as neither one of us has skates on. “There is no way I’m okay with this.”

I do my best to shake Ford off me. “Then talk to me like a normal friend,” I raise my voice.

Ford steps back but keeps his grip on my shirt, his gaze completely furious. “*Friend?* Are you kidding me? You know she’s off limits.”

“You’re no longer playing hockey, and neither am I,” I justify and push him away.

“Doesn’t matter.” He’s unamused. “The rule is for life. Besides, we kind of work together now in some way. You crossed a line!”

I huff out a breath to calm myself. I wasn’t expecting confetti, but this is the worst-case scenario by far. “We can’t control the way we feel,” I highlight.

Ford pinches the bridge of his nose. “You have a reputation that I sure as hell witnessed on a few accounts. You really want to tell me you’re in a relationship with Violet? Screw that, you don’t do relationships, since you only ever think about yourself.”

“That’s not true. Did I not play as a team, am I not supporting a team?”

“Don’t compare hockey to Violet,” he shouts.

“Stop it, you two!” Violet watches, horrified, from the sidelines.

Ford looks at her and points to me. “No! You’re my little sister, and you deserve the best.” He throws his arms in the air. “I knew it. I had a feeling you two were up to something, but I wanted to be so wrong. This guy here only looks for his momentary good time.”

“People change,” I mention.

It causes him to laugh. “Oh yeah? You really want to tell me that you intend to settle down with a wife, kids, and a kickass Labrador who retrieves like crazy?”

“What’s your point?” I’m getting angry.

He looks between us, as if we’ve gone insane. “Have you really grasped what Violet deserves? I mean, can you honestly look her in the eyes and say that your relationship will go exactly where she wants it to go?”

My heart flinches from his words. A sharp knife wound.

“Relax, Ford, we’re not even there,” Violet explains, but I hear uneasiness in her tone. We’re enjoying one another and seeing where this can go.”

“Fantastic. Get emotionally invested, only to walk directly into heartache. Because, Violet, you wouldn’t be here telling me about you and Declan if you were just having fun. I know you too well. Deep down you want more, you want it all and believe maybe he can give you that. You’re lying to yourself if you try to tell me otherwise,” Ford lectures.

I adjust my shoulders as reality seems to shower down on me, especially when Violet goes mute, and she doesn’t blink. Her brother just threw a bucket of reality onto her.

Hell, maybe I’ve been lying to myself too, because I know what kind of future Violet wants, and we’re not on the same page, but I can’t seem to push her away because of our magnetic pull.

The momentary silence is broken by Ford continuing on his tangent. “And threatening my son? What the hell?”

Now I’m aggravated. “Come on, it’s not like that. Really, Connor was drinking and tried to blackmail us...” As soon as

that rolls off my tongue, I realize this sounds incredibly bad.

Ford throws his hands in the air in disbelief. “I don’t know what to think right now. The fact my son has the balls or the fact that my friend is using my sister—”

I interject. “I’m not using her.”

Connor skates over. “Yeah, my vote is that you should focus on bad-boy Declan since we all know that I’m freaking awesome anyhow,” he announces as he slowly skates on by, clearly satisfied with the chaos he started. His smug grin is a reminder of me on a few occasions.

“Don’t get excited. There is a long conversation happening later,” Ford calls out as Connor skates to the other side. Ford returns his death stare to me. “That’s why you two are here together? To inform me of this forsaken blessed union?”

“Stop this. You’re being overdramatic.” I swipe my jaw with my thumb and wonder why we’re still standing on the ice.

“She’s my sister.”

“I’m aware.”

“Are you two done now?” Violet reminds us that she’s here. We both glance to her and see that her hands are stationed on her hips. “I’m an adult, and you either accept this or not.”

Ford growls in frustration. “Violet, I know you’re an adult. But you’re my little sister who I owe so much to, and I simply can’t ignore this protective need I have to watch out for you. Brother bear is here to stay, so get used to it. My point isn’t that I’m pissed that you two are together; I’m *livid* because you’re with a guy who will only break your heart.”

“Stop saying that,” I insist.

“Fine. Tell me you both want the same long game,” he challenges.

My mouth opens, but only a sound croaks out.

Ford watches me and scoffs a sound. “Thought so.” He steps into me to ensure only I can hear and whispers, “If you care even an ounce about her at all, then you’ll be honest with her.”

Then he leaves me there to ponder in my own fumes.

WE HAVEN’T SAID one thing since we walked from the rink back to the car. Violet and I move side by side with our arms occasionally grazing. As we approach my car, I turn to her and notice her eyes dip low as she avoids facing me.

“That was not how I expected it to go,” she mumbles with a weak laugh. Her hair blocks half her face, but now I’m far too familiar with her and recognize that she’s somber and affected by the last fifteen minutes.

If this were after a hockey game, I would be running on adrenaline and energized to say anything. Yet Ford is right, this isn’t hockey, and Violet is a whole other scale.

Maybe that’s why I feel empty inside, my chest hollow, which is crazy because my heart is beating far too fast.

I touch her shoulder. “He has a point.”

This hurts. It feels like misery. An impending doom.

When Violet flicks her gaze up to me, I see a glaze of sadness over her blue eyes. “I don’t want him to have a point.”

“Neither do I, but...”

Tears well in her eyes, and she steps forward to claw my shirt.

“Be honest with me, Vi,” I rasp with urgency. “I know what’s going on in my head in this very moment, but I need to know what you’re thinking.”

“It’s not in my head, Declan.” Her words startle me, because it means they come from a deeper place. “I’m giving you pieces of my heart, all for a chance.”

My thumb brushes a teardrop away from her cheek. “A chance that I want the longest game there is?” I finish her thought.

She nods softly. “I don’t want to be that woman who thinks you will change for them. I know you don’t really want kids or a wife, and still I signed up for more with you because it feels better than nothing. But... you have the pieces of my heart in your hand. It’s up to you...”

“To figure out if I’ll break them or not.” I cup her head in my hands to plant a long kiss on her forehead. “He’s right. I feel a lot for you, which means I shouldn’t lead you on. I need to be 100% sure of our direction, that we’re on the same path. It’s only fair to you that my head is clear.”

We stand there, completely heavy in our reality, and it feels like the ground below us is quicksand.

“I need a timeout,” I whisper my request. “A little break.”

Violet snuffles another cry as she nods before turning to walk away.

This isn’t goodbye, but at this moment, I can’t give her the answer she needs.

VIOLET

I use my spoon to play with the jellybean that sank to the bottom of my coffee. I'm sure it weighs heavy like my heart.

"How do you not need caffeine right now? You've barely drank anything," Brielle mentions as she stirs the tea bag in her mug.

We're sitting in Jolly Joe's, and I'm sure I must look a state. I'm in yoga pants, a cute-enough hoodie, and a messy bun.

"I'm not that thirsty or hungry lately," I tell her honestly.

She sighs in understanding. "Haven't heard from him at all?"

I glance up from my drink while my thumb plays with the mug handle. "It's only been a few days, but why should I?" I laugh to myself. "Then again, Declan is very good at mixed messages, so maybe I should be surprised that he hasn't reached out."

"Violet, I don't know what to say. I was rooting for you two, but maybe Ford made a valid point. Why ride the train if the destination is wrong?"

For the experience, for the adventure. Sometimes we are attached to someone and refuse to let go.

"Maybe I don't want kids or a husband one day."

Brielle gives me a pointed look because she's calling my bluff. "It hurts, I'm sure. You never know, maybe he'll realize

his priorities in life have changed. At least then it would be from his own initiative and not an ultimatum.”

I reach up and tighten my bun. “All valid points, but it doesn’t change the fact that I feel hollow inside and wish I wasn’t so willing to fall for him, but he made me feel... special and that something more was possible.”

She reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. “Remember the good parts.”

I nod, but my bottom lip trembles as I feel a cry about to break which has become routine lately.

Brielle smiles at someone over my shoulder. “Hey.”

I turn my head to see April and her daughter Hadley. “Hey, you two, how are things?” April beams a smile. Her eyes whip to Brielle who I catch mouthing not to ask about Declan. “The flower shop all good?” April’s tone is hesitant as she tries to figure out the dynamics.

I growl a sound. “It’s okay, Brielle, no need to worry about upsetting my little heart. That’s already been done by a man who, under that bachelor-hockey-player persona, is surprisingly romantic. But never fear, my beloved brother was right, and Declan Dash is bad news.” I string my words together, as that anger resurfaces inside of me. At least I made it to 3pm today.

“Yikes,” April simply answers.

“Eat ice cream, that’s what I do every time hockey players break my heart,” Hadley says, as if she has experience, and she’s only fourteen. “Ooh, they have maple pecan today.” She notices the board and heads to the counter.

“Maple pecan,” I echo, with my lips quivering.

“Oh crap, a trigger,” Brielle winces.

I blow out a breath, but tears pool in my eyes.

“How the hell is maple a trigger?” April questions Brielle.

“Because Declan’s family—” Brielle explains.

“Owns a maple syrup company, and he hates maple syrup, except when we...” I wail a sob and drop my head onto my arms on the table, which would be hysterical to most.

April looks at me blankly. “I think this is a sister-in-law pep-talk moment. I’m going to, uh, go grab some non-tree-related ice cream.” She mouths good luck to Brielle and leaves us.

“Why don’t you come stay at our house for a few days?” Brielle suggests as she rubs my arms where they’re crossed on the middle of the table.

My head pops up. “No, I don’t want to hear Ford give me any more of his life wisdom, and your son, I love my nephew, but Connor is really turning into a little shit.” My head flops down.

“He is, isn’t he,” Brielle reflects with a fond smile on her face. “He’s going to be one of those hockey players with a bad reputation off the ice, I feel it in my bones. I’m already waiting for him to come home with a tattoo because he used a fake ID to get one.” She takes a sip of her tea, calm with her predicament.

The corner of my mouth stretches. “Sounds like something he would do.”

“I promise you that one day it will feel like the storm has moved on.”

I straighten my spine to sit up. “I was so happy. I’m not sure I’ll get that again.”

“You will. Besides, you’re talking as though you’ll never see or hear from Declan again. He’ll be in Lake Spark more than he won’t. Eventually you two will need to face one another to clear the air. But I still believe there is hope.”

“Why are you so optimistic?”

Brielle twists her lips and stifles her smile. “Just a feeling I have that will make sense one day, but right now, you should function with confidence and dress to kill. It drives guys crazy, and their brains begin to rewire to think properly. It’s like a button is pushed.”

I shrug a shoulder. “This is my first time out of the house other than the flower shop,” I admit.

“Then do something to change that routine.”

“You’re probably right, I can’t live in this cloud forever. Especially since I don’t know what timeline I’m working with, and I’m not sure biology would let me wait forever.”

Brielle smiles softly at me. “Would you wait forever?”

My lips purse together. “That’s a long time. But I know that it will be hard to match the last few months, and unless it’s Declan, then it won’t be the same.”

That I’m sure of.

YANKING UP MY STRAPLESS DRESS, I’m severely doubting my choice of attire. My strapless bra is giving me zero support, and the red on my lips feels a shade too dark. This is what I get for letting Charlotte dress me up.

Now I’m swaying my hips to Bonobo’s “Nightline” in a busy club in Chicago, all because I took Brielle’s advice to heart. At least I look and feel hot, I’ve noticed a few eyes land on me, but nobody is of interest because they’re not Declan.

“I’m sorry I haven’t made it out to Lake Spark lately,” Charlotte apologizes over the music as she dances. She’s in hot pink and hard to miss.

I wave her off. “It’s fine. I wanted to get out of Lake Spark, and last time I checked, the club scene is minimal there.”

“Someone needs to tap into that market, there must be a demand.”

My shoulders slant up to my ears. “Doubt it.”

“Come on, I’m dying of thirst.” She grabs my hand and guides me off the dancefloor to the bar.

“Two gin and tonics,” she calls out to the man behind the bar before turning her attention to me. “Doesn’t a small town mean you’re going to run into the man who shall not be named sooner rather than later?”

I bite my bottom lip. “Maybe. Then again, all he has to do is avoid Main Street and we’re safe for a while.”

Charlotte laughs. “Brent thinks Declan is hung up on you.”

My heart patters from the thought, and my head perks up. “Really?”

“Yep.” She smiles at the barman for delivering our drinks. “Declan even skipped the last party, if you know what I mean.” She lifts her brows.

“Oh?”

“Totally.”

I take a sip of my drink. “I almost told him I love him during morning sex.” The confession falls off my tongue.

Charlotte looks at me with affection. “I’m happy you get to experience that—love, I mean. But I’m sorry it’s turning out like this.”

“Maybe it’s for the better that I froze and kept my words in. Makes this all easier, right?”

She shrugs at my thought.

I take another long drink and assess the room, only to return to the door, and my gaze freezes. “You didn’t tell anyone we would be here, right?” I check with Charlotte because this is too much of coincidence.

Declan walks into the club with a beautiful brunette by his side. He smiles at one of the barmen as if they’re familiar with one another.

“No, why?” Charlotte looks over her shoulder, only to scoff a disapproving sound. “Forget small town, seems Chicago isn’t big enough not to run into each other. Who’s the chick?”

I want to run to him and shove him into the wall from the level of anger boiling inside of me.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” I lie and quickly take a sip of my drink. “We’re not together, he’s free to do what he wants.” Bullshit too. Is this what his “timeout” looks like? Did he just move on? No wonder he hasn’t reached out.

Aggressively, I stir the straw in my glass and an ice cube falls out.

“Forget him, Violet. We can get out of here right now and go somewhere to forget him.”

“I’m not going to a sex club,” I protest.

“Okay, okay. Just throwing out options.”

I do my best to avoid glancing at Declan, but it’s hard as he’s a cross between business-Declan and Lake Spark-Declan, in jeans and a blazer.

“Damn it,” I curse to myself and down another long sip of my drink.

“His loss,” Charlotte reaffirms. “The audacity to go around town with *her*.”

I search for the bartender, ignoring Charlotte clearing her throat.

“Violet.” A warm deep masculine voice says my name, and it wraps around every fiber in my body. *My Declan*. His hand on my lower back molds to me instantly, a button pressed into the world we created.

My eyes flick up to Declan, and the room seems to stop.

“I see Brent, I’ll be back,” Charlotte mumbles then leaves. Neither Declan nor I take much notice.

“Declan,” I say softly.

His eyes drop then draw a line back up, and an approving smirk ghosts his lips. “You look *really* stunning.”

For a second, I nearly blush, giddy from his praise, but I know better. I search for the brunette but can’t find her.

“She’s my cousin. *Blood-related* cousin.” Declan seemed to notice my curiosity and answers my thoughts.

But I won’t melt to a puddle. “It’s okay, you don’t owe me an explanation. We’re on a break.”

His hand jolts me forward a step, closer to him. “Really, my cousin who studies fashion, the reason I knew which boutique to call when you stayed at my condo, that’s her. She’s in the city for a few days to meet up with friends. There is nobody else, understand?”

I barely nod because somewhere in that sentence a beacon of hope shot out at me.

“Why didn’t you let me know that you’d be in the city?” He looks pained.

I scoff a sound of annoyance. “Why haven’t you contacted me?”

His face tenses, and his lips purse out while he takes a long breath. “It’s complicated. I want to be sure.”

“Of what?”

His head lolls gently to the side, and his eyes send heat across my skin before he leans in to whisper in my ear, “You look really good.”

My body trembles from feeling him so close, wanting more.

“Changing the topic, great.” I look up to the ceiling then back to him. “You still need time, that’s fine, but don’t look at me as if you’re about to devour me.”

He smirks and slides the outside of his thumb across his slightly stubbled chin. “Want to get out of here and head back to my place?”

My eyes grow wide. “No, Declan, meaningless sex isn’t going to help us right now.”

He grabs my elbow with a little force that catches me off guard but feels safe all the same. “It can never be meaningless with you.”

Declan's twisting into my thoughts and feelings again, hope hitting me from all directions. I deserve to have it all, I remind myself.

But this is too good, seeing him again, his hand on me, his eyes possessive.

"How was your day?" I ask, as if we're chatting over coffee, in an attempt to re-center us to neutral.

"Fine. I had an interview for a magazine profile on my new ownership gig."

"Good. You can confirm you're single and readership will skyrocket." I don't know why that just spit out of my mouth. The alcohol must be hitting me.

His look turns unimpressed. "I'm not single. We're on a break." Declan's words nearly sound seething. "Tell me the sheriff or some asshole with flowers hasn't already attempted to make a move."

"No. Why are we even going over this? Our situation hasn't changed. I want to give you time, but you are touching me and saying these things that send me right back on the mixed-message train." I down my drink to the last drop.

His hand drops from my arm, and I hate that it's my doing that I feel the loss of his touch.

"Violet, let's get out of here," he says again, adamant.

I cross my arms over my chest, doing my best to stay firm. "No way." I can't help the smile that wants to grace my lips because his persistence sends a swirl of fun tumbling inside my belly. "We're not helping ourselves if we fall into bed together right now."

His eyes dip down to me while he smirks. "Say that again and I might just throw you over my shoulder."

Run far away from this man's charm. Do it now. Save yourself.

"Find me when you have a clear message and know what to do with my heart," I declare before I walk away from him,

and I may look proud on the outside, but inside I'm desperate
for him to proclaim everything I want to hear.

DECLAN

I knock on Brent's door at ten in the morning, hoping he has time to head out for brunch. I sure as hell could use a distraction.

I barely slept. I mean, how could I? Running into Violet last night was both a blessing and a curse. I've been avoiding sending her a message or giving her a call for two weeks, because I knew it would just confirm what I fear... Letting her go is the last thing I want.

But I need to be sure of so many things because stringing her along for an end game with different rules would crush her, and believe it or not, hurting her just isn't an option in my playbook.

Damn, what I would have given for her to come home with me and to wake with her in my arms before I order in breakfast from this little French bistro nearby. We would have talked about our weeks, and she'd listen to my hockey talk because she gets it and has interest. She would sit on my lap while she explains how much her nephew drives her crazy, but her pure affection would be apparent. One of us would say something wicked, and domesticated-us would be thrown out the window. That's my ideal Sunday.

Instead, Brent opens the door while he's pulling a t-shirt on. "Hey, you look like shit."

"Thanks. Exactly what every man wants to hear." I follow him inside and immediately hear giggling.

Charlotte pops her head up over the back of the sofa wearing only a bra. “Morning.” She smiles, completely unfazed by her state of undress.

Immediately another woman appears next to her. “Morning.” The brunette smiles as she attempts to zip up her dress.

My eyes bug out as I turn my focus to my friend who grins proudly. “It was a good night,” Brent reflects as he leans against the wall.

“And a good morning,” Charlotte adds.

“Clearly eventful,” I deadpan. My eyes turn to Charlotte who rests her chin on her folded arms on the back of the sofa. Something dawns on me. “Where’s Violet?” She was staying with Charlotte, I assume.

“She stayed at my place. You know she doesn’t like to play.” She pouts.

I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration. “You let her go back to your apartment when she’d been drinking?” The disapproval runs strong in my voice.

Brent slaps a hand on my shoulder. “Relax, we dropped her off in the taxi on the way here.”

“Where is she now?”

“Probably on her way back to Lake Spark. She wanted to leave early, something about needing to escape you and preparing begonias or something like that,” Charlotte explains.

“Who’s Violet?” the random third wheel dares to ask.

Brent chuckles, and Charlotte stares at me blankly, almost waiting. When I don’t say anything, she says, “The woman that this guy is in love with.”

I sigh, because I can’t deny it.

“He just needs time to ‘think.’” Charlotte uses air quotes.

The random woman angles her head to study me. “Aren’t you that hockey guy who owns a team now?”

“NDA,” Brent clucks his tongue and chides her a warning lightheartedly.

I point at her and look at Brent. “Who is this?”

“Jenna,” he answers.

“Gemma,” she corrects him.

“Gemma,” he repeats with a tight smile. “Sorry, Gemma, Declan here is a little out of sorts and has morphed into someone with an emotional backbone.”

Charlotte turns to Gemma who is sitting on her knees, invested in our conversation. “Declan used to be as adventurous as us, but then he hooked up with Violet, and since then has been a monogamous lovesick puppy—until he turned into an asshole to think over his feelings.”

Brent squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t be too hard on him. He’s never been this obsessed with a woman before. I mean, hell, one time on a video call, he wouldn’t shut up about babysitting with Violet and some dog. He smiled the entire time. This isn’t the guy I’ve known all these years. If I ask about his sex life, he shuts me up, as if his time with Violet is so sacred.”

I give him the death stare. “Why did I bother coming by to see if you wanted to grab brunch?” I wonder.

“I did work up an appetite, but I can’t handle listening to your Violet woes for another meal. Not when it’s so obvious. You literally called me the other day because you were standing outside the window of Tiffany’s trying to imagine if buying a ring is something you could see in your future.”

“You what?!” Charlotte sits up in full intention.

My hands come up to defend myself. “It was a moment.”

“Yeah, and what about having the contractor fix a treehouse, even though you don’t have kids? Manifesting or what?” Brent adds.

“Aww, a treehouse for little Violets and Declans,” Charlotte coos to tease me.

“The treehouse was already on the property, so why take it down?” I shrug, but really, there was maybe something screaming inside of me that one day, just maybe...

“You’re putting yourself through these moments because somewhere inside you do want to imagine it.” Brent walks to his bar on the side and holds up a half-empty bottle of champagne. “Mimosas?” Everyone ignores him.

“What else has he done?” Charlotte asks Brent. These two as a team are a headache.

“He’s avoided Ford, sent his assistant to a meeting in Lake Spark so he didn’t have to go, made a shitload of paper animals. This man is losing his focus. Bad news for his hockey empire.” Brent is trying to put pressure on me, I can tell.

“She loves you, you know.” Charlotte’s words strike me.

“Why do you say that?” I pry.

“She nearly told you, but then you went on your break a few hours later.”

My mind runs through that day. In bed... she almost told me something. God, I wish I heard her say it. I would hold onto that forever.

“I’m not sure you should have told me that,” I say softly.

Charlotte stands up and grabs a shirt of Brent’s hanging off a cushion. “Nah, something tells me this will make a good maid-of-honor speech one day.”

“This is so romantic. How did you meet Violet?” Gemma asks as she grabs her purse.

“She’s my buddy’s little sister.”

“Their sparks started when he grabbed her name from a bowl at my party.” Brent grins then sighs. “Someone had to do the good Lord’s work.”

I shake my head. “That’s my cue to get out of here.”

“Fine, I’ll send up a bagel if I order some. Just remember that your ideal world isn’t having a bagel with me, it’s with someone else. Oh, and imagine that, you could actually have it

all.” Brent plants both his hands on my shoulders to square my vision to him. “It’s okay to admit what you enjoy is actually everything we were always against... Besides, I’ll just go wild for the both of us.”

For the first time this morning, I nearly laugh, because it feels as though ease is forming inside of me.

HEADING BACK UPSTAIRS, I take a long shower before I walk into my closet to search for a suit that I’m after. I’m supposed to drive out this afternoon to meet with my parents for some event at their country club.

I slide hangers to one side until I spot my suit in a dry-cleaning bag. I forgot this was delivered a while back. I bring the hanger off the rail and carry the suit to my bed where I work the bag off. I notice an envelope attached to the neck of the hanger. The dry cleaner always puts things that are found in pockets in an envelope.

Opening the envelope, my body comes alive at the sight of the catalyst for my current state.

Taking the two small sheets of paper out, I unfold them to find Violet’s name and my own.

Because I’m the guy who decided to keep our names that were in a bowl. Deep down, I know why, too.

She was always going to be more than one night.

Now it’s time to do something about it.

DECLAN

Brielle smiles warmly at me as she balances Wyatt on her hip and grabs a treat from the jar for Puck who is jumping up on his back paws.

“He’s been waiting for you, you know,” she mentions.

“Ford or the dog?”

She laughs. “Both. Ford will be down in a minute. Want something to drink?”

“Nah, it’s okay.” I take a seat at the kitchen island, scanning the area. Every time I’m here, I’m reminded what a home looks and feels like. Toys scattered on the floor, an overzealous dog wagging his tail, and the music from upstairs which means Connor is home.

“Thanks for the maple syrup.” She indicates with her head at the new bottle on the counter.

It’s a glass bottle with gold foil around the cork. “It’s a special edition, all the way from Quebec,” I explain.

She tickles her son. “This guy loves it on his waffles and pancakes. It’s so strange too, because we had like a full bottle, then suddenly it disappeared. “

A light feeling hits me because I know exactly what happened to it.

“How much longer?” I indicate to her belly.

“Too long, still another month... but you didn’t come here to make small talk or discuss hockey with Ford, did you?” She

gives me a pointed look.

Wyatt points to me. “Paper bird.”

“What?” Brielle asks her son, grabbing his little hand.

“We made paper animals together that one time, didn’t we, buddy.” I smile at him.

He proudly nods his head.

“Oh yeah, I remember that now. The weekend we all want to forget.” Brielle exhales a long breath.

Except me, I kind of enjoyed that weekend a lot.

The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs is slightly daunting. I’m not sure what mood Ford is in, but I need to talk to him if I have any chance of saving a friendship and possibly more.

“Hey.” His tone is neutral as he walks to Brielle and takes Wyatt from her arms. “Connor is asking about laundry. Really, he can do it himself, you know that, right?” he tells Brielle.

She grins and pats his shoulder. “But then we end up with destroyed clothes. Trust me, it’s better this way. He’s probably asking about his jersey. I’ll go.” She begins to walk away but pauses and clears her throat. “Be nice.” She smiles tightly at her husband.

We both watch her leave, but then I notice that Ford has an affectionate smile tracing his lips. “It never gets old, this chaos,” he states fondly.

“I can only imagine.”

He looks at me cautiously. “What brings you by?”

His calm demeanor catches me off guard, considering last time I saw him he wanted to rip me to shreds. Then again, that’s a talent many hockey players have; we eventually cool off after outbursts that are mostly warranted. I sit up on the chair. “A few things. An apology, a request, and a use of the friend card.”

Ford chortles as he grabs a box of animal crackers sitting on the counter. “Ballsy, but that’s just you.”

“Ford, I owe you an apology for going behind your back.”

“You’re not sorry,” he informs me matter-of-factly, with the corner of his mouth twisting.

I tilt my head to the side in contemplation. “You’re right. Sneaking behind your back was never an issue for me, nor would I have sought out your approval.”

His face turns serious. “I’m not going to go in circles about that. What matters right now is that my sister has a broken heart and that’s all your doing.”

My shoulders drop, and I sigh. “That’s why I’m here.”

Ford slams the box of animal crackers on the counter rather abruptly. “Gentle, Daddy,” Wyatt reprimands him.

Ford smiles sweetly at his little boy. “I’m sorry, sometimes Daddy is so strong that he doesn’t recognize his force, something other big boys should be aware of.”

I roll my eyes at his humor. “Remember I’ve taken you down a time or two.”

“Let’s stay focused. Are our future dinners going to be awkward as...” He glances at his son. “Duck? Or is this the part where you try to tell me that you’ve seen the light.” Ford snaps up a cracker with his mouth when Wyatt offers one.

“A bit of both.”

He raises one brow at me. “Let’s discuss this in the living room so this one can play.”

I nod, and we walk to the living area where Wyatt runs straight to his blocks, Puck walks to me to deliver a tennis ball, and Ford gets comfy in his big chair as he continues to snack on animal crackers.

“You made a point, one that we needed to hear,” I begin.

“Violet is more than a sister to me. She’s part of our support network, she’s crucial in Connor’s life, and I see her almost daily. I will never let her settle for less, she deserves it all. You have to get that. She wants the husband, the kids, any

pet but a parrot, and I just don't see how you can provide those things."

I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees. "I don't know either... but I want to."

"Want and will are two different things."

"Which is why I've thought about the future every waking second since that day. I won't apologize, but I can't walk away from Violet. Life is too good with her in it. I'm happy for once, and it isn't because of hockey. It's her."

Ford takes a long pause as he studies me, with his gaze fixed. "I don't doubt that you two have fun or that you care, but life is more than the present."

"Which is why I wanted to be sure, and it can't be a thought but a feeling... It doesn't matter anyway, it all leads back to Vi."

"Are you telling me that you've changed? Because I've witnessed some unsavory things when it comes to your partying ways, especially if Brent is involved, and I have to be honest, it's going to take a hell of a lot to caution before I'm convinced that you've changed."

My lips purse out. "Fair enough, but it's not you I have to convince."

A hint of a smile appears on Ford's lips. Maybe I'm saying all the right words. "You're telling me that one day you want to marry Violet and have kids?"

Looking around and seeing the dog knock Wyatt down into his blocks, only for him to squeal in delight, I can't help but smile at what surrounds me, a glimpse of what I could have. "Maybe not tomorrow, but yeah, that's what I can see in the future."

His eyes widen with reality sinking in. "I'll be da—
ducked."

"It's cliché, but it's because of someone that my entire view of life altered, and that someone is Violet."

"You promise not to freak out again?" he asks.

“I promise.”

“You came to me first; why not go straight to Violet?”

I grin to myself and toss the ball again for Puck. “I’m crazy about your sister, but not so crazy about another showdown with you. I’m here because I value our friendship, and a wise man knows you’d better be on good terms with your girlfriend’s brother. I need you to know that I only want to make her happy, and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her.”

Ford continues to stare at me, eating another cracker. He offers me the box. I wave him off. “Have a cracker, trust me.”

He’s adamant, and now isn’t the time to test him. I grab a cracker that’s really a cookie, but whatever. Taking a bite, it isn’t bad.

“Delicious, right?” Ford insists.

“Surprisingly.”

“So how are you going to win back my sister?” He’s interrogating me now.

Connor enters the room and gives me a scowl before he flops onto the opposite end of the sofa and points at me with his thumb. “We’re back on friendly terms with him? *Really*, Dad?” I can’t tell if he really isn’t amused or if he’s just riling me up.

Ford’s gaze slides to Connor. “Yes, Declan was just about to enlighten us how he is going to impress your aunt, because surprisingly, I may be shipping them as a couple *if* he gets his act together.”

“He better go big, because he sure as hell put her in a shitty mood all week,” Connor says before he steals the box of crackers from Ford. Clearly, I discovered the Spears family snack of choice.

Ford gives him a disapproving look. “Language in front of the young one. We should give Declan the benefit of the doubt, I’m sure he has grand plans.”

I look between them. “Actually, I do, and I kind of need Connor’s help.”

“Really? Now you want my dating expertise?” Connor’s voice is pure attitude.

“Expertise? Hardly. Your ability to scheme? Yes,” I answer.

Connor and Ford look at one another before breaking out in grins.

There is only one way in my mind for how I’m going to ensure that Violet knows she’s the one.

VIOLET

Arranging the row of newly potted plants that I received in this morning's shipment, I admire how a green cactus is a safe bet. It's green, dry, and sends the message that this is not a romantic plant. This is the plant for people who only want to give occasional attention to it.

Apparently, plants scream, but we can't hear it. Kind of like me lately. I'm yelling inside, waiting for clarity, hoping for a fantasy. Everyone looks on with sympathy, maybe even pity for the woman who fell for the playboy hockey star. I wish I could say that I'll prove them all wrong.

"It sucks, Nugget," I voice.

The bird looks at me with I swear surprise that I've given him extra attention in the last week, but anything to keep me occupied, even if that means giving spare thought to the parrot who I'm sure wants to kill me.

The bell over the door rings, and I'm ready to throw that bell onto the street. Every. Single. Time. Hope ignites inside of me that maybe it's Declan.

I frown when I see Connor walking in. "Oh, it's you."

"Geez, someone is in a mood." He frowns.

"Sorry, it's been a day."

"More like a few weeks, but it's okay, you'll be okay."

Lines form on my forehead. "What makes you say that?"

Connor looks around the room and drops his gym duffel bag on the floor. “Didn’t you get the message?”

“What message?” I say as I walk to my station.

“I’m here because I assume you ignored the message.”

I blow out an exasperated breath. “I’m lost.”

He begins to search my table, and he notices a pile of cards, and it grabs my attention. Tilly was working earlier, I must have missed the orders. Crap, I now potentially have clients waiting. Frantically, I lift the papers. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Today.

My eyes scan the order.

No flowers, only a card, it says for the instructions. To write on the card:

*Declan, thank you for last night.
My answer is still yes, Violet.*

He was here. Declan was here.

My stomach sinks, and then a faint line forms on my mouth because it’s the same note from when he first came into my store, but I’m lost about what this means.

“That message,” Connor points out.

I narrow my eyes at him. “How do you know?”

“Don’t ask. It’s time to go.” He pulls out rope from his gym bag and a strip of fabric that I can assume is a blindfold.

“What the hell is going on?” I’m half curious and slightly scared.

“Trust me, I’ve been asking myself the same thing since Declan showed up for a *talk* with my dad.”

A smile tugs at my mouth. “He went to Ford?” That must be promising, right?

“Close up shop and let’s go.”

I CAN'T SEE, my wrists are tied, and my nephew's driving is not for the faint of heart. I don't remember this many turns around the lake.

“Will you just tell me where we're going?”

“It's a surprise.”

“Is this really necessary, the rope?” I wiggle my wrists in the air.

Connor laughs. “I think so.”

He speeds up as the car turns to the right. “Easy, tiger, I'm going to be sick.”

“Not in Dad's car.”

My mouth gapes open. “We're in the Jaguar? Does your dad know?” I sure as hell didn't, considering I've been blindfolded since I locked the door to my store, and although it felt like a sports car, Ford never ever lets Connor drive it.

“This is for a good cause.” That's a no, Ford has no clue his son stole the car.

I breathe to myself. “Please, can we drive a little smoother?”

“Relax, we're here,” he informs me as he begins to slow the car.

I have no idea where we are, I was too distracted by Connor's driving.

The moment the car comes to a halt, I breathe out a sigh of relief. I was getting a little queasy, and I have zero patience for this mystery.

I hear Connor get out of the car, and a few seconds later, he opens my door to help me out.

“Goods delivered,” he calls out.

Connor guides me by my arm, and we take a few steps in the afternoon sun. It feels like we're on a driveway.

"What the hell?" Declan yells in the distance, and he sounds horrified, but I can only hide a smile. I hear his voice, which means he's here. He delivered a message, he saw Ford, he has Connor involved, these are all positive indications. "Why is your aunt tied up and blindfolded?"

Oh, this wasn't part of the plan.

I hear the stomp of feet, and I think Declan is marching toward us.

"You said I could do it my way," Connor protests.

My hands are yanked, and instantly I feel Declan's familiar fingers fiddling with the knot. "I said you could come up with whatever story you needed to get your aunt here because you're her soft spot."

"I added a little interpretation," he gripes. "Trust me, this is by far more memorable. Far less boring too," Connor justifies.

The rope falls from my wrists, but all I feel is the warmth of Declan near, and my heart is on a rollercoaster. Fingers sneak under the blindfold and lift the dark fabric. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the light, and I'm greeted with eyes that possess me in the most delicious way possible.

"He went rogue on us. You okay?" Declan asks with concern as he assesses my body.

I blink a few times. "I'm fine." I smile nervously. "Not sure what's going on, though." I look around to see that I'm at Declan's house.

Declan glares to my nephew. "I'll take over from here."

"Sure. Want to keep the rope?" Connor asks casually.

Declan gives him a stunned look. "No, I don't want to keep the rope," he mocks. "One of these days you're going to give one of us a heart attack."

“Just keeping it real.” He flashes us a peace sign and heads back to the car.

Declan ruefully shakes his head, and I roll my lips in because an overpowering smile wants to beam on my face. Declan is here in front of me.

He waits a few moments until Connor starts the engine before he focuses on me again. “Hi.” He sounds tender and near shy. Ooh, timid is a side of him I haven’t yet seen, and I’m here for it.

“Hi,” I softly answer.

“Give me two minutes. I was supposed to be waiting out back, but then I saw you were kidnapped and had to intervene.”

“Chivalrous,” I state, one-toned. “I’ll wait,” I reassure him.

He offers me an appreciative smile and jogs back to the backyard.

For the next two minutes, I nervously wait outside, kicking a few pebbles and breathing to myself until I look at my watch and there is no more stalling.

My walk isn’t slow as I circle around his house, and then my heart falls... so hard.

A path of flowers lead to the treehouse. Not just flowers, but paper flowers.

Different colors, mostly purple. One flower after another. I chuckle because he’s lucky it isn’t windy today.

I follow the line of flowers until I reach the steps of the treehouse. My face turns puzzled, as the structure looks different, refreshed, upgraded, and a far cry from what it was when we first saw this house.

Climbing the few steps, I enter the treehouse to find more paper flowers all leading to a bowl on a new rug in the middle of the room. Declan is leaning against the wall with one ankle crossed over the other and his hands in his pockets, a man confident with his move, maybe even calm.

Our eyes meet, and my chest is visibly moving.

One step, and another.

He tips his head to indicate that I should investigate something on the floor. My eyes peer down to find our names on two pieces of paper in the bowl. They're not new, they're the originals... from that night.

"I kept them," he states softly.

"Why?" I can't tear my eyes away from what started this all.

Declan walks to me and places his hand on my shoulder, and the fingers on his other hand hook under my chin to guide my eyes to his. "Life's always been a game to me. Turns out, the championship game that I've been after is the one that I have with you. I always win, which means I've been waiting to score, with you and the life we can have."

Am I floating? Is this real?

He continues to speak, with every word wrapping around me. "I knew you would be something, and I didn't want to forget our night together. I held onto paper, for crying out loud."

I shrug and smile. "You do a lot of things with paper," I tease him.

He smiles as he steps closer, threading his fingers into my hair to ensure I can't escape, even though I wouldn't want to. "But only you get paper flowers."

I glance around before returning to meet his eyes and smile, with emotion taking over. "Aren't paper flowers for forever?"

Declan's eyes stayed locked with mine. "That's the point."

"What are you saying?" I try not to sound like I'm going to jump into his arms.

"It's only you, Violet. I'm not going to let you go, and I refuse to break your heart, so I had to be sure. It turns out, the

things you want are what I want, as long it's with you and only you, because I love you."

I step closer then stall. "I should be angry at you, not give in so easily when you do something as perfect as this. But is it wrong that I just want to walk into your arms, because then the last few weeks become history and my misery is over?"

He nods once. "I can't answer because I'll be biased."

Slowly, I step into his embrace and loop my arms around his neck. "Are you sure about us?"

He snorts a laugh. "I fixed up a treehouse, and other than right now, I don't intend to be in here again, so I'm going to assume this is for our next generation."

"I don't want to have kids soon, I just... eventually."

"We have time. We have to train our dog first." He smirks.

I'm still hesitant, but I'm about to burst. "You won't get bored with me?"

"Not a chance." He yanks me forward by my middle. "Though maybe let's avoid any parties, clubs, or suggestions that Charlotte and Brent might give us too."

This time I chuckle. "Couldn't agree more."

"I can't say sorry about the last few weeks. I wish I didn't have to give us the distance, but I owed it to us to ensure we are the long game."

"I get it. I was patiently waiting on the offside." I know he loves when I make hockey references.

"I love you, Violet. I thought hockey was my life, and I got thrown into a void when I retired, but it turns out, real fulfillment is you."

His words take me by surprise. I always kind of assumed that I would be the first to say it. The feeling has been bubbling inside of me, but it feels safe to admit the truth. "I love you too."

"Good, we've established that. Now let me kiss you," he nearly growls.

Our mouths slam together for a deep and passionate kiss. He steals my breath and saves me when I lose my balance, because this man's swoon has swept me off my feet.

He hoists me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist, instantly feeling his hard length.

"I brought pillows," he mumbles.

I glance down. "Oh, you want to do this here?" I kiss him again.

"I thought it would be special."

"For sure. We can get a splinter in my ass, and the squirrels can watch us too." I love being playful with this man.

He squeezes my behind. "Your ass might be in the air."

My head falls back in a laugh, and his mouth lands on my throat to spread the warmth of his breath across my skin. "I don't care how we do this, I just need you."

"It's been too long," he whispers against my skin.

"I'm sure we will make up for that," I husk right before he walks me to the wall of the treehouse to keep me trapped between his body and the wood.

Turns out, christening the treehouse is *nearly* as amazing as hearing him tell me that our future is together.

DECLAN

Violet's eyes are cloudy with lust as she leans her head against the headrest while she stares at me, with our fingers interlaced on the seat between us. We're in the back of the car while a driver is up front.

"You never get nervous, so I won't even ask." She smirks.

Feathering my hair with my fingers, I think I'm set in my suit. Violet looks stunning in a deep blue satin dress that plunges in the front, just a shade above scandalous.

"It'll be a good night. You left some clothes at my place, right?" I ask with a mischievous grin.

Since a few weeks ago when we decided to go all in, I'm not afraid to take steps. One of them is that Violet needs to keep stuff at my place, as it makes logistics easier. Besides, give it a month or two and she'll be moving into my lake house.

"Yes, sir. Toothbrush and all." I want to kiss her coy smile off her face. I lean in to capture her mouth before retreating.

"Just stay close tonight, okay?" I request.

She scoffs. "I'm sure you will be way too busy to notice me. Everyone will want to talk to you, it's the team dinner."

Inhaling a deep breath, I can't help but smile. "Crazy, huh? People coming to me, not because I'm the star player but because I'm the one in charge."

Violet brushes the sleeve of my blazer with her fingers. "Just the way you like it."

“My parents are slowly accepting my new career. You softened the deal a little. They seem less concerned that I’m destined for a life of debauchery. You know, my dad phoned the mayor of Lake Spark.”

“Oh yeah? Why?” Violet looks entertained.

“He wanted to insist that Jolly Joe’s starts to use Grizzly Dash maple syrup for their recipes. It’s a local syrup now, since his son is a Lake Spark resident. Then, to sweeten the deal, he promised to sponsor next summer’s festival, with Dash branding and all.”

Violet laughs. “Sounds like him.” My parents adore her, and that’s based only on the few times we’ve seen them lately.

“If only he knew how we make use of the family brand,” she taunts.

“You wicked woman.”

She glances at the partition between us and the driver, before she unbuckles her seatbelt and swings her leg over my lap to straddle me, a pool of satin now resting up by her waist, giving me a fantastic glimpse of her thighs.

“I am wicked,” she promises. “Whatever will you do about that?” she rasps.

My fingers claw her bottom, and she gasps from surprise. “Want me to show up completely hard?” I warn her.

“Now, now, I can’t wrinkle this dress, so you need to be on your best behavior.” She jabs her finger into my chest then bops my nose, right before she slithers down my body and begins to work my belt.

“Violet.” It comes out as a pleasurable curse.

“Doesn’t mean *I* need to be on good behavior. Guess I will have to swallow and not miss a single drop.”

“Fuck me.” My body is at her mercy, letting her lead the way, instantly reacting when her mouth finds my tip and her tongue swirls. Blood rushes down to below my naval and a dizzy spell hits me, knowing the best relaxation is about to descend upon me.

Violet moans as she strokes and bobs on my cock.

Sometimes the way that Violet gives a blowjob makes even me lose my mind, way beyond any fantasy, and that takes a lot. But she's sexy, beautiful, talented, and likes to give as much as she receives.

And she's mine. All mine.

A sharp breath hits me, and I know this won't take long. There's something about this setting and the fact we are short on time that tells my brain to hurry up, but it doesn't matter, as my body already feels the release that is purely due to Violet.

My hands gently cup her head, because she took a while to do her hair for tonight; I'm considerate that way. Framing her jaw with the palms of my hands, I hold her in place while I come inside her mouth as she wraps her lips tighter around my length.

She stays on me until she fulfills her promise of every last drop.

I release her, and she leans back to lick her lips and give me a satisfied smirk.

Tucking myself back in and zipping up, a relaxing breath escapes me. "You are special, you know that?"

"You've mentioned that about a hundred times lately, but by all means, tell me again."

"Thank God Ford isn't sitting at our table. You know I can't speak to him after you do these things to me." Because this scene has happened a few times as of late. How I survived Sunday dinner last week, I'm still not sure. I guess I focused on Puck's tennis ball more than I should have, stress relief for both of us.

Ford is on board about us, or at least he's slowly adapting to the fact that Violet and I are a couple who are cemented by a promise to move at our own speed but with a destination that we both want.

The car slows down just as Violet finishes applying a fresh coat of lipstick. "You've got this. Tonight's your night."

“It’s better because you’re here.”

“Just give me a sign if you need to be saved, otherwise I will be your arm candy all night, at your command.” She smiles proudly.

“There will be photographers, so we’re going pretty official.” I grin.

“Can’t wait to read the headlines,” she teases.

“Come on,” I say. Stepping out of the car, I button my blazer and offer my hand to Violet to help her out. The moment she’s standing, I admire the curve of her bare shoulder which will drive me crazy. My hand finds a protective spot on her lower back as we begin to walk toward the team photographers stationed outside the restaurant, ready for a photo op.

Violet offers me her signature smile and brings her arm around me for a side hug.

Before I have a chance to remind her how breathtaking she looks tonight, there are already flashes going off.

In general, this is a private affair, except for the team marketing department that never misses a beat.

We give them what they want, the affectionate embrace, with our eyes telling their own story as we look at one another. I would say that we’re putting on a show, but this is actually us.

Luckily, we usher that along quickly and head inside to the private banquet room that we rented.

Violet holds me firmly. “You’re going to rock your speech. I’m proud of you.”

I kiss her cheek. “I haven’t done anything yet.”

“I already know you’re going to rally the troops.”

“What makes you so sure?” We both take a glass of champagne that’s offered to us by a passing waiter.

She turns toward me and offers her glass for a toast. “Because you’re now playing for your favorite team. The you-

and-me team, and as a proud member, I can say that you have an excellent positive mindset. It's infectious."

I tilt my head side to side, glancing around for a second to see everyone who contributes to the Spinners. "I like our team, the you-and-me one." I clink our glasses.

We both take a sip, and our eyes dance in a funny waltz, with wry smiles on our faces.

"We're ridiculously too cute. We have to stop this." She pretends to be annoyed. "Even I can't handle it. Go, go out there and be inspirational yet firm, and a little fear for the rookies might be good for them." Her lips purse out in doubt.

I chuckle under my breath. "You're keeping me sharp."

She winks at me before she indicates that she's going to say hi to her brother. I watch her walk away, and I'm still in awe at how perfect she is for me.

Then it hits me.

Playing hockey was my life, but never has a goal been so clear with nothing in the way. Both career wise and in my personal life. It's because of Violet that I've saved the best play for last, because she's my breakaway to the greatest win of my life.

EPILOGUE: VIOLET

FOUR YEARS LATER

Handing over the bouquet of red roses to the young man, I smile. “Here you are.”

He grins at me while the bell announces someone entering the store.

“I think Hadley will love them. Thanks again.” He holds the flowers up before turning to leave, crossing paths with Connor who just arrived. I notice both men square their shoulders and puff out their chests. Connor is 100% Ford, which means the glare he possesses right now is some sort of territorial claim.

Connor continues his stride to my table, while the other young man leaves. “Why was O’Keefe here? He mentioned Hadley’s name.”

I suppress my grin that wants to appear. “Because he bought her flowers, as she has a dance audition, or show, maybe a date. Is that... a problem?”

“He’s an ass, but whatever. If he wants to get flowers for Princess Snark, then he can be my guest.” He adjusts his neck, clearly agitated.

I tap my nails on the roll of ribbon, figuring out the best way to approach this. Ah, hell. “For someone who often declares that your next-door neighbor is an annoying creature, it’s odd that you seem a little... bothered.”

“Totally not. Hadley is a complete headache, and now I nearly feel sorry for O’Keefe that he wants to sign himself up for time with her. Then again, he was booted from the varsity hockey team when he was in our junior year, so maybe he is resorting to desperate measures to find someone willing to date him.”

I shake my head, exasperated from prying for details because it will be one big circle. “Not everyone is like you,

Mr. Just Voted Newest Player to Watch in the Hockey League.” He’s been drafted from college hockey to the pros, to the Spinners, which despite what people may think, neither his father nor uncle played a role in that.

He can’t control his proud smirk. “Talent is talent.”

Walking to the bucket of sunflowers, I begin to count the flowers. “Thirteen, right?”

“Make it fourteen. Mom loses it when I say Wyatt also got her a flower.”

“You have the seven-year-old in on your ploys now too?” I’m impressed.

“Of course.” Connor walks to Nugget’s cage and peers in. “This guy causing you any trouble?” he asks me.

I laugh. “No, he doesn’t age. I was kind of hoping he would nap more and then I could pretend that he isn’t here plotting ways to murder me. Instead, he speaks words, lots of words.”

Declan bought out the building as a wedding gift to me, and he even negotiated a new home for Nugget. Yet, when it came down to it, I couldn’t let my faithful parrot go, so Nugget got to stay.

“You love it,” Connor reminds me.

“That’s what Declan tells me.” I circle back around to my workstation and roll out some wrapping paper for the bouquet of sunflowers.

Connor taps Nugget’s cage while the bird angles his head in various ways. “Where is your husband these days?” Declan and I have been married for two years, after a beautiful wedding which was by no means small here in Lake Spark.

“He’ll be arriving back from out of town. He was out in Arizona for a few league meetings. Don’t worry, he’ll be at family dinner tonight.” We all meet up at least a couple times a month, but sometimes we’re missing Connor or Declan due to hockey life.

But it's June, which means everyone is on downtime. Well, at least, once Declan is back this afternoon, then I get him all to myself for a few weeks.

Luckily, tomorrow is Sunday which means we will not be leaving our bed. He's always extra insistent that we stay in our little bubble after he returns from business travel. I can't complain. We just need to survive a chaotic dinner first.

"I SAY we bail five minutes after dessert is served," Declan murmurs into my ear while my eyes roam the outside table to ensure nobody notices how my husband hasn't removed his hand from my thigh for the last five minutes and his voice is thick with need for me.

I smile tightly, avoiding glancing at him. "Ten," I counter.

He growls low into my ear, giving up in defeat before he leans back on his chair.

The lake is quiet on this early evening, but the backyard of Ford's house is anything but. Puck circles the table with his wagging tail, desperate for any handouts, while my near-four-year-old nephew Alex sings a song that makes no sense. Meanwhile, my other nephew Wyatt protests to my brother that he should be allowed to play more hockey.

"Dude, relax. One more year, then you can start to really play games that mean something. Don't rush it. You'll be living in my shadow anyway, so good luck with that," Connor informs him.

Brielle instantly reproaches him. "Connor."

Ford touches his wife's arm affectionately. "Relax, our son has a good point. Spears boys are exceptional hockey players, all eyes are on them."

I sputter my sip of wine that I'm drinking. "You sound ridiculous. It's not like it's genetic."

Ford makes a sound of doubt.

“Come on, it’s not like some men have some magical hockey swimmers. If that’s the case, then good luck, because one day, we—” I gesture between Declan and me “—may just produce our own little hockey team that could outshine your crew purely because my husband also has hockey swimmers.”

Declan winces before guiding my waving hand back to the table. “Can we not talk about my... in front of your brother?”

“Yeah, please don’t. I’m going to need therapy for this.” Ford shakes his head while he folds his arms on the table.

“We really should pivot into a new topic,” Brielle suggests. “By the way, I saw your parents, Declan. They mentioned looking at real estate out here. They were having lunch at Jolly Joe’s.”

My eyes snap to Declan. “What?”

He nervously offers me a tight smile. “They mentioned, but I forgot to tell you.” I mean, I love Pearl and Walter, but his parents living so close? I don’t know. Naked backyard sex will just feel too risky, in case they stop by to borrow eggs.

“Ooh, someone is going to get an earful on the drive home.” Connor winks and clucks his tongue at Declan.

Declan gawks at my nephew. “Or not, as there is nothing more to say. By the way, how is the signing bonus my team paid you? Reminding you to mind your own business?”

I snicker a laugh, as these two always tease one another but are close.

Ford sets a hand on Connor’s shoulder, as they are sitting next to one another. “Connor knows he is on the straight and narrow now. A little less partying and staying humble.”

Connor just rolls his eyes. “Let me just grab my fictitious guitar and we can all sing Kumbaya together.”

Declan and I glance at one another, and we both roll our eyes, entertained.

“Why do I fear the years ahead?” Ford says to the sky.

“Because my husband may have hockey swimmers like you, and we’re your competition on producing the future hockey leaders of our world,” I deadpan.

My brother looks at me, pretending to be unimpressed, yet he can’t control the trace of a smile on his face.

All while my husband glides his fingers along my thigh, informing me that he has plans for me tonight.



IT’S an hour later when we’re back at the house, and the moment we make it through the door from the garage to the hall, Declan’s hands are on me, and our bodies are flush together as he walks us forward, with him behind me. His hot breath spreads just below my ear in that sensitive spot before he kisses the nape of my neck.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispers.

“It’s been three days but three days too many.” I hum a sound when his fingers drag the hem of my dress up as we continue to head toward the stairs. We may just burst from the overpowering urge to forge our reunion together, literally.

“My favorite part of returning home to you is when I get you naked and take you, with our hands and our wedding rings linked together. It’s the reminder that you’re always waiting because you’re mine.”

I reach behind my back to yank on his belt. “Wedding rings do tend to symbolize that. So do some collars, but you’re not a fan of that,” I taunt him.

His chuckle rumbles against the back of my neck, and he fists some of my hair. “Naked. Now,” he barks.

“You’re so impatient.” I begin to shimmy my cotton dress to the ground, and my eyes catch the outside patio lighting, which flashes an image of backyard sex, and then my head spins into a different direction. “Your parents,” I state.

Declan stops his own clothing removal in a heartbeat, because admittedly, I just ruined the mood. “It’s not a big deal,” he insists.

“I just didn’t realize.” Really, it is that, because I guess it’s a minor thing in the grand scheme of things.

Declan guides my body to face him, and I’m standing before him in my bra and panties. “They might have said something the other week, but I didn’t think they were serious.”

“Okay.” I blink several times. “Why do they want to move?”

His fingertips cascade down my arms to link our fingers together, and he gives me one gentle yank to bring our bodies close again. “Because they made a grandchild remark.”

“And? They often do.” In a gentle not pushy kind of way, more of “do we need to plan our year around any potential development” kind of way.

A peculiar look flashes across his face, with the sexiest most endearing smile appearing on his lips. “I didn’t remind them to be quiet.” Declan kisses the outside of my hand and steps closer, letting go of my hands to cradle my face. “Instead, I smiled to myself.” His thumb runs along my bottom lip, my heart thumping like crazy, because a balloon of hope fills my chest.

“What are you trying to say?” My eyes narrow as I try to read his mood.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, and don’t you dare think your little ‘my husband has the good hockey genes’ speech back there is any influence,” he warns.

“Influence over what, exactly?” Feelings swell because we’ve always respected that we didn’t want kids right away, we have time, but I’ve been feeling the desire lately. I never wanted to push, but now it seems...

Declan drops one hand to my belly. “I want to put a baby inside of you.”

A warm smile instantly hits me, as my entire body enters a new state of happiness. Maybe we'll be lucky to one day get pregnant, maybe not, but right now, we're on the same page and timeline, and that feels like a positive start to a new chapter for us.

"I couldn't focus during my meetings because I've been thinking about it for a while, but I'm ready, and you better believe that this place is turning into baby-making central."

I leap into his arms and kiss him with so much excitement. "We don't need to make it a big thing, let's just do what we always do, minus birth control."

He's walking us to the stairs. "To hell with that. The number of times that I'm going to have you on your back with legs in the air will be way above our daily average."

I kiss him again, inhaling his love, feeling so incredibly lucky that this man is my husband.

EPILOGUE: DECLAN

ANOTHER THREE YEARS LATER

“Shh,” Violet shushes as I pump into her with a little force while I spoon her from behind.

It’s afternoon, and we have a window of opportunity while our daughter Willow takes her nap. She’s two years old now, and she’s going to be the spitting image of Violet when she’s older. Everyone adores her. My parents insist on watching her at least twice a week, and her cousins are excited to have a girl in the family.

I cover Violet’s mouth with mine to keep our sounds under control. We are two souls with a little less sleep, a hell of a lot more patience, and this is our moment to close out the world and just be us, together.

We just entered the off-season, so I’ll have a little more time with my girls.

Violet moans wildly into my neck as her body begins to shiver around my cock.

“Declan,” she breathes out.

“Let go, baby, come on.”

Her pussy contracts around me, and it causes a wave of pleasure to flow through me. I won’t be far behind her release. Violet reaches behind to link her arm around my neck as she draws out our kiss.

There is nothing like being naked in bed with the woman you love at two in the afternoon while the house is quiet except for the sound of our skin slapping together and my dick sliding in and out of her. I’ve waited my whole life for this.

Finally, when we lie here, tangled together, tempted to fall asleep after great sex, we smile fondly at one another. “I fucking love you,” I remind her and swipe away hair from her forehead.

“I love you too. Do you think we can get thirty minutes of sleep? Will our daughter give us that today?”

This is my favorite part of the day, touching base with my wife while I’m still inside of her.

“I think so. She played a lot this morning, had her pancakes with maple syrup, which means she had a sugar high and crashed right on time after lunch.”

“She loves the family brand.” Violet grins at me before kissing my lips. My parents lose it every single time we send them a photo of Willow eating maple syrup; it’s the highlight of their day.

“But I think we should attempt to get another round in since you promised we can try for the next kid.” I want this. Watching Violet pregnant, then the moment Willow entered our lives was a gamechanger. I don’t want to stop growing our family. I dive in to kiss her mouth then speak against her lips. “Close your eyes.”

“Sleep,” she insists.

We both sigh a satisfied breath and get comfortable, ready for a power nap.

An hour later, the Dash family is rested and ready to conquer the rest of our day. Violet and I decide to pack up Willow and head into town to grab some things for dinner, plus Violet wants to check on The Flower Jar. It’s a quiet day, so not many people are on Main Street.

We stop at The Flower Jar first. I hold our daughter and approach Nugget’s cage at a safe distance. Our daughter instantly squeals in delight, meanwhile Violet chats with the new assistant who works in the store.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I balance Willow in one arm to pull up my phone without even looking at the call display. “Dash,” I answer.

I listen while the team publicist and general manager talk on the other end of the phone, explaining the latest news that will bring attention to the Spinners. They’re doing this as a courtesy due to my connection to the team. When she

mentions Connor's name, my jaw juts out. That kid is making all of us age too soon. My nephew follows the whole "play hard and party harder" philosophy. A lot like me when I was his age. The number of times the team publicist has had to do damage control lately has made me want to throttle Connor, but he's just too damn good of an athlete and is related to my wife.

After the team publicist finishes her explanation, and we hang up, I shake my head in pure aggravation, yet I chuckle to myself for the potential fallout coming Connor's way. Before I can process the information, I hear the bell over the door announcing a customer, and my daughter's grabby hands reaching behind me breaks my thought.

"Connor!" Violet greets him with a hug.

Of course, he shows up to see his favorite aunt when he returns to town from his latest adventure.

I walk toward them because I feel a conversation coming. "Hey, Connor." I don't blink.

He looks at me cautiously, probably not expecting me here. "Hey." Yep, it's an awkward hey.

"How was your trip?" Violet asks as she signs off on an order form and hands it to her assistant.

"Yes. Do tell." There is no enthusiasm in my voice.

Connor scratches the back of his head. "It was... Vegas."

Violet looks at me, slightly thrown off that Connor seems to be acting weird.

"And? You had a big group going, right?" Violet does her best to keep the conversation moving.

Connor swipes his hand across his jaw. "Something kind of happened."

Now I smirk to myself, while my wife notices in...

Three.

Two.

One...

She grabs Connor's wrist to examine his new accessory. "What the hell is this?"

"I kind of wanted to see you first before my parents find out," he begins. "I'm going to need a lot of sunflowers."

Violet shakes his hand. "Why do you have a wedding ring?"

He takes a deep breath. "I kind of... got married."

My wife's jaw drops open as she releases his wrist. "You don't have a girlfriend. You have flings. Now you're telling me that you went to Vegas and got married?"

His lack of words coming out of his mouth confirms Violet's question.

Violet enters freakout mode and quickly glances at our daughter, reminding herself of our child's impressionable ears. "What the duck, Connor!"

"Duck it," the parrot volleys.

Connor stays mute, but his face says it all. None of this was planned.

"And who might the lucky bride be?" I ask, knowing full well that my fury for his private life making the news is minor compared to his parents who are about to have a heart attack.

Connor inhales deeply. "Hadley."

No wonder the media is going to go crazy. I can see the headlines now: "Hockey Royalty Elopes in Vegas with the Daughter of a Baseball Legend."

UP NEXT!

Connor is smug, grew up destined for his hockey career, and he's irritatingly good-looking. He was also my next-door neighbor growing up. He wouldn't give me the time of day and made it clear he would never be friends with me, the ballerina and daughter of a baseball legend. Except for that one time. Years later, one hazy night, and now he's apparently my husband according to the paper next to my bed in a Vegas

hotel room. You would think we would have it annulled, but he needs to clean up his image, and I'm a sucker for his occasional glances.

So, we agree to stay married.

Rumor spreads fast in Lake Spark, and the responses of our parents, who are best friends, well, uh... they're mixed. But the problem with marrying for convenience is that you discover secrets about each other. You learn things too, like how he may just kill anyone who looks my way, or how sharing a bed brings out his dominant side. The thing is, it turns out that I may mean more to Connor than he'll ever admit. When life throws me another twist, I need a real husband to support me. And it turns out that Connor may have always been offside, waiting to win...

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THANK YOU

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Oh, uhm, hockey? Because it has made the romance book world go bananas!

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