



PITTSBURGH TITANS

CANNON

Pittsburgh Titans' Plan Crashes Killing All on Board

It's a devastating scene at International Airport as the plane for the Titans lands Wednesday. Reports are citing a problem in the landing gear that caused the plane to drop to the ground. The chartered Airbus 320XLR-300 somersaulted on its side, bursting into flames. The crash was described as "an unimaginable tragedy." The Titans were leading the league following a 3-2 win over the Columbus Hawks, earning another playoff spot. The Titans were expected to clinch the first round and clinch the division.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SAWYER BENNETT

CANNON

PITTSBURGH TITANS

By

SAWYER BENNETT

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About the Author

Foreword

Dear Readers,

Thank you for continuing on this journey with me as we fall in love with another Pittsburgh Titan. This time you're getting Cannon's story and the new head coach is going to have you fanning yourself as well as tugging at your heartstrings a bit. If you read Drake, you'll see that Cannon's story runs somewhat concurrently and you'll recognize some things. If you didn't read Drake, no worries. As always, all of my books can be read as complete standalones.

It's always been fairly easy for me to write about professional hockey not only from my viewing experience, but also having a friend that's a former Carolina Hurricane player. However, I found myself scratching my head on what exactly head coaches do. I'd like to thank Jack Han for his help with Cannon. Jack is an NHL analyst, worked in operations for the Toronto Maple Leafs, and is a former AHL coach, among other things. He has an amazing Substack called The Hockey Tactics newsletter and spent a lot of his personal time giving me an insider's view into what NHL coaches do at all levels. I'm dedicating Cannon to him with much appreciation for his insight and knowledge to help make this book more than just a romance!!!

xoxo,

Sawyer

CHAPTER 1

Cannon

PLAYER.

Minor league coach.

Coach of the Pittsburgh Titans.

It's been a hell of a journey, but I'm where I'm supposed to be, no matter what happened to get me here.

It's the third game of the regular season. We won our first one, which was in Boston, but lost to Minnesota at home the day before yesterday.

Not how I wanted to start my new coaching career with the Titans, but I'm a transformative leader, using motivation and inspiration to effectuate innovation. A lot of old-style coaching leans toward expecting impossible standards of perfection and then aiming ridicule for mistakes and errors. My understanding is, this team's former coach, Matt Keller, was quite the asshole.

I am the opposite.

I tend to take the position that failure is an intrinsic part of growth and improvement. Allowing failure helps players bounce back quicker rather than leading them to berate themselves for not reaching an impossible standard of perfection.

It might sound like my coaching style is too soft, but no one can argue with my record. That's why Brienne Norcross, the owner of the Titans, and Callum Derringer, the general manager, hired me.

The loss to Minnesota hurt, but we've moved on. My assistant coaches have been working hard running five-on-

fives to improve play and one-on-ones with the clips provided by the video coaches to address individual needs.

I'm a delegator, as many good head coaches are. It means letting go of control, which isn't easy for some. But when I moved from player to coach, I learned very quickly that the head coach position has little to do with actually drilling down into specifics and more to do with keeping all the cogs of the monstrous wheel moving.

It's why I've been at the arena preparing for our game against the Edmonton Grizzlies since six thirty this morning. I met with my assistant coaches, who, in turn, went to handle meetings with the equipment and medical staff. I moved on to a meeting with the media relations staff to discuss relevant information about tonight's game. After that, it was back with the assistant coaches for updates on injured players. From there, I had pre-scout meetings and then reviewed video clips and analyzed the special teams' objectives.

The assistant coaches ran the mid-morning skate, although I watched. Light drills for skill work and special teams practice, especially the power play.

After that, the other coaches cut loose for a few hours, but I stayed at the arena, going over five-on-five video reviews and taking another dive into the pre-scout reports to see if anything else came to mind. I made notes and suggestions for the assistant coaches, who in turn parceled out that information to the various lines, special teams, and the players individually.

Two hours before the puck was set to drop, we had our final round of meetings with a more focused emphasis on power plays and penalty kills. The assistant coaches addressed the team with a review of our entire game plan, focusing on our identity as a group and how we need to play as a team. I listened in, but that's one of the big things I delegate. It's essential for everyone to know it's not my show but that the coaching staff is a cohesive unit.

And now, it's game time. We've had our pregame warm-up, and in these last few minutes before we go out for the puck drop, it's my job to wrap it all up with some inspiration and hype.

"We've got an even matchup tonight." We're in the locker room, the men gathered around with my assistant coaches—Maurice Dupont, Sam Thatcher, and Gage Heyward—standing behind me. "You stack our lines, our special teams, and our skills up against our opponent, Vegas would say the odds are evenly matched. But that doesn't mean we accept that."

Most of the men stare at me intently. A few nod.

"We never accept anyone telling us what we can or can't do. What we will or won't win."

"Fucking right," someone says from the back.

"We never accept defeat until that last buzzer sounds, and never forget when you're on that ice that you have something the other team doesn't."

"You as our coach," someone calls out, and everyone laughs.

I chuckle, shaking my head. "Well, there's that, but I'm talking about that gnawing hunger that I know every one of you has deep in your belly. The insatiable, gut-twisting ache to prove to the world that this team is a force to be reckoned with. That we don't need to be pitied for our circumstances because there's nothing pitiable about this team.

"In fact, I'm feeling a little sorry for our opponents this year because they'll never have what we have. They couldn't even begin to imagine the fire burning inside us to be the greatest we can be. So when you step out on that ice, you do it with the knowledge that we might stack up evenly on paper, but in reality, they're no match for the Titans."

Approval roars from the players as they clap their hands. I turn to leave with the other coaches so we can make our way onto the bench. It's on the players to take the information and advice and apply it.

It's up to them to go out there and grab that win.



THE ATMOSPHERE IN the locker room after the win is almost carnival-like. I stay in the revelry until it dies down as the players get showered, changed, and head out for celebrations. Only then do I go to the media room to do the press conference to field questions, most of which are legit. There's a dumbass one, though.

“Coach... given this is a newly built team after the crash eight months ago, do you think today's win was a fluke?”

I'm irritated but keep a genial smile on my face. “I don't know, Tim. Was our loss against Minnesota a fluke?”

I let him stammer for only a few seconds before calling on another reporter.

With the players gone—the last few headed over to Mario's for some celebratory drinks—I settle in at my desk to record my game observations.

I watch a lot during the game, write down notes, and don't give much individual direction to players. That's a job my assistant coaches handle, and they do it well, as they know the mechanics of the game as thoroughly as I do. They know the pre-scouts. I'll suggest a line change, but it's the assistants who call it out, and if they feel something is better served, they'll do that as well, with impunity. It's important they know I trust their judgment as much as the players'. Sometimes being hands-off is the best way to build confidence.

I tap away on my laptop, adding notes. We left the upper slot weak during some clutch moments, but luckily, our goalie, Drake McGinn, was on fire tonight.

My biggest dilemma—and this has been an issue since preseason—is that our second line defenseman, Camden Poe, seems to be struggling. I watched video of him last season, and it's not a new problem. He seemed a little off in everything, about a quarter of a step behind on a breakaway or a second too late getting his stick on a puck. It's hard to define, but

when you watch him game after game, you can see that he might not belong on our second line.

Camden is one of the three players who wasn't on the Titans' plane when it went down last February. While he seems to have coped well with the trauma and survivor's guilt, it might be weighing him down more than we think. It's something I need to discuss with him.

There's a knock on my door and I lift my head to see Gage Heyward standing there. He's our newest assistant coach, replacing Bill Perry, who moved on at the end of last season. Gage moved from the first-line center to coach after serving as a major unifier for the newly rebuilt team. But it was never his intent to stay long and when the coaching position opened up, he was the most obvious choice.

"What's up?" I ask, motioning him in.

He doesn't enter, merely leans against the doorjamb. He arrived to the game in a suit, but he's changed into jeans and a sweater. "Maurice, Sam, and I are going to head out for a beer. Come join us?"

I know I should go. The Titans are a family, and part of that is strengthening bonds off the ice. But fuck... I'm tired. I've been going nonstop for over sixteen hours, and I need sleep, not beer.

"I'm going to take a rain check, man. I'm ready for bed."

Gage smirks. "I'd call you an old man, but we're essentially the same age and I'm tired as shit too."

"Maybe we exert more mental energy as coaches than the players do on the ice and it's just more exhausting."

"I like that analysis." Gage pushes off the jamb. "Which is why I'm only going to have one beer before heading home."

"Well, I guess I could do one beer," I drawl, closing my laptop and rising from my chair.

"Grab your cane and let's head over to Mario's. We'll stand in solidarity to have just one drink."

I snort as I grab my overcoat since it's dipping into the forties most nights. I wish I'd had the forethought to bring casual clothes, but I'll make do by loosening the knot on my tie.

Mario's is packed. My understanding is it's always been a popular hangout spot following hockey games due to its proximity to the arena, but after the team was rebuilt, the fans were rabid in their support of the new players. That spilled into after-game celebrations, so it's crowded by the time we get there.

Luckily, the bar owners let the players reserve tables, so they're guaranteed a place.

The coaches, not so much.

Not that we don't warrant it, but mainly because we don't really hang out with the players. It keeps somewhat of a professional line between us, so our authority is never blurred.

Also, I doubt the players want us watching over them, so they can get crazy if they want.

Maurice pushes through the crowd, and we follow him toward the end of the bar. He's able to wiggle his way in and order us a round, and then we find a spot near the wall where we can huddle and talk.

I'd like to say it's casual, fun talk, but we end up discussing the game. The things that worked to get us the win, and the things that need improving. We talk about the two-game road trip we leave for tomorrow.

As I finish the last swallow of my beer and decline Maurice's offer of another, I ask them, "What did you think of Camden tonight?"

"He's the weak spot on the second line," Sam says, and the others nod.

"It's like he's a beat off," I say. "Is it his knee?"

"I've had no indication from the medical staff reports." Gage has been the primary liaison with medical and players.

“By all accounts, it was fully rehabbed last season, and he’s not had any complaints. He gets it iced, but he doesn’t even use a brace.”

His knee is the reason Camden wasn’t on the plane when it went down. He had a slight meniscus tear, not even that bad. It could’ve been fixed with rest and therapy, along with the hope it wouldn’t tear further, but he chose a quicker and more stable fix with surgery.

“Want me to talk to him?” Gage asks. “See if he can identify the issue?”

“I’ll talk to him. It might be he’s just having a hard time clicking with this line, and maybe we move him.”

Gage nods in agreement.

“And with that, I’m heading home. I’m about to fall asleep standing here.”

The guys laugh, but Gage follows me out while Maurice and Sam stay to have another. We walk back to the coaches’ parking at the arena and say our goodbyes. We’ll next see each other tomorrow midmorning for our flight to Texas, where we’ll face the Dallas Mustangs and the Houston Jam.

I drive across the river to my downtown condo. Upon moving here, I decided against a house, just as I had when I lived in Sweden and Greenville. I keep very few possessions, and I don’t want to have to care for a yard or be expected to socialize with neighbors. I’m not antisocial—far from it, actually—but coaching is more demanding than my career as a player, and I don’t have room for much else outside work. I definitely don’t need a lot of space, so a small two-bedroom condo suits me just fine.

Granted, it’s in a swank as hell building with private parking and security. I bought all new furniture to fill it, given the pay increase I received after moving from the minors to the professional league. But past that, I live modestly.

I take a quick shower when I get home, but despite being physically exhausted, I’m not quite sleepy. Flopping down on

the couch, I aim the remote at the TV and surf Netflix. My chest squeezes as I scroll past the movie *Armageddon*. I don't even think about watching it as it stirs feelings I don't like.

It was the one movie Melissa and I watched most often. I loved the action and suspense, and she loved the romance. I was touched when Harry died at the end, but Melissa would sob into my shoulder.

My eyes shift to the slew of picture frames I have on one of the built-in bookcases. I'm close to my family, and I have a lot of photographs of us together.

I have some of me and Melissa still displayed. She might have died almost nine years ago, but I don't ever want to forget her. It sometimes hurts to look at her—always with a bright, sunny smile on her face. But it should hurt because she was my wife. We'd been together since our junior year in high school.

I was holding her when she died.

So yeah, it should still ache, but it's not debilitating anymore. More often than not, like right now, I can smile when I look at one of those pictures. Showing her youth and vitality, the very best of Melissa before the cancer. Those memories are a source of comfort.

The pain never fully goes away, but it has significantly lessened over the years. I've learned to live with it.

And I've moved on.

CHAPTER 2

Cannon

I LIKE CITY living. Not that I often take advantage of the great restaurants or cool bars all within a few blocks of me, but I love the convenience of those things being within walking distance should I choose to go.

When I moved here a month and a half ago, I immediately found a coffee shop around the corner from my condo. I'm a bit of a coffee addict and somewhat snobbish, so The Grind became my go-to place for my shots of caffeine.

I hit it religiously every morning when I'm in town, and it fortuitously opens at six a.m. for the super early risers.

When I enter at six thirty, my eyes immediately land on Ava. She sits at her regular corner table with an iPad propped up on a Bluetooth keyboard and a stack of papers beside it. She chews on the corner of her pen—something she does when she's concentrating—and makes entries on the keyboard after perusing a sheet of paper.

There's only one person in front of me in line, and the young barista accepts his money for a cappuccino. He moves off to the side to wait for it.

The girl behind the counter beams at me. "Hi, Cannon. The usual?"

Yeah, I come in here a lot. "Please. And add a shot of espresso."

"Late night?" she surmises with an empathetic look.

"Nothing your coffee won't cure." She laughs, I laugh, and I tap my credit card on the reader.

I move down to the pickup counter. The customer before me has his head bent over his phone. He glances up, looks back down at his phone, and then his eyes snap back up in slight recognition. But I can tell he's not sure if he really knows who I am.

Yes, as the Titans' new head coach, I had a lot of press coverage when I joined the team, but our faces aren't as recognizable as the players', unless you're a diehard hockey fan. I am wearing Titans' gear. My normal work outfit on non-game days is a pair of khakis and a polo with the team logo. If it's chilly, like today, I wear a jacket or coat, also embroidered with the team logo.

The amount of team gear I get is outrageous, but it wouldn't necessarily point me out as a member of the organization. At least one out of every five people I pass wears some sort of Pittsburgh team gear, whether it be baseball, football, or hockey. Pittsburgh is sports crazy.

I offer a smile, but before he can say anything, they're calling his name. He grabs his coffee and walks out the door, giving me a nod as he passes. I bet later he'll tell someone, "Dude... I think I was in line next to Cannon West, but I couldn't be sure. He had a hat on, but he was wearing a Titans' jacket. Maybe it was him."

Truthfully, I prefer the anonymity of being a coach versus the stardom of being a player. It makes doing simple things like grabbing coffee a lot easier.

A young guy slides my coffee across the counter. "Here you go, Cannon."

Now the people who work here... I don't know if they know who I am. They've never once asked over the weeks I've been coming in—they just know me by my first name, which is written on my cup in black Sharpie. They don't act weird, and they haven't asked for autographs. I don't see them whispering to each other when they think I'm not looking, and there are no subversive glances. It's another reason I like this place. I can just be myself here.

As is my usual habit, I move to the table next to Ava's. I take her in as her head stays bent over her work. Her dark hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, and she wears the same navy visor cap as the other baristas with the business logo on the front. Her uniform includes a navy polo shirt with the store logo over the left breast and a pair of khaki pants and tennis shoes. Her name tag is pinned over her other breast, and under it, printed in smaller letters, reads Assistant Manager.

"You're not doing anything good for my ego by ignoring me," I say as I settle into my chair.

She doesn't lift her head, but I can see a smile curving. "You don't have an ego."

"True, but you could at least say, *Hello, Cannon, how is your morning going?*"

Ava looks up, and as I was on the first day we met right here at these tables, I'm momentarily knocked silly by how beautiful she is. It's her eyes, first and foremost, a bright green that I've never seen on any other person in my life. My own hazel eyes have striations of green in them, but the tone is more matte than the jewel-like nature that makes up the entirety of her irises.

Her smile reveals straight white teeth as she mimics me. "Hello, Cannon. How is your morning going?"

"Much better now that you've acknowledged me and soothed my ego," I quip.

Ava rolls her eyes and returns to her work. But she doesn't ignore me. "Again, you don't have an ego, and you know damn well that you're charming."

"Now we're talking," I tease, propping my elbow on the table, my chin on my palm so I can stare at her. "What else?"

Ava starts typing, eyes pinned to the screen, but she chuckles. "Let's see... you're funny—although in kind of an annoying way—personable, and at times, you seem fairly intelligent."

I snort, leaning back to sip my coffee and settle in to watch her. Because I know that will annoy her too.

Ava and I met the first day I walked into this shop at six thirty on a Tuesday morning. She was sitting at the very table she's at now, although I didn't notice her at first. I was actually in the middle of a phone call with Callum Derringer. I sat at the table I'm at now and promptly knocked my coffee over. I cursed, jumped up to avoid it running off the table onto me, and then Ava was there cleaning it up.

Before I'd wrapped up my call to Callum, she'd wiped down the table and brought me a fresh coffee.

"On the house," she'd said, and sat back down at the corner table where she'd been working on an iPad.

Clearly, she was an employee, not only recognizable by the uniform but by the fact she replaced my coffee free of charge. But she was more than just a barista because she was doing paperwork.

I introduced myself, we exchanged first names only, and that was the extent of our first conversation.

Over the past several weeks, we've progressed to flirting, or sometimes she'll insult me in a backhanded way, always with a devilish grin. Our conversations have never gone deep. Just some quick, light banter every day I come in and she's working. Sometimes, I'll flirt, but admittedly, I'm not great at it. That skill is so rusty, it squeaks in despair. Ava flirts back in a teasing manner, and it appeals to me.

Our interactions are never long, merely the time it takes me to drink my coffee. She's got a sharp wit, which I appreciate, but she's also smoking hot, and I wonder why she's working here. I've interacted with her enough to know she's too smart to be working in a coffee shop.

Ava glances up at me and smirks as I stare back at her. "I've stroked your ego today. How about you stroke mine?"

"That's a whole lot of stroking, and I'm not sure I know you that well," I toss back. She tips her head and laughs, and

it's smoky and sexy as fuck.

She rolls her eyes. "I gave you a free coffee about six weeks ago. You know me well enough."

"Fine." I wave my hand outward to her work area. "You type very prettily."

Ava grimaces and shakes her head, an amused expression on her face as she turns back to her iPad. "Your flirting skills suck."

"Wait... we're flirting?" I drawl in mock surprise.

"You most definitely are *not* flirting. No girl I know wants to be told she types prettily."

I grin and take another sip of my coffee. "How about you let me buy you a drink sometime, and I'll try to work on my skills before then?"

Ava's head snaps up and whips my way, twin emeralds sparkling with surprise. "What?"

I'm a bit surprised myself—I didn't walk in here with any intention of asking her out. It's not that I haven't asked women out before, but I don't go on many dates these days. I'm always so damn busy that it never seems more important than my work.

But Ava has definitely captured my attention. "You heard me. Let me take you out for a drink."

"Um." She looks back to her computer, brow furrowed. Eyes back to me, filled with confusion, she asks, "You want to go out with me?"

Now I'm the one who's frowning. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Well... because you're..." She waves at me, seeming to struggle to find the words. "You're... you know..."

I shake my head slowly. "I really don't know."

“You’re...” She looks over to the counter where three people stand in line for coffee, then back to me. She lowers her voice. “You’re the Titans’ coach. I work in a coffee shop.”

A slow smile forms on my face. “I was wondering if you’d recognized me. You never acted like you did.”

Her cheeks turn pink. “I didn’t recognize you. One of the baristas did and told me that first week. I didn’t want to make a big deal of it.”

“For which I’m glad,” I assure her.

“But you are a big deal,” she points out and turns back to her work, as if to dismiss this conversation.

I can’t help but smirk. “And you’re prejudiced against people who are a big deal?”

Her eyes slide my way, and she glares. “Of course I’m not prejudiced.”

“Then say yes to a drink. It’s not complicated.” But then something occurs to me. “Unless you’ve got a boyfriend.”

Ava scoffs. “I don’t have a boyfriend. But I’m sure you can do better.”

“Who are you to judge what I can and can’t do?”

She ignores me and keeps typing, but I won’t be deterred. “What’s your last name?”

That startles her, and she cuts me a side eye before answering, “Cavanaugh.”

I pull out my phone, navigate to Contacts, and start a new one. “Ava Cavanaugh. And your phone number?”

Those eyes lift to meet mine, her head tipped slightly. “Really?”

“Yes, really. We’re going out for a drink.”

She just stares at me.

I stare right back, refusing to blink. “Phone number. Now.”

She releases a frustrated breath and snatches my phone from my hand. “Fine.”

I watch as she types in a number before handing it back to me. I stare at it dubiously. “You didn’t just give me a fake number, did you? Because I know where you work, so it will be difficult for you to ghost me.”

Ava laughs and shakes her head. She makes a shooing motion. “Go away. You’re bothering me.”

I love that she’s not starstruck. I love that she tells me to go away. “I’ll call you later to nail down the date.”

She doesn’t acknowledge that, and I know she’s doing it to annoy me. I’m not about to let her have the last laugh, though.

I step up to her table, move in very close, causing her head to tip back to look at me in question. “Just wanted to see those beautiful eyes one more time before I left.”

Said eyes flare wide at the compliment, and her cheeks glow pink again.

I wink at her and bend a little closer. “Now that’s how you flirt. Call you later.”

Turning, I walk out of the shop feeling pretty damn good about that encounter.

CHAPTER 3

Ava

WHAT IN THE hell are you doing, Ava?

It's a question I've asked myself over and over again since Cannon invited me out for drinks the day before yesterday.

The freaking head coach of the Pittsburgh Titans.

As I stare in the bathroom mirror, my face flushed from having one too many dirty martinis, I ask myself the question one more time. I still don't have an answer.

I was confounded that Cannon wanted to go out with me. I'd taken our silly flirting and short conversations over the past weeks as nothing more than him being outgoing and gregarious and me being a good representative of my company.

Okay, that's not exactly true. I've been a little entranced by the man, not only because he's famous, gorgeous, and rich, but because he's sort of goofy in his attempts at flirting.

Other than his rather forward comment that he finds my eyes beautiful, not once did I think he was interested in me. Our bantering has been nothing more than some fun in our hectic mornings.

But here I am, having accepted his invitation, now supremely buzzed—even mildly drunk—and having one of the best times I can remember.

We were only going to meet for a drink. We both have to be at work early tomorrow morning, so I insisted we meet at this bar. My job as the assistant manager at The Grind is to handle opening the store, and the Titans have a home game tomorrow that he has to be in bright and early to get ready for. I know Cannon lives near The Grind, and my place is a ways

out (and not in the nicest neighborhood), so I wanted to make it convenient for him.

Plus, I didn't want him to see my crappy apartment.

I suggested a bar right around the corner from the coffee shop. It was a bit of a pain in the ass for me as I had about a four-hour window between when I got off work at three p.m. and when we decided to meet at seven. I have a forty-five-minute commute each way, but I didn't mind.

It was only supposed to be for a drink. But one drink turned into two, along with appetizers, because we were having such a good time.

Two drinks turned into three because jokes abounded, and with alcohol, the flirting actually got better on both sides. I haven't laughed this hard in ages, but our deeper discussions have held me captive.

Just a few minutes ago, Cannon looked at his watch and grimaced. "It's almost ten. Still an early night for most people, but not for us early risers."

"Speak for yourself," I snickered. "I graduated from college a mere four years ago, so I'm still at the age I can do all-nighters and be fresh the next day."

It was a backhanded slap at his age, which I learned tonight is thirty-six. I had a good time teasing him about our age difference, which really... nine years isn't much at all. In fact, my ex was a few years older than Cannon.

Challenge flashed in his eyes. "I'm up for another drink if you are."

And now here I am.

My head is swimming, but in a pleasant way. In the way that has a goofy smile plastered on my face because I'm out with an amazing man and I have no clue how this came to be.

I check my makeup and decide on lip balm instead of a new layer of lipstick. It's just going to come off on the martini glass, anyway.

“One more drink, and then you’re taking an Uber home,” I firmly tell myself in the mirror.

The Ava who looks back at me with a smirk tells me that I’m not in control of how the evening will end. Mr. Martini is running the show.

When I exit the bathroom and head back to our high-top table, I see a young couple standing there talking to Cannon. He’s signing a drink napkin, and he hands it to the man with a smile.

God, he’s got a gorgeous smile. It’s dangerous, to be honest, with his five o’clock shadow, just one dimple on the left, and full lips. His dark hair and hazel eyes are set upon a face close to perfection. Like he could be a supermodel if the coaching job didn’t work out. I giggle at the thought.

The couple walks off as I approach, and Cannon stands to pull my chair out for me. He’s been a gentleman all night, holding open doors, pulling out chairs, standing when I leave and approach the table.

“You got recognized,” I say with a grin as I take my seat and he returns to his. We’d been talking earlier about the difference between being a public figure as a player versus a coach, and he doesn’t seem to be approached as often.

“It happens,” he says, his eyes cutting down to the fresh martini.

I pick it up, and Cannon taps his tumbler of bourbon gently against it. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” he says, smiling at me over the rim before taking a sip.

He’s still smiling as we set our glasses down and he shakes his head.

“What?” I ask.

“I just don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“Why you’re single. I mean... you’re gorgeous and sexy, which would have men crawling out of the woodwork, but you’re also kind, funny as hell, and keenly intelligent. You’re the type of woman men walk through fire for. What are you hiding?”

I flush with pleasure over the compliment, which has to battle with the tiny twist in my gut over the fact that not all men would walk through fire for me.

“You really *are* hiding something,” Cannon says as he studies me intently and he must be reading the emotions on my face.

“Not hiding anything,” I assure him as I swirl the toothpick speared through three olives. “Just a prior relationship that would disprove your theory.”

I wince because I didn’t mean that to sound pathetic, so I immediately play it off with a laugh. “That is to say, my last boyfriend was a dick, so he didn’t know what was good for him.”

“Recent breakup?” Cannon asks.

“No. Over six months ago.”

“And you haven’t dated anyone since?”

“Haven’t met anyone since. I basically work and sleep and don’t have much time or opportunity for anything else.”

Cannon chuckles. “You sound too much like me.”

“Well, here’s to us stepping out of our comfort zones.” I hold up my drink. Once again, he taps his glass to mine and drinks. “This has been an awesome evening, even though I’m going to be exhausted and slightly hungover tomorrow.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Cannon rests his forearms on the table and leans in a little closer. His eyes bore into mine. “So, why was the ex a dick?”

My face heats up, not because I find the question intrusive. I’ve had way too many drinks to be a closed book, but the

underlying reason is embarrassing.

My expression must give that away because Cannon takes my hand and squeezes. “You don’t have to tell me. Forget I asked.”

But the liquor has loosened my tongue, so no sense in lying. “Well, for starters, he told me I was a lousy lay.”

Cannon’s eyes almost bug out of his head. “He fucking said that to you?”

I snort-laugh, not because what Derek said to me is funny, but because I can’t believe I actually said that out loud. I believed Derek when he said it, and it’s truly the most humiliating thing that’s ever happened to me. “Oh my God... forget I told you. That is definitely the alcohol talking.”

“What kind of asshole says that to someone?” Cannon mutters.

I wrinkle my nose and give a slow shrug. “The type who gets busted cheating?”

Cannon’s eyes flash furiously, and maybe that’s the alcohol too. “He cheated on you? And then blamed you?”

I give a nonchalant wave of my hand and tell my one and only lie this evening. “I didn’t pay it any mind. He was just covering his ass and truly, it wasn’t as bad as him getting me fired.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Cannon says, and to my surprise, stands from his stool and takes out his wallet. I watch as he retrieves two hundred-dollar bills and drops them on the table, which more than covers the drinks and appetizers, plus a hefty tip. When that’s done, he offers his hand to me, palm up. I take it, and he urges me up from my chair. “Let’s take a walk.”

It’s chilly outside and my wool coat is toasty, but that’s not what’s keeping me warm. Cannon tucked my hand into his elbow as we walked down the block, which is a good thing because I won’t be walking any straight lines tonight.

I'm not falling down drunk, but I am completely tipsy, so I don't mind leaning against his large frame.

"Okay... lay the whole story on me," he says.

I glance up at him, and he turns his head to look down at me. He towers over me by several inches. "This conversation turned very serious," I muse.

Cannon shrugs. "I'm a diverse guy."

That makes me laugh and puts me at ease, although I know the martinis are adding to it. "I was an HR generalist for a large life insurance company back in my hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina."

"Oh God," Cannon moans with exaggeration. "Please don't tell me you're a Cold Fury fan."

Giggling, I squeeze his arm with my other hand. "While my family loves the Cold Fury, I'm not that into hockey to be honest."

Cannon claps his hand over his heart. "You're killing me."

"But," I drawl with a laugh, "I'll be sure to start watching from now on."

"That makes me happy. So you're an HR generalist, which is what exactly?"

"My job was mainly to administer pay, benefits, and leave, as well as enforce policies and practices."

"Gotcha."

"And my ex, Derek, was a vice president in marketing."

"Were you allowed to date within the company? Or was this an illicit affair?"

I snort over the insinuation. "Sorry to burst any scandalous bubbles, but we were allowed. He wasn't working in a direct line of supervision over me."

"And yet he had you fired," Cannon points out.

“Yeah, must have been in the fine print,” I joke with a mirthless laugh. “At any rate, not long after we started dating, Derek got transferred to the company headquarters here in Pittsburgh. Got me a job transfer as well, and I moved in with him.”

“How long ago was that?”

“About nine months. My parents were against it. They felt that I was making myself too dependent on Derek and moving too fast. They’re kind of overprotective. Actually, they can be quite overbearing, but it’s from a place of love. The rest of the story isn’t all that complex. I found out he’s a cliché—cheating with his secretary—I confronted him about it, he said mean things, and it was over.”

“And he got you fired,” Cannon says, disgust in his voice.

“And,” I say with exaggerated drama, “kicked me out of his house. Within a twenty-four-hour period, I found out my boyfriend was cheating on me because he thought I was horrible in bed, got me fired, and rendered me homeless.”

“Jesus fuck,” Cannon growls, and then my head is spinning, not from the alcohol but because he stops right in the middle of the sidewalk and kisses me.

His chilled hands frame my face, but I’m burning hot from the intensity that crackles between us. It’s not a consoling kiss, brought on by sympathy and a need to redirect me.

The kiss is instantly carnal, and the way his tongue swirls with mine there’s no doubt that this has everything to do with sexual attraction.

No sooner has the kiss started than Cannon pulls back. His eyes bore into mine. “Do I need to apologize for that?”

He’s rendered me mute, but I shake my head, still caught between his hands.

It’s apparently all he needs because his mouth crashes onto mine again.

Cannon's tongue dominates as his hands dive into my hair. I groan from the onslaught, my hands gripping his lightweight sweater beneath his open coat. I'm overcome with lust because of his dominance, his skillful tongue, and the surety in what he's doing.

I'm fueled by alcohol, so I respond to the kiss, dropping one hand to the waistband of his jeans. I dip only my fingertips inside and use the leverage to haul myself flush against him.

Cannon issues a harsh curse into my mouth when our bodies make contact, spins us around, and backs me into the brick wall of a pharmacy. He walks his body right into mine so I can feel every hard—and I mean *hard*—angle of his body.

Tearing his mouth from mine, Cannon stares down at me, his breath coming out in harsh bursts. "Not sure I'd be kissing you like this without the alcohol. I'm usually a lot more reserved on first dates."

"I probably wouldn't have let you kiss me like this without the alcohol," I admit, moving my hips against his. "But I know I'm not drunk enough to regret it tomorrow."

Cannon groans against the friction I'm creating. "Not going to lie... the fact your ex said you were bad in bed pissed me off, and I want to prove him wrong. Just by that kiss, I know he's fucking wrong. So I'm going to give you fair warning and one chance."

His words make me shiver, and I'm light-headed from the combination of vodka and desire. "One chance for what?"

Cannon's hands go back to my face and he leans in, running his lips feather-soft over mine. "One chance to tell me to back off because we've had too much to drink. Otherwise, we're going to walk around the block to my place."

He lifts his head, and the weight of his stare should crush me but all it does is make me feel empowered.

Okay, that might be the alcohol too.

Regardless, I find myself whispering, “Let’s prove him wrong.”

CHAPTER 4

Cannon

LET'S PROVE HIM wrong.

Those four words had a profound effect on me. Mostly, it made my dick harder—the kiss started the process—but it also reminded me of why I kissed Ava in the first place.

I've got a soft heart and have always been that way. While Ava tried to play off her ex's harsh insult, I could tell it had knocked her confidence. So a lot of the reason for that kiss had to do with the fact I wanted her to know that she was sexy and desirable.

The way she kissed me back already proved that douchebag wrong. Her mouth fit perfectly against mine, her tongue not shy, and when she grabbed hold of my waistband and pulled our bodies close to each other, I knew she'd be a confident lover. Granted, the alcohol might be bolstering her a bit, but the woman knows what she's doing.

Sex wasn't a goal for me tonight. I truly just wanted to have a drink with a woman I found intriguing. But sex is most definitely the end goal now that she's given me the green light.

Is alcohol playing a part? It's playing the biggest part because it's amplifying our mutual attraction and removing our inhibitions.

This is the stuff one-night stands are made of. I can't seem to care about it though. I'm aroused and want to fuck Ava and I'll worry about repercussions tomorrow.

The only saving grace to my conscience is that Ava isn't super drunk. She's talking intelligently, no slurred words, so I don't think I'm taking advantage of her.

Grabbing Ava's hand, I walk at a pace that's so fast, she has to jog slightly to keep up with me.

I apologize and try to slow down.

She laughs while teasing, "Let's hurry before we start to sober up and think this is a rash decision."

The stars must be aligned because there's an elevator waiting inside the lobby of my building, and it whisks us up to my unit on the eighteenth floor.

There are no gentlemanly thoughts of giving Ava a tour or offering her a drink. We've had enough of those.

Instead, I toss my keys on the foyer table, missing it by about four inches, and shrug my coat off, dropping it where we stand. I'm too impatient so I tug at Ava's coat as I start to kiss her again. When it's puddled on the floor, I lift her with my hands under her ass and praise her when she wraps her legs around me. "Good girl," I murmur against her lips.

My bedroom is lit by a bedside table casting a romantic glow. But there's nothing romantic about the way we tear at each other's clothes. Nothing sweet about the way I curse as I try to unhook Ava's bra, and nothing genteel about the way she strokes my cock through the denim.

"Work the zipper," I demand against her mouth because we've yet to stop kissing.

Ava's laugh is smoky. "Sorry. Got sidetracked."

I grin and kiss her harder, finally giving up on the clasp and pulling the cups of her bra down to expose her breasts. About the time I'm moving my mouth down her neck with the intent of sucking one of her nipples into my mouth, she's got her hand in my pants and strokes me hard.

"Christ," I grumble as I pull away from her. "How are we not completely naked yet?"

She's fucking beautiful with her hair messed up by my hands, her lips swollen from my kisses, and both nipples budded hard. Her face is flushed, a combination of lust and

inebriation, and her chest heaves as she stares at me with glittering eyes.

“Get your clothes off,” I order as I whip my shirt over my head. “Fast.”

We both strip, and I note that her bra clasp twists in the front—for future reference. I’m much faster than she is, so I dive into my bedside table drawer for a condom.

When I have it in hand, I wheel around on her and see she’s gloriously nude without an ounce of shyness. While my urge is to pounce on her, I allow myself a moment to take her in. My eyes slowly roam over her body, noting her rounded breasts, flared hips, and a completely waxed pussy that makes me harder.

Also makes my mouth water.

I lunge at Ava, lifting her up and tossing her on the bed where I follow right behind, crawling my way up her body.

She parts her legs to make way, and I brace my hands on the mattress as I stare down at her. “I should be a gentleman and ask if you’re sure you want to do this.”

“Don’t be a gentleman,” she says with a sharp shake of her head. “Be so much less than a gentleman, okay?”

Christ, I love her charm and humor. Love the expectation in her eyes right now.

I look down her body, bringing my gaze to rest at the juncture of her legs. I press a palm to her belly before dragging my fingertips down her silky skin until they graze over her bare mound. “Fucking sexy as hell,” I mutter as I glance up at her.

Ava stares intently at my hand, teeth clamped onto her lower lip. I stare at her, wait to see her reaction as I slide one finger straight down the middle and dip just the tip inside.

She groans, squeezes her eyes shut, and flexes her hips. I’m entranced as she lets out a huff of pent-up breath and slowly opens her eyes, now burning with heat.

“You want more?” I ask.

“Yes.” A mere whisper, but her eyes are pleading. “More.”

Fuck yes, I’ll give her more. But my mouth has to be on hers.

I surge up to kiss her at the same time sinking my finger in deep. Ava cries into my mouth, burying her hands in my hair. She grips it hard, slashing her tongue across mine once before biting into my lip.

It stings perfectly, and I stretch her with two fingers. She’s soaking wet, and that silky-smooth skin drives me nuts as I graze my thumb back and forth over it.

“Cannon,” Ava gasps as I pump in and out of her.

“What do you need? Tell me.”

She shakes her head, eyes averted, and it’s the first time I’ve seen a hint of modesty. Not going to let her get away with it.

“Tell me, Ava. Tell me how much you need my cock inside you.”

“Oh God,” she moans as her hips rotate against my hand.

“Say the words, sweet girl. Tell me you need me to fuck you.”

I swirl a finger around her clit before slipping back inside.

“Are you always a dirty talker or is this the alcohol?” she rasps.

“It’s most definitely not the alcohol,” I assure her. “Now, give me the words... tell me what you want.”

Ava licks her lips as I slowly move my fingers in and out of her. “I want... no... I need you to fuck me, Cannon.”

A low growl rumbles out of me as I snag the condom from the bed and hand it to her. “Get it on me,” I order gruffly, leaning to the side on one arm so she can reach my cock.

Ava fumbles with the foil wrapper. It takes a few attempts, but then she has it out and is rolling it over my length. The first touch of her hands on me has my eyes practically crossing. I suck in a breath, trying to get control.

I cover Ava's body, feeling her heat as I nudge my way inside, rotating my hips with gentle thrusts. She's slick and tight, and her tiny mewling noises drive me crazy.

"Cannon," she whispers as I push in a little deeper. She raises her legs, presses her knees into my ribs and tilts her hips. "Give it all to me."

"Fuck." I surge into her, bottoming out with our pelvises flush with each other. "Goddamn, that feels good."

Dangerously good.

Ava's arms slide over my shoulders and then curl around my neck to pull me down close. My torso presses against hers, chest to chest, and I stare down at her. "No stopping this train now."

She laughs and flexes her hips. "The train needs to get chugging."

I can't help the bark of laughter, but then I kiss her again and it's on. Our tongues clash as I punch into her, over and over again, and I swear to fuck, she melts around me.

Or I melt into her.

I'm not sure, but every moan she makes resounds within my chest, and the warmth of her pussy heats up the blood in my veins.

I drive into her deep and slip a hand between our bodies so I can stroke her clit. Ava groans and rotates her hips, silently demanding more. I thrust hard, circling her clit with wet fingers, and Ava starts to pant.

Pressing my forehead to hers, I mutter, "Not going to last long as good as you feel."

I'm stunned when I no sooner get those words out than Ava's hips buck, her back arching. She cries out a strangled moan of release, and her pussy muscles tighten all around my cock. Christ, that was fast, and now I'm racing to catch up.

I slam into her as Ava hangs on with arms around my neck. As I'm hammering into her body, she whispers in my ear, "I think I'm still coming."

I believe it because she feels tight as a glove, and the fact that she set off so quick is a fucking turn-on in and of itself. Lifting myself up, I put my hands on the backs of Ava's thighs, leverage my weight against her, and pound away.

My release comes hard and fast. I groan deeply as my hips grind against her, the orgasm so powerful that my breath gets caught in my chest and won't come out.

I fall onto her, still pumping away until I can ring every last bit of pleasure from both of us, and only then do I let out a long exhale of relief.

Gathering her close, I wrap one arm around her neck, the other around her lower back. I feel Ava's lips press against my neck. "Thank you," she murmurs.

For a moment, I let anger flare within me, pushing away some of the bliss. She shouldn't have to thank me for that. I got just as good from her.

That was fucking phenomenal.

Ava Cavanaugh is most definitely not a lousy lay, which means her ex said those words as a means to belittle and humiliate. Most likely because he was the one who was no good in bed.

We're quiet for a long moment, and then Ava says, "I've never done anything like this before."

I lift my head to look down at her in question.

"I mean... I'm not usually this easy."

Laughing, I press a soft kiss to her mouth. “I’m going to let us blame the alcohol. I wouldn’t have made the move this quickly without those drinks in me. But we’re two consenting adults, and there’s nothing wrong with what we did.”

“Agreed,” she says sleepily.

I glance at my clock and note it’s just past eleven. There’s no way she can drive home, and I’m not sober enough to drive her. We’ll get a few hours of sleep and evaluate later how best to get us both to work.

“I’ll be right back,” I say as I pull away from her, hating the loss of her heat.

I dispose of the condom in my bathroom and have enough sobriety to brush my teeth. I pull a spare toothbrush out of my pantry for Ava and set it on the sink.

Back in my bedroom, I turn out the lamp and slide into bed next to her. As I move in close to her body, I say, “I put a toothbrush out for you if you want to use it.”

Silence.

“Ava,” I murmur softly, and although I can’t see her face since it’s dark, I hear her deep breathing with the tiniest snore at the end that somehow makes her lovelier to me.

Smiling, I decide to let her sleep. I set the alarm on my phone and pull the covers over both of us, and then I’m out.

CHAPTER 5

Ava

MY EYES POP open with the sudden awareness that I'm in deep shit. The room isn't completely dark, and my internal clock knows I'm late for work.

I wince at the spike of pain in my head—fuck you very much, vodka—and mutter a curse as I sit up in bed. Glancing to the left, I see the clock reads 6:18 a.m. I'm in so much trouble.

“Goddamn it,” I mutter as I roll out off the mattress, flip the lamp on, and start searching the floor for my clothing.

“What's wrong?” Cannon mumbles as he sits up, hair mussed and eyes sleepy. I ignore how perfect his chest is and how unbelievably sexy he looks with the sheet loose over his hips.

“I was supposed to open The Grind”—I look over at the clock that now reads 6:19 a.m. and slip into my panties—“nineteen minutes ago. I'm in so much trouble.”

Cannon frowns and reaches for his phone. “I set the alarm for five, figuring that would be enough time for you to get up.”

I put on my bra and then tug on my jeans as Cannon unlocks his phone.

“Fuck,” he curses, and my eyes cut to him. “I set it for five p.m. instead of a.m. I'm so sorry, Ava.”

I manage a smile. “It's not your fault. I was drunk too, remember.”

He scrubs his hand through his hair. “What can I do?”

“Nothing,” I assure him as I pull my sweater over my head. “I'm going to haul ass over there and hope the line of

pissed-off customers isn't too long."

I sit on the edge of the bed to pull on my socks and boots. I hear Cannon slide out and when he comes around into my line of sight, he's put on his boxer briefs.

Hadn't paid them much attention last night, but they're bright white, hug his package a little too well, and make his tanned skin look even more golden.

I blink the vision away and zipper a boot. When I have the other one on, Cannon pulls me up.

His hands come to my cheeks—the same way he did last night before he kissed me for the first time. I love that he does it to hold me captive.

"I'm really, really sorry," he says again. "I should have gotten you home last night."

I grab one of his wrists to chastise. "You weren't in charge of nor responsible for me getting to work on time today, Cannon."

His hazel eyes bore into mine as if he's searching for some lie. But eventually he nods and pulls me in to press a warm kiss to my forehead.

"There's a toothbrush on the sink for you. I laid it out last night. Can I get you some coffee or something?"

I shake my head. "No, I really don't have time. But I will take advantage of your bathroom and the extra toothbrush."

Cannon nods and heads out of the bedroom, and I hit his master bath. I pee, wash my hands, and then my face. I brush my teeth and search his pantry for Tylenol, which I take with a scoop of water from the faucet.

I locate a brush in one of his drawers and attempt to detangle my hair. It looks like we spent all night wrestling it's such a mess, but I manage to make myself look halfway presentable.

Nothing I can do about the fact I don't have my uniform but wasting any more time on my appearance isn't helping any.

I exit his room and find Cannon waiting by the door with my coat. I let him help me into it and accept my purse he's also holding for me.

I wish I had time to talk about what last night meant, because admittedly I'm totally confused. I've never in my life slept with someone on the first date.

I've also never had sex like that.

Heat warms my cheeks as I remember how ravenous we were for each other. How fast things happened, how the sex was frantic and slightly rough, and how I loved every second of it.

Cannon slips a hand behind my neck. "I'll come by for coffee as soon as I get my shower, okay?"

"Sure," I say with a smile that doesn't feel right on my face. I'm too stressed about not being there to open the shop and slightly envious that he has a job where he doesn't have to worry about such things.

I go up on tiptoes and kiss Cannon's cheek. It's the only thing that feels right, because a real kiss would only confuse me further, and I really have to go.

"See you later," he says as I walk out the door and I don't even know if he means it.

Last night could very well have been a one-night stand and I won't be surprised if Cannon avoids the coffee shop now. He probably thinks I'm a skank for hopping into bed with him like that.

Those are thoughts for another time though as I rush out of his building and hightail it down the block. I pull out my phone and wince as I see the missed calls from Joyce, one of the early-shift baristas.

I'm perplexed when the store comes into view and no patrons are waiting on the sidewalk. As I get closer, I see lights on inside and people sitting at tables.

I open the door and find my morning baristas hard at work.

My stomach plummets because that can only mean one thing.

"Ava." I cringe inwardly when I hear Stan Dubetsky's voice. I look at the hallway that leads to the bathrooms on one side and a break room and storage closet on the other. "I need to see you."

Fuck. One of the staff must have called Stan—the general manager—and he came down to open the store. I can tell by the look on his face he's not happy.

My shoulders hunch forward as I move past the service counter. I don't dare look at my coworkers because I'm honestly embarrassed I wasn't here to open up for them. I hate that I put them in a position of having to call the big boss in.

There isn't an office to work out of in this space, which is why I do my morning paperwork at one of the tables. I follow Stan into the break room, which is nothing more than a small kitchen with a round table that seats four, a counter with a sink, and a microwave.

I pull the door closed behind me and then shrink back into it when he yells at me. "What the fuck, Ava? You don't show up to open the store? And I had to get woken up to come down here and do your job?" He steps toward me, taking in my appearance. "And God... were you on a bender last night? You look like shit and smell like booze."

No words come to defend myself. It wasn't exactly a bender, but I did have more alcohol than I normally would drink. I know my eyes are bloodshot and I'm probably sweating out vodka under his furious stare.

"I want you to give me the key to the store," he says, holding out his hand, palm up.

“What? Why?” I stammer, words suddenly pouring out of my mouth in a panic. “I’m so sorry I was late. I swear it won’t happen again.”

“That’s right. It won’t happen again because you’re fired.”

“Stan! No. Please don’t fire me. Demote me if you have to, but I need this job.”

Like, I need this job so badly that without it, I can’t pay my rent. I unfortunately had to pay for a new tire last week, and it drained most of my meager savings.

“You should have thought about that when you overslept,” he snaps. “Now give me the key and get out of here. I’ll mail your last paycheck to you.”

I almost start crying. That last paycheck will only be for three days of work.

“Please don’t do this,” I say, my eyes starting to sting. I’ve tried so hard to make a go of it here in Pittsburgh after Derek kicked me out, needing to prove to my parents and myself that I wasn’t a complete screwup. “I’ll work overtime at regular pay. I’ll work extra shifts if you need.”

“Your key.” Stan snaps his fingers and looks down at his palm.

I blink rapidly to push back the tears, nodding as I open my purse. I pull out my keys and remove the one that opens The Grind. I drop it in his palm and turn for the door.

Stan doesn’t say another word to me.

My stomach is churning by the time I hit the sidewalk, and for a moment, I don’t know what to do. I actually can’t even recall where my car is, but then I remember it’s in a parking garage two blocks over, which is where I’d met Cannon last night for drinks.

I think about him right now, taking a luxurious shower, probably eating some breakfast. I thought I’d feel bitter about it, but I can’t.

I had an amazing time last night. I might have been slightly drunk, but I recognize that was the best sex of my life. Maybe it was the alcohol—or maybe it was Cannon.

Regardless, given that I lost my job and won't be seeing him for morning coffee the way I used to, I figure he's now become a part of my past.

Bereft, I trudge along the sidewalk to the parking garage. My car is on the third level—a four-year-old Nissan Maxima with its shiny new tire winking at me. I ran over a nail that went in near the rim at an angle so it couldn't be patched, and there went \$235. I resolve myself to meals of ramen noodles for the rest of the month. At the very least, I've got room on my credit card if I need to take a cash advance to make rent, but after that, I'm tapped out.

A new job is an absolute priority.

Once I'm in my car and southwest of the city, I make a dreaded phone call.

My brother's voice comes through with a slight crackle over the Bluetooth. "What's up, Sis?"

"I got fired."

There's a lengthy pause before Rob says, "I can catch a flight there the day after tomorrow. I'll help you pack and drive you home."

I sigh, rubbing my temple. It's not what I wanted to hear. "I don't want to move back home, Rob."

"I swear no one will say a word," he promises. He was as vocal as my parents when I wanted to move to Pittsburgh to be with Derek. He disliked him more than my parents did and thought I was making a colossal mistake.

But God, it pissed me off that none of them had any confidence that I could make my own choices. I could make them and own up to them if they were wrong. Instead, they just wanted to be right.

“Can I borrow some money?” I ask. “Only enough to get my rent paid. I’m sure I’ll land another job quickly.”

“You’ve been trying to find a decent job since that asshole broke up with you.”

“I broke up with him,” I remind my brother.

“Whatever. The point is, why are you struggling with things like a coffee shop? You can come home and work with the family.”

“I don’t want to be a real estate agent.” My exasperation is on overdrive because we’ve had this conversation many times. My parents own one of the largest real estate companies in the state and Rob is an agent there. It was sort of expected I’d follow in his footsteps, but I had no desire to sell homes.

“Fine,” he snaps with irritation. “Don’t be a real estate agent. But come home and at least have a solid place to live without worrying about your next paycheck.”

“I don’t want to live with Mom and Dad.”

“You can live with me—”

“I don’t want to be dependent on any of you,” I murmur.

“Then you can’t ask to borrow money,” he chastises. He doesn’t say that unkindly, merely pointing out if I want to be independent, I need to do this on my own. “Look, I’ll come get you. Say the word.”

Glancing over my right shoulder, I make sure no one is in my blind spot and move over a lane toward my approaching exit.

“I’ll think about it,” I promise him. “And please... don’t tell Mom and Dad I lost my job. I really can’t handle the *I told you so* calls right now.”

“Understood,” he says, his tone gentle. “Do you really want some money?”

“No,” I grumble. “You’ve reminded me I need to try to do this on my own.”

Rob chuckles. “While I’d rather you come home, I have to respect that.”

We chat a little more. He asks why I got fired, and I only tell him I overslept and the boss had no mercy.

By the time I pull up to my apartment complex, I’m feeling marginally better. At least I know I have an out if I can’t find a job soon. Rob will come and rescue me, and I can crawl home with my tail between my legs.

CHAPTER 6

Cannon

I STEP ONTO the sidewalk from my building and zip up my fleece jacket. It's a little colder than I thought it would be, but The Grind isn't so far away that I need to go back up for a heavier coat. Besides... I don't really have the extra minutes to spare.

Ava isn't the only one who overslept this morning. I had planned to make it to the arena by six thirty to get a workout in before what is going to be a busy day. In addition to our regular practice, we're doing some extra special teams drills. Callum also asked for a slice of my time today, so I'll squeeze him in around noon. Then it's a fun afternoon and evening of video review and meetings in preparation for our away game tomorrow in Montreal.

But I'll forego my workout today to be able to enjoy a cup of coffee at The Grind. I wonder if Ava will blush when I sit down at my table next to her, or if she'll try to ignore me like usual.

I'll for sure be seeing her in a different light after what we shared last night.

I've never been a one-night-stand kind of guy. Never been the type to seek hookups, not that I'm opposed to them. I mean, if one fell in my lap at the right time, I'd take it.

Actually, one could almost consider last night to be one of those opportune moments. Ava could easily be considered a hookup, given we got drunk and screwed, but I'm excited to see her again this morning when I get my coffee, so I'd say that's not the case.

I absolutely want to see her again.

Definitely fuck her again.

I'm crazy busy and not looking for anything heavy, but I like her. Could I fit Ava into the craziness of my career? Maybe it will only be morning coffee and an occasional date when I get the time. Would she be into that?

I intend to find out. It's hard not to give credence to the racing of my pulse as I approach the store. Will her smile today hold that secret knowledge that we now share? Will she look at me and think to herself, *You made me come so hard last night, no one will ever compare?*

I know I'm thinking it, although I also want our normal fun banter. It makes me smile as I enter The Grind. My gaze immediately goes to the corner where Ava should be doing her work, but she's not.

Not overly worrisome, as there's been an odd day here or there when she works the counter.

But she's not there either.

Frowning, I step up to the barista as there's no one in line. She's fairly new, but she's made enough coffee for me that she knows my name. "Good morning, Cannon. The usual?"

"Hey, Meredith," I say, looking around the half-full coffee shop. Pulling out my wallet for my credit card, I ask, "Where's Ava?"

The girl looks back at a barista working the machines, a young guy named Ken who serves me regularly. His eyes come to me. "She got fired for being late and not opening the store on time."

"She what?" I bark in surprise.

Ken leaves the machine and moves to the counter, leaning across it and lowering his voice so no other patrons hear. "The general manager had to come in and open the store and he was pissed. When Ava got here, he called her into the break room. I don't know what was said, but Ava walked out about five

minutes later. Stan came out and told us that he fired her and that was that.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, scrubbing my hand through my hair in irritation. Ken turns back to the machine to make my coffee. This is all my fucking fault. “Where’s Ava now? Did she say where she was going?”

Meredith shakes her head.

“Is the manager still here?”

Ken nods toward the hallway. “The break room.”

I walk back there, intent on fixing this colossal fuckup that’s all my doing.

Stan, the general manager, is exactly as I envisioned, having only the knowledge that he fired Ava for being late. He’s sweaty and scowling through a walrus moustache as he sits at a table going through receipts the way Ava normally does each morning. His head twists to see me walking through the open door.

He plasters on a smile, because I must be a wayward customer. “Can I help you?”

I shut the door behind me and his smile slips. “Yeah, you can help me. You can tell me why you fired Ava Cavanaugh.”

“I’m not sure it’s any of your business,” he replies, standing from his chair and lifting his chin. It still has him tipping his head back to maintain eye contact with me.

“It is if I’m a customer of this store and part of the reason I come here is her excellent customer service.”

Okay, that’s a bit drummed up for dramatics, because Ava actually works and tries hard to ignore my attempts to draw her into flirty conversation.

“Well, I’m truly sorry that you’re feeling her loss, but she was late for work and failed to open the store on time. I have to balance the feelings of the other customers she’s

inconvenienced as well as the staff who were waiting for her to open.”

I scoff at the absurdity. “The staff and customers love her. I can’t help but think you’re the one who was inconvenienced, and that’s why you fired her.”

Stan goes red. “I’m not sure I like your inference.”

“It’s not an inference. I’m affirmatively stating I think you fired her because you were inconvenienced.”

Blustering and stammering, Stan says, “I have a zero-tolerance policy for tardiness when your main duty is to open the store for business.”

“Zero tolerance?”

“Yes.”

“So it wouldn’t make a difference if I told you that Ava found out late last night that her parents were killed in a home invasion? And she was up all night crying and that’s why she slept through her alarm?”

“Is that what happened?” he asks sheepishly.

“No, but you said you had zero tolerance, so I was wondering if there are exceptions.”

“She smelled like booze,” Stan says, going back on the offensive. “She didn’t have her uniform on. Didn’t even call anyone to say she’d be late.”

I sigh in frustration. “Her being late was my fault. We were out last night, and I set my alarm clock wrong.”

Stan holds his ground, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s not your responsibility to ensure she gets to work on time.”

I can see I’ll get nowhere with this guy. “Give me your owner’s name and number.”

“It would be a waste,” Stan says, his lips thinning. “He’ll back me on my decision.”

“Maybe,” I muse, knowing I can’t control everything. But it never hurts to try. “Maybe not. Only one way to find out, and that’s to call him.”

Stan huffs, pulls out his wallet, and hands me a business card embossed with The Grind’s logo. On the bottom left, it says Stan Dubetsky, General Manager, and on the bottom right, Jerry Parsons, Owner, followed by his phone number and email.

“He’s on vacation,” Stan says with a triumphant smile. “You won’t be getting up with him any time soon, but his secretary will gladly take a message for you. I’ll have Ava replaced by then.”

It’s cute that he thinks he’s in charge. “Trust me... I have the resources to get in touch with him today.”

Stan’s eyebrows knit together. “How’s that?”

I tuck the business card in my pocket and ease toward the door. “You’re not a Titans’ fan, are you?”

“Not big into sports,” he mutters.

“Then you’ll have to figure it out on your own,” I say, giving him my back and walking out the door.

I’m dialing Ava’s number as I exit the hallway, and Ken steps from behind the counter to hand me my coffee. “It’s on the house,” he whispers.

His own little defiance of Stan and a moment of solidarity with me.

As the phone rings, I smile, but it melts into a grimace when Ava’s voicemail answers.

“Ava... call me. I just found out you got fired... so, call me, okay?”

I disconnect and walk out of the coffee shop, heading back toward my building to get my car.



IT'S ALMOST NOON and I haven't heard from Ava, despite leaving another voicemail and a text. I figure she's pissed at me and rightfully laying the blame at my feet.

It's not something I can worry about now as I've got a meeting with Callum Derringer.

Even though I rate an office in the executive suite, I prefer the one on the ice level nearer to the other coaches and the players. However, I'm heading upstairs to his territory since he's my boss.

His office door is open and he's handing some folders to his secretary. Noticing me standing there, he waves me in and motions over to a small conference table that seats six. It's covered with folders and binders, and a laptop sits there opened to a spreadsheet.

I take a seat as he gives some last-minute instructions and she asks me on the way out, "What would you like to drink, Coach?"

"I'm good." I smile and hold up the water bottle I carry with me everywhere.

Callum joins me at the table. He's wearing a suit—sans jacket—his regular attire. I'm in my standard non-game-day gear of khakis and a long-sleeve polo. But the days we play, I wear a suit right along with everyone else.

"How's our prettiest member of the Titans' organization doing today?" Callum says with a wide grin as he sits down at the table head in a chair adjacent to mine.

If Callum were a personal friend, I'd tell him to fuck off in a good-natured way. But he's my boss, and I've only been head coach roughly a month.

Instead, I smirk. "Hey, now... don't be jealous *GQ* didn't come calling on you."

Callum barks a laugh and I chuckle along. It's ridiculous, really. I'm big news in the sporting world. The youngest head coach in the professional league, and I'm definitely not as

battle tested, having spent my coaching career in the minors and a foreign league. All the major sports magazines have written articles about me, and I've been interviewed on national shows.

But everyone is giving me shit for landing on the cover of *GQ* this month. Don't get me wrong... it was nice being asked, and it was about far more than me cheesing on the front cover in the four-thousand-dollar Armani suit they dressed me in. The three-page interview was great publicity for the organization, and the reporter did a fantastic job focusing on my vision for this team and my confidence in putting us on a path to a championship one day.

"I've got a trade prospect," Callum says, moving right from joking to serious. "Bain Hillridge for a first-round draft pick."

My eyebrows lift. "They didn't want a straight-up player trade?"

Callum shakes his head. "They've got some players aging out and are looking for a few good picks to build up. I need to know if you think we can afford to give up a first-round draft pick for him."

I rub my jaw, considering the question. "That's a huge give... a first-round pick. But Bain Hillridge is one of the best defensemen in the league."

Nodding, Callum says, "And Camden's not been performing well. We can move Camden to third line, Nolan to second, and—"

"I'm not willing to move Camden," I cut in.

Callum isn't the least bit offended. In fact, this is why I'm here—for him to lay out his thoughts, and for me to tell him what's best from a coaching perspective, since I have a better handle on these guys.

He merely waits.

“I want to work with Camden. He needs a confidence boost and moving him down a line is going to set him back further, but I think he’s got amazing untapped potential.”

“What’s his issue?” Callum asks.

“No clue, but I want the opportunity to figure it out so he has a shot.”

Callum drums his fingers on the table, glancing down for a moment before raising his gaze back to me. “You know it’s my job to put the best possible team together. It’s not a bad move to send Camden to the third line. I could even make an argument to trade him or send him down to the minors.”

I nod because he’s right.

But I’m not wrong either.

“If you don’t want to move Camden from the second line, what are you going to do with Nolan?”

Nolan is our first-line defenseman, and he’s good. Not as good as Bain though, who would without a doubt strengthen our defense.

“How about offering Nolan in trade and a second-round pick rather than a first?”

Callum’s brow furrows slightly as he considers that. His eyes focus on me. “You think Camden’s potential is enough to merit losing Nolan and a draft pick?”

“But we get Bain,” I remind him. “And yes, Camden’s potential is more important.”

Camden was one of The Lucky Three who wasn’t on the Titans’ plane when it went down. While Coen Highsmith spiraled into a dark place after, the other two, Camden Poe and Hendrix Bateman, seemed able to get back on the ice without much in the way of hang-ups. I know both have undergone grief counseling paid for by the Titans’ organization, and they both seemed to have bonded well with the players who came on to form the new team.

“You know working this trade to keep a man that isn’t up to par is an emotional choice,” Callum points out.

“You hired me because I use empowerment and inspiration to drive change. This is a perfect example of that.”

Callum chuckles as he shakes his head. Knocking his knuckles on the table, he stands from his chair. “All right. You’ve made a compelling argument. I’ll start the ball rolling and keep you updated.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say as I rise. “Good luck.”

And he’d need it. Trades aren’t as easy as they sound as there’s still more negotiating to be done, salary caps to keep an eye on, agents who can be prickly, and no-trade clauses that some players have. I have no clue about any of those details, but that’s not my job. It’s Callum’s.

We chat a bit more about tomorrow’s game in Montreal before we shake hands and part ways.

The first thing I do is check my phone, turning off silent mode.

My heart thumps when I see that Ava returned my call. I like that she didn’t text but rather took the time to phone.

I listen to her voicemail as I walk through the executive suite’s maze of halls. *Hey, Cannon. Sorry I missed your calls and texts. I was sleeping... late night and all. Call me when you get a chance.*

Late night indeed, except while the words were meant in jest, her voice sounded sad. I note the time and that I’ve got a meeting in about fifteen minutes.

I see an empty conference room, step inside, and close the door. I move to the window that overlooks the river and the Pittsburgh skyline as I dial Ava.

CHAPTER 7

Ava

I'M BLOW-DRYING MY hair, so I can't quite hear my phone ringing from where it sits on the vanity, but the screen changes and I see Cannon's name and number.

Turning off the dryer, I connect the call. "Hey."

"Hey back," he says. "I'm glad you called. I was afraid you were pissed and didn't want anything to do with me."

"I'm in no way upset at you," I assure him, turning around and leaning back on the counter. "I was just exhausted, so I got some sleep."

"I'm really sorry you lost your job. I talked to your manager, and he's an asshole. Wouldn't even reconsider."

"You did?" I exclaim.

"Well, yeah." I hear the confusion in his voice. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because it's not any of your business or responsibility." I wince over the blunt rebuke, even though it was delivered with gentleness. I huff out a breath of frustration. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, and I'm grateful you tried. It's just... lately I'm told that I make wrong or bad decisions and it's important that I own up to this and figure it out myself. No one thinks I can be independent. No one thinks I can do things on my own. Everyone is waiting for me to fail."

It's silent, and for a moment, I think Cannon might have hung up on me, but then he asks, "You know it's okay to fail, right, Ava?"

I'm almost stunned speechless, because no... I don't know that. "Is that some witchy coaching wisdom?"

Cannon laughs. “I know a thing or two about failure and winning. You must be able to fail in order to win.”

“Maybe you should tell that to my family,” I mutter.

“Sounds like a lot of baggage to unpack.” I hear the empathetic smile in his voice. “Let’s have dinner tonight and you can vent.”

“Why would you even want to bother with an unemployed loser like me?” I tease playfully, because there’s something about Cannon telling me it’s okay to fail that makes me feel a little all right.

“Well, that’s easy,” he drawls. “Because you’re great in the sack, contrary to your ex-douche’s opinion.”

I can’t help but bust out laughing because really, the entire reason we were in the sack in the first place was because Derek said I was a lousy lay.

Funny how the fates work.

But I am cautious. “I don’t know, Cannon.”

“Come on... let’s do dinner. I’m catching an early flight to Montreal in the morning. We can cook something together either at your place or mine. You can tell me all about the people who make you feel like you have to be perfect.”

It makes me laugh again because when he says it that way, it seems ridiculous for me to get bent out of shape at the thought of disappointing my family.

I quickly calculate the cost of gas for driving into the city and back, versus the cost of humiliation of him seeing the dump I live in. I decide to be optimistic that I’ll find a job soon and can burn a little gas for a dinner date.

“Let’s do your place. What time do you want me there?” I ask.

“Seven, okay?”

“Sure. Not like I have a job to worry about.” I laugh, but Cannon doesn’t. Coughing to dispel my embarrassment, I ask,

“Can I pick up anything from the grocery store?”

“No, I’ll handle it all. I’ll text you the code to get into the parking garage. You’ll see guest parking near the elevators. You do remember I’m on the eighteenth floor, unit 14, right?”

“Of course I don’t remember that. I was a little preoccupied going in.”

Cannon chuckles, and I can actually hear the relief in his voice that there’s no regret on my part. “Okay, then... see you at seven.”

“It’s a date,” I chirp.

“And Ava?”

“Yes?”

“Pack an overnight bag.”

My skin flushes because I actually didn’t see this coming. I’m a literal person. You say we’re getting together for dinner, I expect dinner.

Images of our time together last night assault me in Technicolor, replaying the ravenous way we went at each other.

Of the things he made me feel.

“Okay,” is all I can manage to whisper.

“Can’t wait,” he says, his voice rich with promise.

Of having a good meal or having me, I can’t tell. I’m game for both.

When we hang up, I’m frozen in place for a bit about what to do. I have to find a new job. I have to mull over all my insecurities as to why Cannon wants to see me again. My life can’t quite seem to take off, and he’s at the pinnacle of his.

When I finally make a cup of tea and open my laptop, it’s not to search job listings but instead, I google Cannon. There are a ton of articles on him, and in the top row of photos I gasp to see that he was on the cover of *GQ*. I click on the thumbnail

and when it enlarges, I'm enraptured just looking at his perfection.

Cannon's standing at center ice in the Titans' arena. He takes up most of the frame and the background is blurred and darkened, but it's definitely the arena. I went to a concert there with Derek not long after we first moved here.

The dark gray suit Cannon is wearing has a sheen to it, beautifully tailored to his frame. He's got one arm bent and held before him, his other hand fiddling with a cuff link there. He's looking off to the left, so we get a profile of his face.

His expression is contemplative with a hard set to his jaw. But there's also a very subtle curving of his lips. It's like he's focused on a prize, and he knows he's going to win it.

I slump down in my chair and ogle the man, again wondering why he's interested in me.

And it's not that I'm down on myself. I'm confident enough to say I'm attractive and Derek was very handsome. But it's not really the outward appearance that has me feeling unworthy.

It's that Cannon is the entire package. He's got the looks and wealth, but I've had that before. It doesn't make someone attractive.

No, Cannon has so much more. He's genuine, down-to-earth, kind, and empathetic, all qualities that I'm now realizing Derek didn't have much of. What does that say about me that I accepted him as good enough?

And not the most important, but I can't discount it, Cannon is a rock star in bed. Last night was mind-blowing and while I know alcohol might have been what landed us between the sheets, and it might have warped my perception some, I have no doubt that I experienced the ultimate in sex with him.

Not that great sex is a particular reason to be with someone.

I close out the *GQ* article and scroll down until I find a Wikipedia post on him. I pull it up and start reading.

Cannon West (born November 17, 1986) is an American professional ice hockey coach and a former player. He is currently the head coach of the Pittsburgh Titans, replacing former coach Matt Keller, whose contract was terminated. West played with the Toronto Blazers for seven years before moving on to coaching in Sweden and for the Greenville Mudcats minor league team.

I glance over at the column on the right that lists basic biographical information. There's a picture of him in his hockey gear, bent over at the waist and fighting for the puck. Surprisingly, he wore his hair kind of long, and sweaty tendrils curl out from the back. The caption under it says, *Cannon West, Toronto Blazers.*

Below are more details:

Born: November 17, 1986 (age 36), Denver, Colorado

Height: 6 ft. 2 in. (188 cm)

Weight: 214 lb. (97 kg; 15 st, 4 lb.)

College: University of Minnesota

Position: Center

Currently: Head Coach, Pittsburgh Titans

Spouse: Melissa West (m. 2007–2013)

I freeze, my eyes pinned on those last words.

Cannon was married? I don't know why it shocks me so much, but it does.

I skip all the information on his playing and coaching history and skim down to the section entitled *Personal Life*.

Cannon West married his high school sweetheart, Melissa Waite, in 2007, the same year he joined the Toronto Blazers. She passed away on November 4, 2013, from breast cancer.

My hand flies to my mouth to cut off a small cry of distress. I read back over the words. When I first saw he was

married, I had assumed they were divorced. It's horrific that she died and that Cannon went through something so heartbreaking.

I push the laptop back and stare across my minuscule kitchen to my even smaller living room. Cannon was only twenty-seven when she died. I don't know how old she was, but given they were high school sweethearts, I'm assuming roughly the same age.

What does that do to a person? Losing a spouse.

Especially so young.

I think back to all my interactions with Cannon, trying to come up with a single memory that I can point to that shows he's still mourning or grieving.

Surely he is.

I mean... high school sweethearts.

I have to stop thinking about it.

I shut my laptop and head to the bathroom to finish drying my hair. I try to think about the types of jobs I'm going to apply for. Obviously, anything in HR, since that's what I've done since graduating from college. But my degree is in communications, so I could try something in marketing or public relations. The only problem is trying to get my foot in the door with no experience.

I flip on the dryer and start back on my hair using the round brush to blow it out into smooth waves, letting my mind drift.

At the very least, I'll need to refresh my résumé with my last three months of experience working as an assistant manager at The Grind. I'll research job listings with companies hiring in the area of human resources. I'll even expand that search outside to include Raleigh. If I have to move home, I want a job first. Mostly to prove to my family I'm more than self-sufficient, but also so I'm not pressured to go into real estate.

I wonder if Cannon stopped playing hockey and went into coaching because his wife died. Maybe it was too unbearable to continue in a career where she'd been by his side the entire time.

Which logically would conclude that any future relationship would be compared to that one.

Any woman he'd be with would have to measure up to—

“Aaaghhh,” I groan, yanking the brush through my hair. I glare at myself in the mirror. “Get out of your damn head, Ava.”

If I continue to do this, I'll talk myself out of going to dinner at Cannon's tonight. I have a hard time understanding how I even caught his interest, but the thought of competing against a lost first love is too daunting to bear.

I narrow my eyes at my reflection. “Get a hold of yourself and quit worrying about things beyond your control.”

CHAPTER 8

Cannon

THE DOORBELL RINGS and my spine tingles. I know Ava is on the other side of that door. I've had a low buzz of excitement since I walked in myself not twenty minutes ago. I ordered from a deli that delivers to my building, and we're going simple with meats, cheeses, crusty bread, grapes, pasta salad, and what looks like a container of pickled vegetables that they threw in for a complimentary try. I'm not a charcuterie master and don't pretend to be. I managed to put the food items on different plates and bowls, threw some flatware on the counter, and uncorked a bottle of red, and that's as good as it gets from me.

But what little I've come to learn about Ava, I expect her to look at it and deem it perfect. She's incredibly down-to-earth and would never expect five-star dining because of my fame or status. In my handful of years dating after Melissa died, I learned to spot a gold digger a mile away.

Ava is anything but.

Hell, she shied away from me because she labeled me "a big deal."

I'm smiling when I open the door. Ava smiles back but looks apprehensive. Granted, it's subtle but not unexpected—I know she's got some doubts.

First and foremost, she's beautiful. Her hair is in a long braid hanging over one shoulder with loose pieces framing her face. Her makeup is light, but she doesn't need much. Her green eyes command my attention first, followed by her lush lips, tinted with the barest blush of color.

She's wearing a pair of dark jeans that sit low on her hips, a cream-colored turtleneck that fits like a glove set off by a

wide camel-colored belt. Matching boots of the same color and a fashionable scarf of brown, red, and orange hangs over the shoulders of her unzipped, off-white puffy coat.

Most importantly, she's carrying a tote, which I assume is the overnight bag I told her to bring, my quiet hint for her to stay the night.

"I don't bite," I say, sweeping my arm in invitation to cross the threshold.

She doesn't move, and I sense reservation. We didn't have the opportunity to work through the morning-after awkwardness that comes after drunk sex. Ava was late and running out the door without a lot of time to process her emotions, including the inevitable question of whether any of it was real.

I can almost see it in her eyes. *Did we make a mistake last night?*

I sure as hell don't think we did. "Not a single regret," I say, reaching out to grab the ends of her scarf. I pull her slowly to me until she's close enough that I can kiss her.

Her mouth is slightly unyielding at first, perhaps the lingering effects of a mistrust in me, perhaps herself. But then she opens up and sighs as I deepen the kiss.

Not surprised it happens, but my body reacts swiftly. I've replayed our time together last night a little too often today. It made my review of opponent video this afternoon painful as I'd get distracted and have to rewind to watch again.

But I don't want her to think that's the only reason I invited her over, so I pull away, taking a little too much pleasure from her flushed cheeks and hazy eyes.

I push the coat and scarf off her shoulders, helping her out of it and then closing the door. Moving through the living room, which flows into the kitchen, I toss her stuff on the couch. Ava follows, setting her tote on the coffee table.

"Glass of wine?" I ask as I round the kitchen island.

“That would be great.” Ava looks around with interest. “Your place is really nice. I didn’t pay much attention last night or this morning.”

I let my eyes sweep the kitchen and living area, seeing what she sees. It’s a swank setup with eighteen hundred square feet of floor space. I bought it for just over a million dollars, mostly for its downtown convenience. The perimeter interior walls are in repurposed red brick with fourteen-foot coffered ceilings and built-ins. It came with the most expensive European appliances, which I barely know how to use, imported Italian tile, and bocote hardwood floors.

All that is a bit lost on me, not because I don’t like or care about nice things, but because I don’t really know much about what makes a home nice. When I was married, that was all Melissa’s domain, and after she died, I went with Realtor recommendations, along with my mom’s guidance since she knows me so well.

“My mom helped me pick it out,” I say as I pour two glasses of wine.

Ava turns and smiles. “Where does she live?”

“Denver.” I pull out a bar stool at the island and then take the one next to her. “She owns a lighting store there, and my dad is a high school history teacher and football coach.”

“I’ve heard Denver is gorgeous,” she says.

“Very.” I hand her a glass of wine and hold mine up for her to tap. The glasses clink, and we sip. I nod toward the food. “I didn’t go too fancy.”

“It’s perfect,” she says as she sets her drink down and picks up a plate. “Want a bit of everything?”

“Yeah.” I watch as she fills up a plate for me, creating neat piles of each item so they don’t touch. She grabs a fork and a napkin and hands it over before fixing a plate for herself.

“Do you have siblings?” she asks, nabbing up a square of white cheddar and nibbling at it.

“A younger brother and sister. Connor is a ranch hand in Wyoming, and Belle is a paralegal in Denver. She’s married and has two girls.”

“Are you close to them?”

“Very. I talk to my family constantly, even if it’s just a quick daily text. And of course, Belle’s kids are the apple of everyone’s eyes. What about your family?”

“My parents own a residential real estate company in Raleigh, and my brother Rob is an agent with them.”

I load up a cracker with prosciutto and goat cheese. “So, is it your parents, your brother, or all three who make you think you’re a failure?”

Ava’s mouth quirks into a lopsided smile. “You don’t pull any punches.”

“It’s my coaching nature. But if I’m being too nosy, tell me to back off.” I pop the cracker in my mouth and wait.

For fortification or because she’s thirsty, Ava takes a larger than normal sip. “Not too nosy.” She appraises me over the glass before placing it on the counter next to her plate and taking up her fork. She toys with the pasta salad. “My parents and brother were adamantly and quite vocally opposed to me coming to Pittsburgh with Derek.”

“What was their objection? Or did they know what an unbelievable asshole he’d turn out to be?”

Ava laughs and shakes her head. “I don’t think they knew he’d become such an ass, but they felt I wasn’t looking at him clearly. He was accomplished, made good money, and wanted to settle down.”

“Isn’t that what every parent wants for their daughter?” I ask, because so far, Derek sounds like a good deal.

“You’d think. But I think they felt I was too dazzled by him to really know if he was long-haul material. They definitely thought I was moving too fast. We’d only been dating a few months when he got the job transfer. They didn’t

like that I was dependent on him for the job as well as my living arrangements.”

“And you thought differently?” I surmise.

“I thought independently,” she corrects.

“Good girl.” I smile at her and load up another cracker.

“It ended up being a mistake, though,” she says glumly, stabbing a piece of bow tie pasta. “It was the failure my parents predicted, and it left me jobless, homeless, and with my dignity in shreds.”

“Aren’t you being a little hard on yourself?” I nudge my knee against hers for emphasis.

“Maybe.”

“You were a little irritated I tried to talk to your manager when you got fired.”

Her eyes come to mine, and she offers a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry I’m so touchy about my failures and perceived bailouts. When Derek kicked me out, I got a whole lot of *I told you so* from my parents and insistence that I come home. But I needed to prove to them I can take care of myself.”

“So you took a job in a coffee shop.”

“It was the first job offer I got, and I was scared not to take it. The pay was decent... enough to afford a small apartment and pay my bills.”

“I can probably get your job back for you.” I swivel my stool toward her, put my hand on her knee to squeeze reassuringly. “I know you probably don’t want help, but I found out today that Brienne Norcross, who owns the Titans, is good friends with Jerry Parsons, who owns the parent company of The Grind.”

Ava’s hand covers mine, her fingers curling under my palm. It’s a sweet gesture of gratitude and, at the same time, that simple touch tightens my skin.

“Thank you for the offer,” she says before sliding her hand free. “But I need to do this on my own. Once I figure out what I want to do with my life, I’ll have some direction.”

“And you want to stay in HR?” I ask.

“Not really. I mean, I enjoyed working in the human resources field, but I’d rather do something in marketing.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to offer to help her. I know I could probably score her an interview somewhere within the Titans’ organization. But she’d decline, as well she should. If I helped her get a job, it would be virtually no different from her situation with her ex. The best I can do is help her brainstorm possibilities and offer encouragement.

Regardless, I admire the fuck out of her insistence that she do this on her own.

“Okay,” I say, after tasting a pickled carrot and deciding I’m firmly against such an atrocity. “I’m going to coach you up. Envision your perfect job.”

Ava sets her fork down and closes her eyes. “My perfect job... hmm... lying on a tropical beach, testing suntan oils for a skincare company.”

Christ... the image of Ava in a bikini on a white sandy beach is not what I need right now or I’m likely to toss her over my shoulder and carry her off to my bedroom.

Ava opens her eyes and grins at me. “Too far-fetched?”

“If you want to stay in Pittsburgh, it is.” I laugh.

“I would stay here, but I’m not averse to moving.”

I ignore the twinge of dissatisfaction at the thought of her leaving the area. It’s ridiculous, really. This is only our second date, and I don’t even know that we’ll be seeing each other by the end of the week.

“You said your degree was in communications... why did you choose that? I’m assuming there was a specific career you were interested in?”

Ava nods, her eyes sparkling. “Yeah... I always wanted to do something in marketing. Not just brainstorming ideas but generating marketable content.”

“Okay,” I say with an enthusiastic smile as I stack salami on cheddar. “We’re on to something. Tell me more.”

CHAPTER 9

Ava

CANNON RINSES THE bowl from the vanilla ice cream we just shared as I watch from the kitchen stool. Dinner was delicious, and it took us over an hour to eat because the conversation was so free flowing.

Neither one of us had more than the original glass of wine as we picked at the food, sometimes using our forks to nab bites of pasta. Cannon suggested dessert by merely rising from the island as we were talking and dishing up a single bowl of ice cream with only one spoon for us to share. We passed the spoon back and forth as we talked, mostly about my career potential, with some subtle coaching and empowerment imparted along the way.

It was easy and natural.

I had thought it would be weird since we don't know each other all that well, yet we've already had wild drunk fornication. I know sex is on the menu tonight, and while I was nervous about it when I rang his doorbell—mainly because Derek's dumping and insult to my sexual prowess has dented my confidence—Cannon has managed to make me feel comfortable. Not once this evening, outside that first kiss when I arrived, have I been made to feel that sex was at the forefront of his mind.

I mean... it might be. God knows I've been thinking about it, but Cannon seemed genuinely content to hang over a long dinner where the conversation was enough to make the evening great.

After rinsing the bowl, he puts it in the dishwasher alongside the other tableware we used. I tried to help him put stuff away when we were done, but he insisted I stay seated

and finish off my wine. While I don't mean to compare Cannon to Derek or any other guy I've dated, I know Derek would have never cleaned up. Because he was the bigger breadwinner in our house, I was expected to maintain the home even though I worked a demanding full-time job.

That was clearly a warning sign I overlooked, and it's a lesson I won't ever forget when looking at future partners.

Not that I'm looking at Cannon for that. I'm just saying... it's beyond the realm of my experience, which means my standards were quite low.

After drying his hands, Cannon turns toward me, leaning back against the counter. His palms press onto the granite at his hips, and he crosses one leg over the other. I have no clue what this thing is between us or how long it will last, but I know I'll never forget how beautiful he is at this moment. Not just because of his near perfect good looks, but because I don't feel out of my depth with him.

Lord knows I should be since he's gorgeous, rich, famous, and sexy beyond all imagination. Just yesterday, I wasn't grounded where Cannon's concerned.

But since walking through his door tonight, he's centered me with easy conversation, laughs, solid advice, and genuine care for my situation. It appears Cannon West is the real deal, although I can still hear my parents' voices whispering to me to beware.

I push them away. Cannon is no Derek, and not just comparing them side by side. They're different because I'm different. I'm not going to fall or follow blindly.

"I can tell by your expression you have some deep thoughts running through that pretty head of yours," Cannon teases.

There's no stopping the warming blush. "Just conversing with myself about you."

"What about me?" He pushes off from the sink and leans on the island, directly across from me. There's three feet of

counter space between us but the intensity of his stare makes it feel like inches.

“Just that you’re very easy to be around, and it’s a little surprising,” I admit.

Cannon’s eyebrows rise, his expression an exaggeration of offended shock.

I laugh. “I’m just saying... you’re the head coach of a professional hockey team. A world traveler. You hang out in esteemed circles. And yet tonight, sharing a meal with you, is the most relaxed I’ve been in a long time. You might be one of the most unassuming people I’ve ever met.”

He smiles, and there’s a wickedness to it that makes my spine tingle. “If you knew what I was thinking right now, you wouldn’t feel so mellow.”

Yeah... not calm at all. In fact, distinctly tense with anticipation, especially as he moves around the island toward me.

Prowl might be a better word and my heart feels like it’s going to explode. As Cannon rounds the corner, I swivel toward him, and my breath freezes as he cups the back of my head. Leaning down, he doesn’t kiss my mouth but rather feathers his lips just below my ear. “Are you ready to get fucked?”

The air wheezes out of me as my hands clutch at his shirt to keep myself upright. “Did you really just say that?”

Cannon chuckles as he moves his mouth to mine. “I really just said that.” He kisses me softly, grazing his teeth over my lower lip. Pulling back, his eyes lock onto mine, and they’re filled with challenge and amusement. “I’m a dirty talker. Is that a problem?”

I shake my head. “I’m a dirty listener,” I assure him as I grip his shirt tighter. “I could probably be a dirty talker myself, but I’m not sure I really know how to.”

Cannon laughs and presses a kiss to the tip of my nose that is so sweet, I can't hold back a sigh. It's short-lived though because next thing I know, I'm off the stool and over his shoulder.

I yelp in surprise. "Put me down."

"I will. On the bed."

I giggle when his hand comes to my ass to hold me steady as he winds his way through the living room to the master suite on the other side. I brace against his lower back and lift slightly so I don't hang completely upside down. As we pass by a set of bookshelves, I get a brief glance at several picture frames housing groups of people—family members, I assume. I can't make out details, except one near the edge is a photo of two people, arms around each other and smiling big for the camera.

We go by far too fast, but I think the man was Cannon. The woman? Possibly his sister, but deep down, I think it's his wife.

While I can't be sure, it's enough to get me up in my head so that by the time Cannon's lowering me to the ground, I'm having major second thoughts.

The only problem is he gives me no time to analyze my worries or voice my concerns. He's got his hands on my face and he's kissing me to complete distraction.

I let the photo and worries over it go. It could have easily been his sister with him, and even if it was his wife, so what? Just because she's dead doesn't mean he should box away his memories. In fact, I find it—

"Oh God," I groan as Cannon's hands drop to my ass, and he pulls me flush against his body. The length of his erection—the very hard evidence of his need—pressed into my belly weakens my legs.

Cannon's hand grips my braid and tugs my head back so his mouth can move down my throat. "Got all kinds of ideas

what to do with this,” he murmurs as he coils my ponytail around his hand.

How can those words that sound so ominous make me tremble with need?

“There are far too many clothes in the way,” Cannon says, releasing his hold. I stumble slightly because I’d been melting into him, but his arms steady me.

He grins, enjoying the way he’s knocked me silly with his hot kisses and dirty words. I let him have his moment, mainly because he seems driven to get me naked. Cannon’s hands jerk roughly at my belt to get it open, whips my turtleneck up and over my head, and by the time I’m blinking, he’s got my bra off. His hand goes to my chest, and he pushes me backward. My legs catch the bed and I fall onto it, only to almost be pulled off as he jerks at my boots.

“You’re like a world record clothes-getter-offer,” I say in awe.

Cannon grins at me devilishly as his fingertips work at the zipper on my jeans. He peels me out of the denim, leaving me in nothing but my black satin panties with little red bows at the hips. I’m not sure he noticed the matching bra, but that’s moot now.

Standing straight, he looks down at me with darkened eyes. His tongue peeks out to run over his lower lip before he bites into it, appraising me. “What to do first?”

“What are the choices?”

Cannon’s eyes snap to mine. “My mouth between your legs. You think I’m fast getting you out of those clothes, wait until you see how fast I can get you off.”

The man is confident, and I love it. I press my thighs together, the gentle ache that was between my legs now pounding. “What are my other options?”

Cannon raises an eyebrow, clearly expecting me to have chosen the first. His eyes glitter as he steps to the edge of the

bed, nudging my legs apart.

He bends at the waist, pressing a palm into the mattress at my hip. My breath catches as his finger runs along the elastic edge of my panties. “I bet you’re wet. I’m thinking about putting you on your hands and knees, wrapping your hair around my hand, and fucking you hard from behind.”

God, that sounds perfect. But I know Cannon isn’t a man with only an idea or two in that handsome head. “What else?”

Cannon’s hand glides up my stomach, in between my breasts, and over my shoulder to tug playfully on my braid. “I was thinking about using this to put you on your knees before me.”

“I’ll take that option,” I blurt out.

There’s no hesitation as Cannon’s eyes flash hot. His hand slips to the back of my neck and he pulls me up off the bed. When I’m on my feet, he coils the long braid around his hand until there’s no length of it left, and he gently pushes me down.

My eyes remain locked on his as I lower until my knees press into the soft carpet. Cannon huffs out a slight breath as my hands go to the button on his jeans. His jaw locks as I lower the zipper, and a rumbling need wells in his chest when I pull his cock free.

I grasp the base, stroke him twice, and pull him toward my mouth. Cannon grips my hair hard enough to sting, stopping my momentum, and my eyes fly up to his.

“Just wait a second,” he says gruffly as he stares down at me.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper, suddenly fearful I’m completely horrible at this, just the way Derek said.

“Nothing,” he murmurs, bringing his other hand to my cheek where he rubs his thumb over my lower lip. “I want to commit the way you look right now to memory. It’s perfect, and it’s going to star in all my future fantasies.”

“I like that,” I say softly.

“I’m glad you do.” His hand tightens in my hair, and he forces my mouth onto him.

He groans as I take him in deep, but I’ve got my own purr of satisfaction rattling around my chest. I know I willingly dropped to my knees, but something about him holding me tight by my hair turns me on more than I’ve ever been with another man. I’m driven to bring him pleasure because it brings me pleasure.

The feel of him between the roof of my mouth and my tongue is intense, and I use my hand to counterstroke against the suck and pull I’m providing.

“Fuck,” he curses low under his breath.

My cheeks hollow, and Cannon’s hand tightens in my hair even more as he pulls me off. I lift my eyes to find his chest heaving and his eyes burning.

“That feels just a little too good,” he rumbles.

I twist my hand around the base of his cock and he jerks, his eyes practically flaming with need. I try to pull him back to my mouth, but instead I become dizzy as his hands go under my arms and he lifts me from the floor.

The room spins as he whirls me toward the bed and pushes me onto it. Cannon immediately covers me, his torso pressing down into my back and the hard length of him, wet from my mouth, heavy along my butt.

He rolls slightly to the side, pushes his hand between my legs, and snakes a finger under my panties. A finger slides in deep.

Cannon groans. “Jesus, Ava... you’re fucking soaked. Is that just from sucking my cock?”

I nod furiously. Having him in my mouth, turning him on to the point he had to pull away so this wouldn’t end too quickly, has my body primed and ready.

“Don’t move,” he says and then his hand is gone from between my legs and his weight shifts. I twist my neck and see him straining to reach the drawer of his bedside table.

His fingertips scrabble at the knob but rather than move off me, he jerks the entire drawer out of the table. He sets it on a pillow near the headboard and pulls out a condom. I twist more to watch as he puts it between his perfect teeth so he can tear the wrapper.

Cannon’s eyes drift down to find me watching him intently, and he grins as he pulls out the condom. “Sorry if this is going fast.” He lifts off me, pushes his pants a little more down his hips, and sheathes himself. “But you got me way too hot and bothered with your mouth.”

I start to laugh but air whooshes out of my lungs as he hauls me up and back. My feet plant into the carpet and my hands flail out until they find purchase on the mattress. My head swims with an intense surge of lust as Cannon jerks my panties down to mid-thigh and gathers up my braid again in his hand. He coils it deftly while using his other hand to bring himself into alignment.

A strangled cry rips free as he slides into me, using tiny circles of his hips to work past the tightness.

“Goddamn it, Ava.” He grunts as he tunnels deep, and I melt all around him. “Why do you have to feel this good?”

“You’re one to be talking,” I gasp as he punches his hips forward and bottoms out.

“My apologies if this is over too fast,” he mutters as he pulls out and slowly slides back in with a groan. Through gritted teeth, he adds, “But I swear I’ll get you to the same place I’m going.”

I giggle but it’s cut short as his free hand goes between my legs and I buck against the stimulation.

Cannon laughs darkly and leverages me into a somewhat upright position, although I’m still slightly bent at the waist. Fingers pressed against my clit, my hair caught firmly in his

grasp, he fucks me hard. His strength holds me in place, and because I'm too far above the mattress to use my hands for stability, I clamp each one around his wrists.

It's in this very odd but insanely hot position that Cannon unleashes on me.

He fucks me without mercy, whispering dirty future promises, and it's an all-out assault on my senses. It happens very fast, but I orgasm moments before he does. Cannon curses as he lowers me to the mattress, still grinding against my backside, his hand working the front. I'm dizzy from the strength of my release, and my clit is so sensitive as he continues to touch me, setting off more sparks of pleasure.

"One day we'll go slow," he promises with a chuckle as he releases my hair and presses a kiss to my neck.

"One day, I'll complete a blow job on you," I reply.

Cannon squeezes me before lifting from my body. He slides free, and I roll to the side to see him move into the bathroom. I pull up my panties, wondering if this is when I go home. I know he told me to bring an overnight bag but seeing what I'm pretty sure was his wife's picture in the living room, I'm not sure. My insecurities start to rage.

I start a search for my clothes when Cannon walks out of the bathroom, now completely naked.

"What are you doing?" he asks as I nab my bra.

"Getting dressed?" I lob it as a question, because I have a feeling he's looking for a specific answer.

"Yeah, that's not going to work for me," he says as he strides my way. I can't help but let my eyes slide over his body.

When he reaches me, his hand takes hold of my braid again, and he gives it a playful tug. "There's no handing out of orgasms and running," he chides.

"I wasn't sure..." My words dry up in embarrassment that I even have to guess.

“What this was?” he prompts, dipping his head to look me in my eye as my gaze dropped. “This isn’t a hookup, Ava.”

“What is it?” I ask, my brain involuntarily going to the picture of what may have been him and his wife in his living room.

“It’s not a hookup,” he repeats firmly as he releases my hair and slides his hand to the back of my neck. But all that really tells me is what it isn’t, and not what it is. “I want you to stay the night with me.”

I’m confused, there’s no doubt. First date, we had drunk sex. The second date—dinner at his house—but there was an expectation of sex. He told me to pack an overnight bag, and I did.

Yet for some reason, I feel like I should leave.

Like telling me to bring an overnight bag was nothing more than code for “*I intend to fuck you, so if you don’t want that, you have an out.*”

“Okay,” Cannon says with an exasperated sigh, scooping me up in his arms. I yelp from the shock as he deposits me on the bed.

He plucks my bra from my hand and tosses it over his shoulder. He jerks at the covers and forces me under them. Climbing in next to me, he holds himself up on his elbow and hovers. “Spill it. What’s got that brain of yours in a twist?”

“It’s nothing—”

“Don’t,” he says, and I’m surprised by the slight heat in his voice. “Not after what we just shared.”

Because while it was fast and frantic, it was special. I can feel it.

“It’s your wife,” I blurt out. There’s no holding it back, not after he emphasized that what we just did has meaning.

My body locks tight as I wait for his reaction. I dread that I might have pissed him off enough to kick me out of his house

but instead, his expression softens.

Cannon brings a hand to my face, rubs his thumb over my cheek. “I was wondering if you knew.”

“I googled you, nosy little miscreant that I am.”

Chuckling, Cannon bends over and kisses me. “What’s bothering you about it?”

“Actually, nothing’s bothering me at all,” I rush to assure him, jerking up until I’m also on my elbow so I can look him in the eye. “It’s just... I want to be sensitive to you. I’ve never known a widower. I don’t know if you have room for something more than a hookup. And I saw what I think might have been a picture of you two in the living room.”

“Aahh.” A soft sound of understanding and empathy for me. “I imagine that could be confusing. I guess what you need to know is that Melissa died almost nine years ago. She was my first love, and honestly, she’s been my only love. But not because I hold her in a place that’s so sacred I couldn’t ever care about another. Just... she’s part of my history, and I’ll never pack her away.”

“And I’d never expect you to. I’m not threatened by it. Again, I just want to be sensitive to you. And...” My eyes drop for a moment, but I need to go into this fully honest. “I want to be sensitive to myself as well. I just came out of a relationship that did a number on my confidence. It will help me to know the parameters. To make sure I stay within expectations... both yours and mine.”

Cannon smiles and kisses me again. “This is a smart conversation to have. Granted, we went about things a little backward with drunk sex first, but I like you, Ava. I’d like to continue to see you, and while we’re talking about it, it’s only you. I don’t do hookups or bed hopping.”

“That’s good to know,” I breathe out.

“But,” he says, and instantly I tense up. “My time is limited. My job is beyond hectic. I’m gone fifty percent of the time and when I’m here, some of my workdays are very long.

I have a lot of people I'm obligated to, so it's important you know that while it would only be you in my bed, it might be infrequent."

While I'm relieved to know he likes me, and that he wants monogamy, I wasn't expecting him to be so blunt about his limitations. I am, however, grateful he's laying them out. It's the best thing he could do for me so that as I navigate through a completely new and different type of relationship, I know what to expect.

"Thank you for being honest. You obviously know how important that is to me."

"I'll always be honest with you," he promises, leaning in for a soft kiss. "And when I'm with you, I'll give you all I've got. Okay?"

"Okay." I smile at him, reveling for all of three seconds before I'm on my back and he's on top, kissing me hard.

"It occurs to me," he murmurs, lips trailing down my neck. He scoots down my body, pulling a nipple into his mouth. He sucks hard and lets it slip free with a tiny pop. His eyes lift to mine. "We just committed to being monogamous."

I'm dazed from the rapid change of activity—from talking to my nipple in his mouth and back to talking again. "We did?"

"Yeah, we did." His smile is sly as he moves back up to hover his mouth over mine. "And since we're committed, I'd like to talk about sex without condoms."

"Oh," I gasp, completely stunned. It's not something Derek and I ever talked about. He just suited up and I never thought about it.

That's how I was taught to have safe sex.

"I have a complete physical at the beginning of every season, which includes an STD test. I've always worn a condom when I'm not in a committed relationship."

"Have you been in committed relationships since..."

Since your wife died, but I can't say it.

"Two," he replies, and that stings a tiny bit to know I'm not that first special person he's wanted to have this discussion with. "What about you?"

"Oh... um... well, Derek and I always used condoms, but when I found out he was cheating on me, I had a test done too. Just to be on the safe side."

"And?" he prompts.

"All negative."

"Same," he says with a grin. "So, now let's talk birth control."

"IUD," I report.

"Meaning technically, I can fuck you right now without a condom," he concludes.

"That seems like a reasonable extrapolation." I laugh.

Cannon groans, and it sounds as if he's disappointed. "I had planned on only having you once more tonight, but I'm thinking we're not going to get a lot of sleep."

"I can't say I'm disappointed to hear that."

"Good girl," he murmurs before capturing my mouth in a scorching kiss that has me more than ready to test our stamina tonight.

CHAPTER 10

Cannon

THIS ISN'T THE first time the Pittsburgh Titans have been back to Columbus since the plane crash last February, but it is the first time that I've been here as their head coach. While it's safe to say that this team can compartmentalize their feelings and put on their game faces, I guarantee you everyone—including me—is thinking about the crash to some extent.

I've always been a good flyer. I'm one of those people who never had a hard time giving up control, so a little air turbulence doesn't freak me out. I'm not the type who would feel more comfortable if I were flying the plane.

But I'm not going to lie... I had some jitters on the early-morning flight here. I can't even begin to imagine how Coen, Hendrix, and Camden felt, since they were the three players who weren't with the team when the plane went down.

The flight is only forty-five minutes to travel the roughly two hundred miles between the two cities. Ordinarily we travel to away games the evening before, but with short flights like this, we can do it all in one day, and the players with families appreciate it. We'll head back to Pittsburgh after the game tonight.

After landing at the Columbus airport, we take a bus straight to the arena for a light skate. Thereafter, we load the team back on the buses and check into the hotel. While we aren't staying the night, Team Services always arranges a hotel, as there's a lot of downtime and the players need a place to relax and rest until they have to head back to the arena around five.

After enjoying a lunch buffet, most of the players head off to their rooms for a nap.

I have work to do, so I settle in a small conference room the hotel provided for the coaches and find my crew waiting for me—my three assistant coaches, Gage, Sam, and Maurice, as well as Baden, the goalie coach, and Jack Hanson, our senior video coach.

We spend the next hour discussing final thoughts on lineups, special teams, and other odds and ends, but I pretty much rubber-stamp their ideas. They're doing exactly what they're paid to do, and I have the utmost confidence in them.

When our meeting finishes and the men start to leave, I call out to Baden. "You mind staying behind a second?"

"Not at all. I had something to talk to you about as well."

That catches me by surprise as I detect a note of unease, and I hope to fuck he's not about to give me his resignation. So I can clear that worry off my plate, I say, "You first."

"It's not a big deal," he says, an almost sheepish smile on his face. "I was going to try to catch you later this week, but I guess now is as good a time as any—"

"I'm not accepting your resignation." Figured I might as well cut to the chase.

Baden blinks in surprise and then chuckles. "I'm not going anywhere. In fact, looking to solidify my ties to the area."

I frown slightly. "How's that?"

"I'm going to propose to Sophie."

A grin splits my face, and I reach across the table to shake his hand. "Congrats, man. That's awesome."

"Well, she's got to say yes first."

"I'm pretty sure that's a given." I've had some occasions to observe Sophie and Baden together, and of course, their history before they even started dating is a tale known worldwide by anyone who follows hockey. They were fated to be together. "But what do I have to do with it?"

Baden rubs the back of his neck, levels me another abashed look, and says, “I want to propose to her during a game.”

“Come again?” I ask because I’m not even sure how that would work.

“During a TV timeout, I was thinking a pre-recorded message on the Jumbotron. I wanted to run it by you first because I don’t want it to be a distraction.”

“I think it’s a brilliant idea.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s not going to distract the team, and all the guys would love it. The fans will go nuts. Word of advice, though... don’t do it if you think there’s a chance she’ll say no. You do not want to be humiliated on national TV.”

Baden snorts. “I’m confident she’ll say yes. I just wanted to do it in a *shout from the rooftops* sort of way.”

“As you should when you love someone,” I reply. I remember what that felt like, even though it was a long damn time ago. “When do you want to do it?”

“I’m ready to go whenever. The ring was bought awhile ago.”

“Do it at the next home game.” I love spontaneity.

“Yeah?”

“Absolutely,” I say with a resounding nod.

“Okay... I’ll do it.” Baden looks like he’s about to burst wide open with happiness, and I’m thrilled for him. But he tucks the smile away and goes into game mode. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I just wanted to give you a heads-up that we’re working on a trade to get Bain Hillridge here.”

“No shit?” Baden exclaims. “What’s the trade?”

“Nolan and a second-round draft pick is what we’re aiming for.”

“He’ll be an excellent addition, not just to the defense, but he’s an incredible motivator.”

“So I’ve heard. We looked at him hard. I wanted to give you a little forewarning since you two played together.”

Baden may be a goalie coach, but he was an integral member of the Arizona Vengeance and was incredibly beloved there, especially after he was attacked and left temporarily paralyzed. Every one of the Vengeance players mourned the loss of their goalie, not just from his injury, but once he made the decision to come to Pittsburgh as a coach.

“I’ll give him a call tomorrow,” Baden says, and we both stand from the table. “Anything else you need from me?”

“I’m good.” I follow him out of the conference room. “Going to head up to my room and chill for a bit.”

“Same,” Baden says.

I’m not a napper by nature, my body used to functioning on only five or so hours a night. But I do like to relax, so I’ll usually read a book, watch some mindless TV, or surf the web.

When I get to my room and kick off my shoes, I have a different idea about how to spend my time.

I call Ava.

When she answers, the gentle lilt of her voice as she says *hello* sends a wave of memories slamming into me.

Memories of last night.

I had no clue there had been reins on my libido when it came to Ava, but apparently, I’d been holding back. The minute we agreed to ditch the condoms, I couldn’t control the raging lust that overtook me. By all rights, I should be exhausted because we got almost no sleep, but I couldn’t fucking leave her alone.

This concerns me a bit. It's true that I've been in two other monogamous relationships since my wife died, but it was months before I felt comfortable enough to do away with protection. Not because I had difficulty trusting those women, but it took me a long time to build to that level of intimacy. Some might say it was because Melissa's ghost was hovering over me back then, but I don't think that's it.

All I can guess is that I'm attracted to Ava on a deeper level than with the women from my prior relationships. Part of it might be the raw physical attraction, but I think it has to do with getting to know her over a period in short bursts of almost daily interactions. I flirted with her for weeks and learned tiny bits of information about her. She became something I looked forward to every morning because while the coffee was good, I really went into The Grind and chose that particular table because I wanted to be around Ava.

Hell, I'm smart enough to know that some things just don't have answers. You can only go with your gut, and my gut is telling me that Ava is something extraordinary.

The mere fact that my body reacts to her voice over the phone line is a strong indicator.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Job searching,” she replies, sounding quite chipper and motivated.

“Anything looking good?”

“I don't know,” she muses. “A couple of listings in human resources here in the Pittsburgh area, but there's a really interesting job listing for a marketing manager for a speaker management agency in Charlotte, North Carolina. The job description is exactly what I had envisioned myself doing after college.”

The minute she says Charlotte, North Carolina, a pang of disappointment hits over the thought she might move away. She told me yesterday she was going to look for jobs in other

states, but her preference is to stay in Pittsburgh or go back to North Carolina.

The fact there's a job that excites her back in her home state doesn't bode well for this turning into something more than what we have right now.

Still, I have to be happy for her if she's reaching for her dreams. "That's awesome. What's the job description?"

I listen as Ava reads it to me, and there's no mistaking the animation in her voice that tells me she really wants this. I try to be happy for her, and I even go against every instinct within me and send up a small prayer that she gets it. I know if she does, I'm going to be more than disappointed to have her leave, but I also have to remind myself I'm not exactly in the market for a deep relationship. I can't commit the time that someone like Ava would deserve, and I know from personal experience just how damaging to a relationship a career in professional sports can be.

"It's a long shot," she says wistfully. "I mean, I'm sure there will be better qualified applicants."

"All you need is an interview. A foot in the door. Then you sell yourself."

"Hey... I can do that." Her laughter makes me smile. "I will market the hell out of myself if they'll give me five minutes of their time."

"That's my girl," I reply softly, and I cringe a tiny bit at how possessive that sounds. Because I don't mean it like that. More of an endearment.

There's silence, and before it can turn awkward, I fill it with a change of subject. "Have any problems getting out of my place today?"

It was not a hardship to wake up this morning wrapped around Ava's warm, naked body. I had a team plane to catch, but I didn't want to rush her out. I told her to sleep in and left instructions on how to reset my alarm.

Clearly, she had no problem or I would've gotten an alarm notification, but I'm curious how long she loitered around my place, although I could've looked it up on my alarm app.

"I couldn't go back to sleep after you headed out, so I got dressed and left."

I smile at the memory of her sleepy grin when I kissed her temple. It was hard not to crawl back into bed with her, but my job doesn't allow such flights of fancy.

"Will you be watching the game tonight?" I ask. She teased me last night that she'd have to bone up on hockey if she was banging the coach.

I then said something to the effect of "I'd be glad to bone you up," and that led to another round of sex.

Ava laughs. "I am going to watch. I'm going to make homemade pizza, put on my fuzzy jammies, and see how many times the camera will show you on TV."

I chuckle because I can see her doing that. She doesn't know the game that well. I also like knowing she'll be looking for glimpses of me.

"So," I drawl, as it is suddenly imperative I figure out when I can see Ava again. "I'm flying back late tonight, and I've got a long day at the arena tomorrow, followed by dinner with some of the executive staff. But would you like to come to the home game the day after? I'll get you a ticket and then we could go out for a postgame drink?"

"I'd love that," she says, and I have to hold back my exhale of relief. I'm still unsure of what we have here, and I can't assume anything.

"Listen... Ava," I begin, then stop, not sure if this is the right time. But it has to be. I need to start this off with the correct expectations. "I cannot wait to see you again, but as you've seen, my schedule is crazy. It might only be that I can see you once or twice a week. I know what we have is new and we're still defining it, but this might just be a lot of stolen moments between us."

“You’ve already told me that.” Yeah... there’s a bit of censure in her tone, but I can’t help the need to make sure she understands my limitations. “I really appreciate you laying it out there like that, Cannon. That’s helpful to both of us, and I get where you’re coming from.”

“If what I can offer is not enough, I need you to be vocal about it.” Like, I really, really need her to speak up. Because Melissa didn’t. “I don’t want you ever to think you’re not good enough because you’ve had that already and don’t deserve it.”

“You’re nothing like my ex,” she rushes to assure me.

“I’m just saying, I like you. You’re amazing, but you deserve a lot more than I can give you. My career takes up the majority of my time.”

“I know,” she replies, her voice softly understanding. “But let’s not worry about those things. What we have now is casual, so—”

I snort hard. “What we have is not casual. You don’t ditch condoms for casual.”

Ava giggles. “Okay, it’s more than casual, it’s just not often.”

“I can’t promise you much, but I swear I’ll never intentionally hurt you. At least in that, you can have surety.”

“I think I figured that out,” she murmurs.

“Good. Now, I’ve got to get going. I’ll try to call you after the game if it’s not too late.”

“It won’t be, but if you get caught up, don’t worry about it.”

“Okay,” I say, because she’s operating exactly within the bounds of what I’d established.

My time is limited.

I’ll give what I can and hope it’s enough for her.

CHAPTER 11

Ava

THE FANS ERUPT upon the final buzzer, me alongside them, all of us cheering the Titans' resounding victory over the Detroit Cardinals.

"Are you ready to go, Ms. Cavanaugh?" the usher asks.

I turn to face the young girl wearing a black shirt and pants, along with a vest in the Titans' purple. Her name tag reads Kimberly. She came to my seat about five minutes ago and advised that she had been instructed to take me to Cannon's office after the game.

I was surprised by that as we'd made plans to meet at his place. I was also surprised by the ticket Cannon had left me at will call. It was at the center of the arena, only four rows back from the ice and directly behind the Titans' bench so I got an up-close look at the team and how things operate during a game. The energy rocketing through the arena about had my hair standing on end, and without knowing anything about the sport and having no longstanding connection to the city, I became an instant fan.

And wow... to be just a few rows from where Cannon stood behind the players had me feeling all sorts of things. Pride, but also a little hot and bothered. He's wearing a dark navy suit that is no doubt custom tailored. I know what bespoke looks like because my ex wore them, but Derek never looked that good.

Once during the game, Cannon turned around and looked back at me. It wasn't actually during play but rather after Baden Oulett, the goalie coach, proposed on the big screen to his girlfriend, Sophie. While the arena was trembling from the force of the stomping feet, Cannon turned back and locked

eyes with me. He had an unfettered moment where he didn't have to be focused on the game, and he shared that time with me. It was nothing more than a smile, a wink, then he turned back.

The couple to my left made a big deal about it. "Did Coach West just wink at you?"

I played stupid. "I don't think so. I wasn't paying attention."

Not sure if they bought it, but they continued to stare at Cannon to see if he'd look back again.

He never did, and that was okay by me. Tonight, I'm just a fan, and he's at work, doing what he does best.

Well, not sure it's what he does best. The things he does to me between the sheets are pretty damn incredible. I know one thing I've learned during this very brief affair so far—I didn't know what great sex was before Cannon.

Now I'm not sure anyone else could ever compare.

And yes, I have to think about a future without Cannon because he's laid down enough hints that he doesn't have time for anything more than "stolen moments."

That's okay with me for now. I'm still suffering low confidence from how Derek mistreated me, and I want to be able to trust my feelings. I don't want to chase after a shiny happily ever after.

I learned my lesson.

I follow Kimberly up the steps to the main concourse, which is already filled with fans making the mad dash to their cars. She leads me to an escalator that goes up one floor and down a short hall to an elevator. Pulling out a key card from her retractable badge reel, she presses it to a panel and the doors slide open. I follow her in, and we go all the way down to the basement level.

"How come we had to go up the escalator just to go down in an elevator?" I ask.

“This one’s just a convenience and the closest elevator, even though we have to go up to get it.”

Doesn’t seem efficient, but I’m not an engineer.

At the basement level, we step out, and I can still hear some of the fans cheering as well as boisterous male voices, which I assume are the players, echoing down the hall. The basement is a huge oval that follows under the arena stands, but it’s so large I can’t see anyone down the hall as it curves in the distance.

“Locker rooms are down that way,” Kimberly says, explaining the noise. She heads in the opposite direction, pointing things out as she goes along.

We pass their workout facility, a family lounge where the door is open and I see several people inside, and then an equipment room.

Kimberly turns left down a short hall, and there are offices on each side with the other coaches’ names etched on brass plates on the doors.

Maurice Dupont.

Sam Thatcher.

Gage Heyward.

Baden Oulett.

Jack Hanson.

Cannon’s is at the end of the hall, and it’s huge, filled with a heavy wooden desk, bookcases, and leather chairs. A large-screen TV is mounted in the corner, and he has a round worktable circled by five chairs.

“Make yourself comfortable. Coach West has to do the aftergame press conference but will come and get you after.”

“No problem,” I reply. It’s either wait for him here or wait for him in the parking garage of his condo.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asks.

“I’m good. Thank you for your help.”

Kimberly smiles and exits, pulling the door closed behind her.

I walk around the room, checking things out. On the worktable are several notepads with scribbles. Three whiteboards have hockey rink lines drawn on them, littered with *x*’s and *o*’s and lots of arrows in dry-erase marker. I’d guess that’s Cannon creating plays.

His desk is fairly clear except for a laptop, a landline phone, and a three-ring binder.

The bookcases are fascinating because while they aren’t overloaded, they hold many items relevant to his hockey career. I study pictures of him when he was a player, and God, I thought he was hot in a suit, but in his hockey uniform on the ice... I might melt into a puddle.

There’s an eight-by-ten of a hockey team in the middle of the ice posed with the Cup, which even I know is the trophy passed along to each championship winner. I bend in closer, look among the men, and identify Cannon. Thanks to Google, I know he played for the Toronto Blazers and that they won the Cup one year he was on the team.

There are other group photos where Cannon’s wearing a suit, and I’m guessing those were the two teams he coached before coming here. There are pucks, awards, unframed certificates, and other knickknacks.

There are framed photos with what looks to be other coaches and perhaps some of his hockey buddies in settings outside the arena, including one of a handful of guys on a beach with beers in hand, mugging for the camera.

Cannon and two guys dressed in golf apparel on a putting green.

The collection seems to reflect only his hockey life—on and off the ice—and there are no pictures of his family.

No pictures of Melissa.

The door opens, and I swing that way to see Cannon walking in. His eyes move to the bookcase I'm standing in front of. "Checking out my career?"

I grin. "You were a really hot hockey player."

Cannon snorts, closing the door behind him. He moves toward me purposefully, and goose bumps break out on my arms from the expression on his face.

He wants something, and he intends to get it.

Before I know it, I'm in his arms and he's kissing me breathless. When his mouth pulls from mine, he smirks down at me. "Sorry... I have a press conference to go to, but I had to get a kiss from you first."

"Oh God," I say, trying to wriggle out of his grasp. "You need to go do that."

"Needed that kiss first," he says, his embrace tightening.

It's a concession. A decision to put hockey on hold to have a few moments of personal time, and I'm not sure why he's doing it. It's not necessary because I didn't expect it.

"Did you like the game?" he asks.

"Loved it!" I exclaim. "I don't understand everything, but I got the gist."

"I can't believe you've never been to one before," Cannon says with the same level of surprise he had earlier when he called to explain where I should collect my ticket.

Derek loved to go to hockey games and always went with his work colleagues. His company had season tickets that they parceled out to the higher-ups, but I was never invited.

"And," I gush with exaggerated excitement, "there was a proposal."

Cannon laughs. "I thought you might like that. Pretty slick, huh?"

God, that was so cool. Baden proposing on a pre-recorded big-screen video and then the cameras panned up to one of the luxury boxes to his girlfriend, Sophie, who was clearly accepting.

“How could a woman say no to that?”

“Sophie would never have said no, no matter how he proposed. Those two have a bond that’s unlike any other. It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you about it, but I have to get to the press conference.”

Cannon kisses me again, and I’m finally released from his grasp as he backs toward the door. “Just wait here if you don’t mind. Twenty minutes tops. I’ll try to cut it shorter.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

He ignores my offer and instead asks, “What do you want to do? Go out for drinks and some food?”

“Not really,” I say, hesitant to turn down what would most likely be considered a date.

Cannon’s lips twitch. “Do you want to come home with me?”

“Does that make me a brazen hussy?” I ask with a smirk.

“Do you care?”

“No. I mean... our time is kind of limited, so I want to maximize it.”

Cannon laughs. “Then I can’t wait to take you home with me.”

“My car—”

“We’ll leave it, and I’ll bring you back in the morning.”

“Okay,” I breathe out, excited about this choice of how our evening will end. Maybe I am a hussy.

Cannon moves to step over the threshold and then stops, a frown on his face as he looks back. “You know that when I bring you to my place, it doesn’t mean we have to have sex.”

I cock an eyebrow at him.

He shrugs and grins. “Well, okay... yes, I want to have sex with you, but it’s not like I’m expecting we just go right at it when we get there. We can relax and talk, watch a movie, or —”

“Cannon,” I say, cutting him off. “I know all that. How about we worry about what we’ll do when we step foot in your place?”

His eyes glint with dark promises as he fully faces me. “If I have my way, I want you to know I’ll probably bend you over the couch and fuck you hard and fast. It’s the closest piece of furniture.”

A shudder runs up my spine, but I point a finger at him. “Out. Go do your press conference.”

Cannon grins, winks, and then disappears.

And I don’t miss the fact that my heart flutters over that entire exchange. The dirty talk that forecasts how tonight will probably go. The effort he’s making to give more than what he’s told me he’s capable of giving.

To create tiny pockets of time and slot me into them.

What does it mean he took the time to come and kiss me before the press conference? Why would he do that?

“Stop it,” I whisper, pressing a hand to my chest. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

CHAPTER 12

Cannon

I REALLY DIDN'T want to make it about sex... inviting Ava to my house after the game. Hell, I even told her that in my office so my intentions have been offered to the universe. I drove us across the river and into downtown after the press conference, throwing out different movies we could watch when we got to my place. I offered to make us hot chocolate from scratch and turn on the gas fireplace, figuring that might make things more romantic.

Ava replied with mild interest, saying things like, "That sounds nice," or "I've been wanting to see that movie."

So I figured as soon as we crossed the threshold of my unit, we would divest ourselves of our coats and move straight into the kitchen for some hot chocolate.

Instead, I barely get the door closed before Ava turns into my body, her hands going to my belt buckle to undo it with an almost unholy glint in her eyes.

I'm not really sure what it says about me, but it never once crosses my mind to stop her. All thoughts of movies, romantic fires, and hot chocolate with marshmallows flee my mind, and my hands are jerking at her clothes instead.

Right there in my foyer, we lose our heavy wool coats and shoes, followed by articles of clothing being frantically torn from our bodies in between hot, messy kisses and rumbling groans whenever fingertips make contact with skin.

I kiss Ava with a hand on the back of her head and at the same time slip my other hand between her legs. "What to do with you?" I murmur, wondering if I should indeed just bend her over the couch as I promised.

Ava's laugh is husky as she rotates her hips against me. I give her what she asks for, slipping my middle finger deep inside her. She responds by stroking my cock, and I know at this moment, I will never make it to the bedroom.

Out of respect for our bodies, I don't drag her to the tiled floor but instead pick her up and carry her over to my deep-set couch. Rather than draping her over the back, I lie her down on it as gently as I can. While my inner caveman wants nothing more than to bury myself deep inside her, I slow things down by trailing my lips over her soft skin. I trace a sensuous path over her breasts, across her ribs, and right in between her legs after spreading her wide.

Ava stares down at me from an angle propped up on her elbows. Her eyes are wild with need, and she's biting into her lower lip so hard the skin around her teeth turns white. I tilt my head and rub my cheek over the silky skin of her mound.

Ava hisses from the contact of my stubble.

I leer up at her. "I have been dying to taste you."

"I feel the same. I want you in my mouth."

Groaning, I shake my head. "Not right now." Instead, I prod her with my tongue, and her entire body jerks like she's been electrocuted.

I glance back up and she seems utterly confused.

"What's wrong?" I ask softly.

Her face turns red and she shakes her head, eyes cast away from me.

"Ava... do you not want me to do this to you?"

Her voice is so soft, I can barely hear it. "I want it more than oxygen right now."

"Then why do you look so unsure?"

"Because I've never been in this position before. All my..." She fumbles for the right words.

I hazard a guess. “No one has ever done this to you before?”

“I guess I wasn’t sexy enough to inspire—”

A growl tears free from my chest and I crawl up her body so my face hovers over hers. My dick nestles against her soft pussy, jerking from the contact, but I ignore it. I bend down and kiss her nose before pulling up to study her. “Me wanting my mouth between your legs and wanting to get you off that way has nothing to do with you being sexy. Which you are, of course. But I want to do this for no other reason than I want to give you pleasure. If any of the men you were with before never did that to you, it’s because they were straight-up selfish assholes and didn’t care about what you might want.”

Her eyes flare with surprise, but I still see the doubt.

My lips brush softly against her mouth. “You’re just going to have to trust me on that.”

I’m done talking, so I slither back down her body, spread her legs wide, and destroy her with my mouth. She tastes so fucking good, and I’m getting harder and harder with every tiny cry or buck of her hips. By the time she screams her release, my balls are tingling with the need to explode.

With Ava still trembling, I surge up, taking one of her legs high with it crooked over my elbow and drive into her. She gasps, and nothing has ever felt better than her body melting around me as we join together.

There is nothing tender in the way I fuck her. I go at it hard and furious, egged on by Ava’s fingernails digging into my ass cheeks.

“More,” she huffs, and I nearly come when she slides one hand between our bodies to touch herself.

I immediately slow my thrusts, because that means she wants to come again, and I’m going to make sure she gets there.

It's all leisurely kissing and slow pumping of my hips. I keep my pelvis pressed tight to her, trapping her hand between us. I fuck her deep, and she responds with gyrating hips to create more friction. Her second orgasm catches both of us unaware, and she arches her back as the pleasure rolls through her. I feel her muscles contracting all around me, and I get three more strokes in before my head falls forward and I curse out my release.

"Fuck, Ava," I say through gritted teeth as my lungs deflate. "Just... fuck."

"I love when you come inside me," she murmurs dreamily.

Another burst of pleasure hits me hard as I grind against her. I let my lips drag over her neck and feel the mad beat of her pulse, as fast as hummingbird wings.

Ava slides her fingers into my hair and strokes me gently as we both come down from the high.



IT'S QUIET AS Ava lies on top of me. I shifted our positions on the couch and pulled a folded blanket over us. Her head is on my chest, and I'm lightly skimming her lower back. We've been this way for several minutes, and I thought Ava was asleep because of the lengthy silence, except for her tiny pleasurable sounds as I stroke her skin.

"So a guy has never—"

Ava cuts me off. "Never."

I wonder if that's typical. I've never been one to talk to my guy friends about sex, so I don't know if everyone's into oral the way I am. Then again, I can't say I'm always into it. I guess it depends on the woman and how much I want to give.

With Ava, I want to give her everything and then more on top of that. I'm already thinking about not just getting her off with my mouth again, but rather how many times I can do it in a row.

Two? Three? I've never tried it, but I'm going to.

Just not now.

I am far too sated and content with her on top of me to do much more than lie in peace.

“You were going to tell me about Baden and Sophie’s backstory,” Ava murmurs.

“It’s a good one,” I muse. “How about you and I climb into bed?”

I don’t give Ava a chance to respond. I lurch up from the couch with her in my arms, amazed that I have strength after that orgasm. I carry her to the master suite and set her just inside the doorway, giving her a tiny push with a pat to her ass. “I’m going to use the guest bathroom. Help yourself to mine.”

Within five minutes, both of us are climbing under my covers, still completely naked, and I turn the bedside lamp off before drawing her into my arms. Ambient light spills through the doorway from the lights I left on in the living room, but I’m too lazy to turn them off.

“How did Baden and Sophie meet?” Ava asks, and I know she’s never going to be prepared for the answer I’m about to give her.

I explain how Sophie was visiting Phoenix and was attacked by three men. Baden jumped in without a thought to his own safety to rescue her and ended up with significant injuries.

Ava gasps when I tell her he was paralyzed, and murmurs words of wonder when I describe his long-haul recovery.

“There was a shot he could’ve played as a goalie again, but the Titans offered him a coaching position, and he decided to take that.”

“And he got up with Sophie when he moved to Pittsburgh?” Ava asks, her breath feathering across my chest.

I’ve never been a big believer in fate, but it does make you think. “Yeah... he checked in on her, and they developed a friendship that turned into more.”

“That’s about the coolest, sweetest, and most romantic story I’ve ever heard.” She snuggles in closer, her hand tightening around my waist. “One would most definitely have to believe in fate at that point.”

Ava yawns, and I struggle not to match it. It’s been a long day filled with major rushes of adrenaline—both winning the game and coming inside of Ava—and I’m suddenly exhausted.

“I’ve got a really busy day tomorrow, plus that executive dinner,” I say, leading into setting up our next date. “I could swing a quick lunch if you come to the arena.”

I can hear the wistfulness in her voice. “That would be nice.”

“The dinner is a once-a-month thing and not something I can get out of.”

Ava stiffens in my arms. “I would never ask you to get out of something like that. And you don’t owe me evenings, Cannon.”

I smile and squeeze her, rubbing her back again to soothe her into relaxation. “I know, I’m just telling you my schedule. The rest of my week is crazy with an away game, then travel back. But I was wondering if you’d be willing to be my date to a Titans’ event on Friday. We’re doing a trunk-or-treat for all the kids.”

“Oh, I love trunk-or-treating,” Ava says, lifting her head. “My parents do a big one for the real estate company every year for all their clients.”

“Well, I don’t know what the hell to do,” I admit. “I’m told it involves costumes and decorating the trunk of my vehicle to hand out candy.”

“Yes, you can go with any number of themes, spooky or fun—it’s whatever you feel like doing—but there must be lots of candy.”

“I guess now would be a good time to ask a favor,” I say with what I hope is a charming tone. “If I gave you my credit

card, would you be willing to buy the decorations and help me dress up my vehicle?”

Ava chuckles and places her head back down on my chest. “Of course. I’d offer to buy the decorations myself, but seeing as how I’m unemployed and all...”

“If you need money—”

Ava cuts me off. “I don’t. And I am more than happy to help you. Just give me a budget, and I’ll get it done.”

“There’s no budget, so go crazy.”

“Are you dressing up?”

Hmm. I know the players are, but I hadn’t really thought about it. Just too busy I guess, but if Ava would help me I could do it.

“I suppose I should. Any ideas? We can dress up as a matching couple. But I’d need you to handle getting those costumes as well.”

“Consider it done,” she says, and there’s no mistaking her enthusiasm.

“After, would you like to go out to dinner and a movie?” I ask.

Ava laughs teasingly. “You actually have time in your schedule for a real date. I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

My hand slides down, and I give her naked butt a slight tap. “Smartass.”

“We can do whatever you want,” Ava says with another yawn, and she snuggles in tighter to me, indicating she wants to sleep.

“Okay.” I twist to press my lips to the top of her head for a kiss. “We’ll figure it out on Friday.”

CHAPTER 13

Ava

IT'S TOO LATE to be worried about it, but I hope the toast doesn't get soggy. I'm building double-decker BLT sandwiches for lunch with Cannon today at the arena. My grocery budget didn't take much of a hit with the lettuce and tomatoes, and I went with a cheaper brand of bacon, but honestly, any crispy bacon is good bacon. I also cut strawberries, and that is the extent of our lunch menu, but I know it'll be perfect for him. He's an easy man to please.

Cannon offered to have lunch delivered, but I wanted to do something nice for him. Not that my food would taste better than what he might have ordered, but I want to show the effort because he's making time in his hectic schedule to see me.

Thirty precious minutes that I'm sure he could be doing something more important.

I stack the layers and lightly spread mayo on the toast slices. I stab the sandwiches with toothpicks to hold them together and cut my stacks into triangles. I'm just pulling out some plastic wrap when my phone rings. It's sitting on my cracked Formica countertop the color of crusty mustard, and I'm pleased to see it's my brother calling. I quickly wipe my hands on a paper towel and connect the call, immediately putting it on speaker so I can continue to work.

"What's up, bro?" I say merrily.

"Just calling to check in," he replies through the crackle of what sounds like a poor Bluetooth connection in his car. He always seems to call me from there. "Although by the tone of your voice, it seems you're happy."

"I'm doing excellent. Where are you headed?"

“I’ve got a house to show over in Wake Forest, then I’m going to meet Kristin for lunch.”

“Things getting serious?” I tease, because he’s been seeing Kristin for about five weeks now, and every time we talk, he mentions her.

“I don’t know,” he hedges, which he also does every time I ask how things are going.

“That’s a rousing endorsement.”

“It is what it is,” he laments without sorrow but mere resignation that his love life isn’t a priority. “You doing okay? How’s the job hunt going?”

“I have a bunch of résumés out. Hopefully, I’ll hear back about some of them this week.” I hesitate to say anything else. I don’t know how Rob would take knowing that I’m seeing someone. Not that I’m rebounding with Cannon, since I haven’t dated anyone in the over six months since I broke up with Derek.

There should be nothing about me seeing Cannon that would bring judgment from my brother. It’s not like he’s averse to me being happy. He just didn’t like me running off after Derek without really knowing him.

“Actually, I’m making lunch to go have with a guy I’ve been dating.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I met him at the coffee shop.”

“Another barista?” Rob’s tone turns fatherly. “You know you can do better than a coffee maker.”

I chuckle as I assemble the other sandwich.

“What’s so funny?” he prods.

“I think this guy is a little more accomplished than a barista.”

There's a silence on the other end. Among the reasons Rob and my parents didn't like Derek, even though he was accomplished, made lots of money, and had an executive position at his company, was that he was also arrogant because of it. I'm sure Rob is having flashbacks of those feelings brought on by me dating someone successful.

"Don't worry," I assure him. "This guy is really nice. Nothing like Derek."

"What does he do?"

I'd kill to be able to switch this to FaceTime and see Rob's face right now. "He's the head coach for the Pittsburgh Titans."

Rob snorts. "And I'm the head cheerleader for the Dallas Cowboys."

I laugh because he thinks I'm joking. He has no clue I'm telling the truth, and I'm not sure I can make him believe me.

"I swear to you on all that is holy, I'm dating Cannon West."

Another long pause as Rob considers what I just said. He knows I would never know the head coach's name for any team, much less the Pittsburgh Titans. Rob is into all sports and I know he will know precisely who Cannon is.

"You're seriously dating Cannon West?" he asks tentatively, sounding like he very much fell down the rabbit hole and is staring at a caterpillar smoking a bong on a mushroom.

How to answer that? We are having sex. We're having meals together. I guess that's dating. "Yes. He used to come into the coffee shop, which is how we met, and he ended up asking me out."

"Before you got fired?" Rob asks.

I don't dare tell him that Cannon is kind of the reason I got fired, so I do a smooth change of subject. "All you need to know is that he is a super nice guy, and I'm enjoying myself."

But it is very, very casual. He is an incredibly busy person, and we're not able to spend a lot of time together."

"Well, that doesn't make me feel any better," Rob drawls. "I want you to be with someone who can give you all his time."

My heart melts. I love that Rob only wants the best for me. "I'm good. I'm not chasing rainbows, nor do I have my head in the clouds. I'm grounded here."

"Fine," he relents. "But could this get serious?"

"I don't know, and until I do, please don't tell Mom and Dad. I don't feel like having them all up in my business about this."

Before my brother can respond, a call comes through and I frown at the unknown number on my screen starting with a 704 area code. And then my heart leaps as it says the city is Charlotte, North Carolina. I don't know anyone or have any friends in Charlotte—the only connection is to that job I applied for a few days ago.

"I gotta take this call, Rob. Talk later." I don't give him a chance to say goodbye before disconnecting and reconnecting to the Charlotte call. "Hello?"

"Hi," a young female voice says, all bright and cheery. "My name is Darcy Calder, and I'm calling from the Shelley Royce Agency."

I set the knife down and squeeze my eyes shut, inhaling a long silent breath before letting it out. "Hi, Darcy."

"Hi," she chirps back. "Ms. Royce asked me to give you a call to see if we could set up a quick Zoom meeting at twelve thirty."

My head spins. I'm supposed to be at the arena at noon for lunch with Cannon, but there is no way I'm going to miss this opportunity. "I can absolutely meet at that time."

"Perfect. I'll send you the link, and Ms. Royce will talk to you then."

“Okay, thank you.”

After I disconnect the call, I battle with my emotions. I’m beyond giddy because Shelley Royce wants to interview me and wants to do it quickly. I just emailed in my résumé the day before yesterday. That has to bode well, right?

But I war with feelings of disappointment that I’m not going to see Cannon today. It was the only time he could fit me in before our trunk-or-treat date at the end of the week.

I know he’ll understand, but I can’t push away the tiny bit of fear that maybe he won’t.

There’s no sense in calling as he’ll be in the middle of a team practice right now, so I shoot him a text: *I’m really sorry to do this, especially on such short notice, but I’m not going to be able to make our lunch date. I got a Zoom interview with that agency in Charlotte at 12:30.*

I hit Send and I don’t expect an immediate reply, but I know he’ll respond when he gets a chance.

As for me, I’ve got to get ready. I’ve already showered, but I still need to do hair and makeup. I consider eating one of the sandwiches to put something in my stomach, but I’m too nervous. Instead, I wrap them up and put them in the refrigerator before heading to my bathroom.



SHELLEY ROYCE IS a bundle of enthusiastic energy combined with polished businesswoman. She looks to be in her early forties with lightly layered, short blond hair cut just to her jawline. Her heart-shaped face boasts the dewiest, most gorgeous complexion I’ve ever seen, and her smile is open and friendly as soon as our meeting link connects.

I’ve never done a Zoom job interview before, and I feel a little silly sitting here smiling at her through my laptop camera.

“Thank you so much for dropping everything to jump on this interview with me,” Shelley effuses, as if I’d just given up

high tea with the King of England. “I have a ton of résumés I’ve been going through, but yours stuck out.”

There’s no stopping the frown that obliterates my smile. I can’t think of one interesting thing on my résumé that would’ve caught her eye.

“I can see by your expression that I’ve flummoxed you,” she says with a laugh.

“It’s just... my résumé is decidedly short on marketing experience,” I say, not that such admission is necessary. She has it right there in front of her.

“The fact you have no working experience in marketing is what caught my eye. You’ve got the right degree, which works well in the HR field, as well as the real estate work you’ve done, but you’ve done no marketing at all, which is kind of what I’m looking for.”

Okay, that’s weird, but I let it go for now. “Full disclosure, if you haven’t figured it out by my last name, the real estate job was working for my parents’ company until I got my first job in HR.”

“I did not make that connection, as your last name isn’t all that uncommon. But thank you for letting me know.”

“I have to say, I’m a little unsure of myself. I truly didn’t think I had a snowball’s chance in hell of getting your attention with my résumé. It’s rather sparse, and I’m young.”

“Exactly,” Shelley says, pointing a finger right at the camera. “It’s actually your lack of experience, coupled with your cover letter, that caught not just my attention but my imagination. You might not have experience to draw from, but you’ve got enthusiasm. You’ve got drive. You aim high, which I respect. You told me right in your cover letter that if I gave you a chance, you would work your butt off for me.”

“And I will,” I say emphatically.

Shelley settles back into her chair and seems to appraise me through the computer screen. “I’m not going to ask you a

bunch of run-of-the-mill questions. I'm very much a think-outside-the-box kind of woman. I've got your résumé here, so I know your history. You and I have the same degree, so I know exactly what you learned in college. I only have one question for you."

I swallow hard because the pressure just intensified tenfold.

"Tell me one thing in your work history that has provided the greatest learning lesson so far in your young life."

Sweat breaks out on my forehead because a lot is riding on one single answer. I could probably tell her about all the responsibility my parents put on me at a young age, because they were confident in my abilities. I could tell her how I worked while doing my undergraduate degree to impress upon her my work ethic.

Instead, I decide to admit something embarrassing because if I'm going to be honest with her, it is by far the greatest learning lesson of my life. "I went into HR because of a man. My boyfriend got me the job, and when he got a job transfer, I followed him from Raleigh to Pittsburgh. It was a bad decision. And because of that bad decision, I found myself without a job, without a boyfriend, and without a home to live in. I had put all my eggs in one basket, and I'll never do that again."

Shelley's eyebrows rise and she leans forward, crossing her forearms on her desk. Her attention is rapt as I continue.

"I had the option of going home. My family would have been more than thrilled to welcome me back into the business. But I wanted to try to do something on my own, and through the advice of a friend I've recently met, I decided to look for a job in the field I really want to work in."

"Marketing," Shelley says.

I nod and smile. "Yes, marketing. It's what I envisioned doing when I graduated from college, but instead, I got

knocked off my path by following a man who was not good for me.”

Shelley nods in stoic understanding. “Every woman has a story like that. Did you learn from it?”

“I did.” I glance over at the box of plastic wrap sitting on the counter, all that’s left of my canceled lunch date with Cannon, then back to Shelley. “I learned that having a good career is important. I have to follow my dreams and not the dreams of someone else. I know that I might not be able to have everything I want, but that I should make sure I have the thing I need most. And I really want this job, Ms. Royce.”

“I’m inclined to give it to you just for telling me that story,” Shelley says, and my heart about leaps out of my chest. “Would you be willing to relocate to Charlotte?”

I try to hold my voice steady because I knew this would come up. “Your job listing said that the position could be remote. I really would like to stay in the Pittsburgh area if I can, but if that’s a deal breaker, I’ll come to Charlotte.”

My pulse races as I wait for her response, because truly, it’s not Pittsburgh I’m attached to, but Cannon. So much for telling her I need to focus on my career and not let a man change my course.

Shelley waves a hand dismissively. “It absolutely can be a remote position. I run my business out of my home, and my other employees work from theirs. I just like to get together with my team, so it would require some travel to Charlotte, probably at least once a quarter.”

“I can do that.” And in my mind, I start figuring out how much money I’ll need to save for a plane ticket, or I could just drive. That’s not a major worry though.

“I have some other interviews to do for this position. I plan on making my decision by the end of the week.”

My heart sinks. I had thought by the very nature of her setting this Zoom meeting so quickly, I was a shoo-in. But I plaster a brilliant, professional smile on and say, “Thank you

so much for this opportunity. If you feel like there's anything else I can do to assure you I'm the right person for the job, please let me know."

"I will. And I need to check references. I'm going to assume your parents will give me a glowing one on your behalf. But do you anticipate anything bad from your former company? It didn't sound like you left on good terms."

I shake my head. "I worked in a different division than my ex, under a supervisor who was very happy with my work. All my reviews were spectacular, so I'm confident you can call her for a recommendation."

And I throw up a small prayer that Derek hasn't passed word down to sabotage me.

"Outstanding. I'll reach out to them today. It was a pleasure talking to you, Ava."

"Thank you again for the opportunity."

"I'll let you know one way or the other by end of business on Friday."

When we disconnect, I'm so excited I don't know what to do with myself. I could call my parents or Rob, but the one person I want to talk to is Cannon, and I don't want to interrupt him or seem overly needy.

I'll just send him a text and apologize again for missing lunch. As for Rob and my parents, I'll wait until I know if I have a job.

Unlocking my phone, I see that Cannon texted me back from my last one canceling lunch. *While I'm bummed not to see you, I'm incredibly excited about the opportunity. Let me know how it goes.*

That was sweet. I hadn't expected a reply, and all that tells me is that I've taken Cannon's words deeply to heart. I'm translating his lack of time to a lack of ability to give me anything. I'm setting my expectations very low so I'm not disappointed.

I text him back. *Just finished with interview. It went really good. I'll know by end of week.* I hesitate before sending it, but then decide to throw it out there. *I'm bummed about lunch too and can't wait to see you Friday.*

CHAPTER 14

Cannon

I GLANCE AT my watch and then back to Gage. “I’ve got to get going. I’m meeting with Camden in a few minutes.”

Gage settles back into his office chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “Are you going to tell him about the trade?”

I’m standing in the doorway to Gage’s office, having just stopped by to say hello. We got sidetracked talking about some potential line switches for tomorrow’s game in Quebec. “Yeah... I’m going to give him a heads-up. I don’t want him caught off guard.”

Today’s been a busy day already and we haven’t even reached noon. I watched video this morning, followed by a team practice. Later we’re having a full team meeting to discuss tomorrow night’s game which is going to be tough as the Royals are holding the number one spot in our conference.

“Let me know what you find out,” Gage says. My primary purpose in talking to Camden isn’t about the trade but to try to uncover why he’s seemed so off. “Also, let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“You bet.”

I leave Gage’s office and walk the fifteen feet down to mine, once again looking at my watch. Camden will be here in a few minutes, and our conversation has the potential to go a little longer than my schedule allows. I’ve got a twelve-thirty lunch date with Ava, and I need to let her know I might be running a few minutes late.

After I’m seated at my desk, I pull out my phone to shoot her a quick text. Instead, I see that she’s sent me one. *I’m really*

sorry to do this, especially on such short notice, but I'm not going to be able to make our lunch date. I got a Zoom interview with that agency in Charlotte at 12:30.

Well, shit.

That fucking sucks.

I quickly text her back that I understand and try to put it out of my mind. But damn it... I was really looking forward to seeing her. I know it was only going to be for a short time, and we would be hunched over my desk eating whatever she was bringing, but it was the only time I'd see her for a few days.

My thumbs hover over my phone, wondering if I should text more. Should I say that I'll miss her?

It doesn't seem right, even if I feel it.

Goddamn, this whole thing with her is becoming confusing.

The knock on my door draws my hand from my phone, and I look up to see Camden.

At twenty-five, he's a seasoned second-line defenseman. He came straight into the league at eighteen and has played with Pittsburgh the entire time, although he started with one of our minor league teams. He was one of The Lucky Three, missing that plane trip because of a minor knee injury.

When I first came to Pittsburgh, I spent a lot of time talking to Callum Derringer and the assistant coaches to get a handle on how the three men were doing emotionally, because hockey is as much a mental game as physical. Everyone knew that Coen Highsmith wasn't managing things well, as he was often in the news for bad behavior. Camden seemed able to deal with it with almost an old man's wisdom, talking about fate being out of his hands. By all accounts, he's a happy-go-lucky guy and a favorite among the new players. When he's on the ice, he gives it his all.

But even with all this effort, he's just... off. He's young, skillful, and in shape, so I know it's not his endurance. This only leads me to believe that maybe his head isn't in the game.

“Come on in, buddy. Take a seat.”

Camden lowers himself into one of the chairs across from my desk. He’s changed out of his hockey gear, showered (as evidenced by the damp hair), and is back in street clothes. Like the other players, he’ll grab lunch somewhere close by or take advantage of the buffet in the team room and be back by two for our team meeting.

I take a good long look at Camden, and I can see on his face that he’s nervous. As a coach, I could use this knowledge to my advantage, but I don’t believe in leading through fear or intimidation. So I immediately put him at ease. “Nothing for you to worry about with this meeting. Just a heads-up I wanted to share.”

Camden’s eyebrows rise. “What’s that?”

“We’re working on a potential trade deal to bring Bain Hillridge to the team.” I don’t offer any details as that’s confidential at this point.

“If it goes through, who will take the first-line position?” he asks.

I’m not one to sugarcoat things. “Bain.”

I let that sink in for a moment. Camden was a potential choice to move into that position once we sent Nolan to the Vengeance. “You’re qualified for that first-line position, but you’ve been off since the start of the season. Your numbers aren’t what they were last year, and Bain is performing better. I think you have the ability to battle for that position if you want it, but I need to know if there’s anything I can do to help you get your focus back.”

Camden’s gaze slides, and I use that opportunity to push a little harder. “Is it the crash? You need any help with that?”

Camden shakes his head, eyes snapping back to mine. “It’s not that. Just some family stuff I have going on. It’s fair to say my focus has taken a hit.”

“What can I do to help?” I ask, the main reason for this meeting. How can I effectuate some positive change for him?

Clasping his hands, he says, “I’m good. I’m dealing, and I’ll get it under control.”

He doesn’t say anything else, and I’m not going to push. He’s an adult and I have to assume he’ll do what’s necessary. I’ve made my offer, and I think Camden knows me well enough to know that my help’s a standing offer.

“Okay, then.” I stand from my desk, indicating the meeting is over, and reach out for a handshake. Camden looks relieved, likely because I could’ve browbeaten him and tried to pick until I got to the crux of his story. “I’ll see you at the team meeting.”

Although I’ll still be keeping a close eye on him.

“Thanks, Coach.”

When I’m alone, I sit back in my chair and heave a sigh. I wonder how Ava’s job interview is going. There’s a good possibility that it could lead to her moving away sooner rather than later. I’m not crazy about the headspace this puts me in... I haven’t felt like this about anyone since Melissa.

I didn’t shy away from telling Ava the truth about past relationships. I’ve had two monogamous relationships with women that I would’ve considered somewhat serious. Serious in that they lasted a moderate amount of time. One was eight months, and the other was almost a year and a half.

But ultimately, they faltered. I just couldn’t give enough of myself. They wanted love and marriage and children. Those were three things I could not offer, and the relationships ended. I think back to those times and ask myself what I would do if one of them had gotten a job offer in another state.

I don’t have to think hard to know I wouldn’t have done anything. I’m not even sure I would’ve been disappointed. I would have simply moved on, like I always do.

It doesn't sit well with me that I'm already invested in feelings for Ava, and that the fact she's on a job interview causes unease within me.

The easy way out would be to cut it off with her right now. Ava has the ability to make me want to care a lot more than I've ever been willing to explore.

But the easy route has never been the path I've been interested in, and I'm not ready to give this up yet. There's a chance she won't get the job, and until such time as she might leave Pittsburgh, I would like to keep striving to spend as much time with Ava as I can.

Whether it turns into something like my past relationships, I can't say. Will Ava want something more than I can offer, and if she does, will I be willing to cede? My past experience tells me it's way too complicated and way too early in the game to be worrying about such things.

My stomach rumbles, and I realize I haven't eaten anything since scrambled eggs at my house this morning. I open one of my desk drawers intent on pulling out a protein bar, as I keep a handful around for just such emergencies.

But my phone rings and my eyes go to the screen, hoping it's Ava to tell me the job interview is over and she wasn't offered the position. Thinking that makes me a complete shit, but I don't dwell on it because it's not Ava calling.

It's Melissa's mom, Connie.

I hate the way my stomach pitches over seeing her name. I hate myself for wanting to ignore it, because I've got the perfect excuse of being a very busy head coach of a professional hockey team.

But I do my duty.

"Hey, Connie." My voice is gentle because I know every single conversation with her has to be done with kid gloves.

She snuffles into the phone, and her voice is watery. "Oh, Cannon. How are we going to get through next week?"

I hate these fucking calls. I'm not an insensitive man, and I have all the sympathy in the world for Connie. Melissa was her only daughter, and she simply hasn't recovered from her death.

What's worse is she carries on our relationship acting as if I haven't recovered from it either.

Or I suspect, at times, she knows I've recovered, but she does not want me to move on. By staying behind with her, mired in bleak grief, she has companionship.

It's now time for me to walk a tightrope, balancing Connie's feelings with staying true to myself.

"I don't suppose November fourth is ever going to be an easy day for us," I say with sympathy.

That's the truth. No matter how well I've handled my grief and moved forward with my life, November fourth will always be the worst day of any year because that's the day Melissa finally let go and died in my arms.

We are exactly one week from the anniversary, and Connie is already spinning out of control.

"I was driving by Milner Lake the other day and it just broke my heart," Connie reminisces. "All the times you two would hang out there in the summer. I remember the day you got engaged... that look on Missy's face when you got down on one knee was priceless. You were at the end of the dock with the sun setting behind her..."

I close my eyes and settle back into my chair, listening to Connie recount the memories. Melissa and I dated all through high school, and I spent a lot of time over at her house. Connie and Andrew Waite became second parents to me. I invited them to be there when I proposed, along with my parents. I loved them. They were going to be my parents through marriage, so I wanted them to share in the joy.

"... so I went in," she continues, having sunk deeper into her sadness, "and rearranged the furniture in her room. It made me feel close to her."

Melissa was twenty-seven when she died, and we'd been married and living together for six years, but Connie never changed her bedroom.

Now it's a shrine.

"Cannon... I know how difficult this time is for you. I know how hard you try to move on, and I know you're having the same struggles that I am. Just know I'm here for you because you're still like a son to me."

I take in a shaky breath. Connie lives in a fantasy land. I am not struggling to move on, and the anniversary of Melissa's death will not send me into an abyss of grief next Wednesday.

That's not to say I didn't have debilitating grief after she died. There were weeks where I was beyond lost on how to escape the pain, then things gradually got better.

I most certainly moved on because every person in my life who loved me—friends, family, teammates—wanted me to move on. I choose not to stay in the darkness, and I do that by focusing on the very special memories we had together. That's particularly so because Melissa and I didn't have a very good marriage in the end.

Yes, I'll be sad next week, and the day will be tough... but it won't debilitate me like it will Connie.

I take a moment when she pauses and attempt to change the subject. "What's Andrew been up to?"

Connie sighs with exasperation. "Oh, you know him... traveling all over the country taking depositions. I think it's an excuse to get away from the pain, but we all grieve differently."

My heart breaks she doesn't have her husband to lean on. I would never in a million years tell Connie this, but I'm quite sure Andrew travels so much to keep some distance from his wife. Like me, he's been able to process his grief in a healthy way, but he's had a tremendously difficult time dealing with a wife who can't move on. Frankly, I'm surprised Andrew has not divorced her, but maybe guilt keeps him there.

I know all about guilt keeping you in a marriage. I could write a fucking book about it.

“Listen, Connie... I hate to cut this short, but I’ve got a team meeting I have to get to. Would you like me to call you later tonight?”

Connie snuffles again. “Oh, you don’t have to. I know you’re busy.”

“I’ll call you tonight,” I promise her. I won’t enjoy it, but I’ll do it. It’s part of the continual commitment I have to Melissa to not leave her parents behind.

“Oh, that would be wonderful, Cannon. I was going to pull out picture albums and look at them tonight. We’ll have some good memories to talk about.”

I smile into the phone because that actually sounds nice. I never mind talking about the good memories of Melissa and hopefully Connie will be able to keep it to that. But deep down, I know she’s going to end up losing control, and I’ll end up listening to her pouring out her grief to probably the only person who will still listen.

Unfortunately, by letting this go on for so long—letting Connie use me as a sponge for her melancholy—I haven’t been able to tell her my true feelings. It would kill her to know that I left that part of my life behind.

Not just Melissa, but my hockey career, and the almost daily fights we’d have over said hockey career. I left behind the months where I took care of Melissa, and I most certainly let go of the horror of watching someone you love die.

Connie would probably have a heart attack if she knew how bad our marriage had become before Melissa got sick, but it might help ground her in reality. It’s a fucking mess, and while I’ve had plenty of counseling to help me process my feelings over losing my wife, I have no clue how to handle Connie’s, so I just sit and listen when she needs to talk.

CHAPTER 15

Ava

I JOLT FROM the knock on my apartment door and move swiftly from the fretting that's turned me into a tight bundle of nerves.

Cannon is here, and this provokes a variety of feelings for more than one reason.

It's been two days since we've seen each other, and I've been spending a little too much time thinking about him. Every passing hour seems to double the excitement. I've relished every tiny stolen moment, making me yearn for the next.

On the downside, I'm horrified that he insisted on picking me up for our trunk-or-treat date, which means he's going to see where I live. My ratty dump of an apartment makes me feel like I'm not good enough for someone like him, in turn chipping away at the confidence he's been helping me rebuild. I know this is silly, but it is what it is.

Mostly, though, I'm practically tingling from the inside out with the amazing news I want to share with him because I just learned it myself five minutes ago and he's the first I'll tell.

I move to the door quickly and open it.

"Holy shit," Cannon says as his eyes roam all over, taking in my Dorothy costume. "You look amazing."

"I got the job," I blurt out.

Cannon's gaze snaps from my sparkly red shoes up to my eyes. "The one in Charlotte?"

I nod, feeling slightly maniacal in my excitement. It's a good job, and it helps assuage the feelings of inadequacy I

have over my crummy apartment and unemployed status. “And best of all, she’ll let me work remotely.”

Something weird flickers over Cannon’s expression, but I can’t ferret out what it means because he crashes into me. Hands to my head, mouth slamming onto mine, his body walking me backward until he has me pushed against the tiny wall next to my broom closet.

“I didn’t think you’d be this excited about the job.” I laugh as his lips tickle along my jaw.

Cannon lifts his mouth just enough to mumble, “Happy about the job, but I’ve been thinking of doing this for the last two days, and I can’t wait a second longer.”

His lips are back on mine, and I fall into the pleasure of it. When I feel him hiking up my dress, though, it snaps me out of the daze of lust he’s put me in, and I twist my neck to break the kiss.

“Cannon,” I gasp as his lips simply move to my neck. “We don’t have time. We’ve got to get to the arena and decorate your car.”

My words bounce right off him. His hand slides up my leg, under my dress, and his fingers snake down the front of my panties, which are white cotton to match my ankle socks. I figured he would see that later and consider it a nice virginal, sexy detail.

“There’s always time for this,” he murmurs as he sinks a long finger into me. I groan as my hips buck against him.

While I think I’ll die if Cannon pulls his hand away, I also know we are running against a serious time issue. It was the basis of my argument we had earlier when Cannon insisted on picking me up. I knew we’d be in a time crunch if he came from the arena to get me, merely to drive us both back there. I argued it would be much better for me to meet him there, but I’m beginning to think he had this all planned out to have this bit of intimate time alone.

“Kids,” I gasp as he pulls his finger out before sinking it back in again. “We have kids waiting on us. We don’t have time for sex.”

“I’m not going to fuck you, Ava.” Cannon lifts his head and peers down at me. “Just going to get you off. Then we can go.”

“Oh God,” I moan.

Cannon is absolutely correct. It doesn’t take any time at all to bring me to a quick orgasm with his masterful fingers between my legs and dirty words whispered in my ear. My head falls to his chest where I shudder out my relief. Cannon rubs the back of my neck, soothing me.

He pulls his hand out of my panties and lifts my chin to place a chaste kiss on my mouth.

“I think you better show me my costume and let’s load up my car. I’m goddamn horny as hell, and I need to get my mind on something else.”

I tilt my head, a sympathetic smile on my face. “Well, that’s just not going to do. I cannot leave you in that type of pain.”

My hand goes to his erection, straining against his pants. He’s in what I consider his work uniform of khakis and a long-sleeve purple polo bearing the Titans’ logo. His chest and arms fill out the shirt nicely, and his pants don’t leave a lot of room for his hard cock.

Cannon hums as I squeeze him. “Fuck yes,” he mutters as I work his zipper open to release him. We definitely don’t have time to get naked for sex, but I am up to the challenge of getting Cannon off just as fast as he did me.

I start to lower onto my knees, but Cannon takes hold of my arm. “Wait a minute.”

He leans over, nabs a pillow I’d bought at Target to brighten up the dingy couch, and drops it to the ground at my

feet with a grin. “Don’t want you to bruise those pretty knees with you wearing a dress and all.”

“You’re so sweet,” I say as I drop down, still holding him in my hand. I look up, the end of his dick hovering before my mouth.

“Jesus... I’m never going to be able to watch the *Wizard of Oz* again and not get a hard-on for Dorothy.”

I’m going to make sure of that.

I lick Cannon from base to tip, taking much satisfaction when his palm slaps against the wall as if to hold himself up. I then take him into my mouth, and oh God... the taste of him and the animalistic sound he makes shoots a pang of need between my legs.

Moving on him with hollowed cheeks and my hand working counterstrokes, I have Cannon making noises I’ve never heard before. One of his hands wraps around one of my braids, and he tugs at it playfully.

I glance up and almost combust over the lust in his eyes as he stares down at me. It makes me feel powerful, and while I have no desire to bring this man metaphorically to his knees, I want to give him the ultimate pleasure.

Closing my eyes, I concentrate on the feel of him in my mouth, the way he begs me to go faster one moment and slow the next, how his hips thrust into me.

“Ava,” Cannon croaks, and I can tell he’s about ready to warn me to pull off. I merely suck on him hard, put one hand to his ass to hold him close, and issue a tiny growl of warning that he better stay right where he is.

That’s all it takes before he comes with a strangled grunt, and I swallow the flow of his release with my eyes closed and a hum of approval.

“Christ, you’re perfect,” Cannon mutters as he hauls me up and kisses me swiftly. Leaning back, he grins. “Better go fix your lipstick, Dorothy.”

Laughing, I pull away from him. “Better zip up your pants, Lion.”

“Lion?” he asks as he tucks himself away.

I grab a bag from my kitchen table and pull out his costume, tossing it toward him.

Cannon grimaces as he shakes it out, and I put my hand to my mouth to keep from laughing.

“I’m the Cowardly Lion?” he asks as he eyeballs it.

“They only had the Cowardly Lion or a flying monkey left.”

“I think I would have liked the monkey better,” he mutters. “Jesus, Ava... it looks like a huge onesie pajama. Like that pink bunny one in *A Christmas Story*.”

I lose it because he’s not wrong. It’s fuzzy with loads of mane fur around the head and big, floppy lion paws. I got it because it was ridiculous, and I knew Cannon would find it hilarious.

“It’s perfectly you,” I say.

His eyes cut to me, and the faux disdain melts away. “Yeah... I kind of dig it. But not sure I’d be this magnanimous if Dorothy didn’t just give me the best blow job ever.”

Cannon puts it back in the bag. “I’ll put it on at the arena after we decorate the car. It’s too bulky.”

“Okay. I really do need to fix my lipstick, and God only knows what my hair looks like.” I start to turn for my bathroom but freeze as I notice Cannon finally taking a good long look at my apartment. I just let the man finger me to an orgasm and then come in my mouth—you’d think I wouldn’t have anything to be embarrassed about. But I find myself apologizing. “This place is a dump. I’m so sorry.”

I squat to pick up the pillow, put it on the couch, and fluff it as if it will make this place miraculously look like a home from *Architectural Digest*.

Cannon takes my wrist and pulls me straight to him. “What’s all this?”

“Nothing. I just... my apartment is crappy, and I’m embarrassed.”

“But why?”

I shrug, gaze falling from his. “I guess it’s sort of an indication of how far I fell chasing the wrong man.”

“Hey,” Cannon says gently, causing my eyes to drift up to meet his. “This apartment isn’t an indication of how far you fell. It shows how resilient you are. You could have run home, been sitting by Mom and Dad’s pool sipping margaritas, but you chose to stick it out to prove to everyone you’re one badass woman.”

“Really?” I ask, hating the hopeful need in the words.

“Really,” he assures me before pressing his lips to my forehead. His hand then slaps my ass hard, and he’s pushing me toward the bathroom. “Now go finish getting ready so we can get to the arena.”

CHAPTER 16

Cannon

I KNOW I should feel foolish in this Cowardly Lion costume, but I don't. Big and baggy, and the only part of me showing is my face from an actual cutout in the hood. The four paws are disproportionately large, and I have to pick up my legs a little higher when walking so I don't trip. And best of all—although annoying—the tail curves upward with sturdy wire so it waves when I walk, continually catching my attention from my peripheral vision and startling me. Ava is a whiz with makeup and painted a nose and whiskers on me in no time. When all was said and done, I admittedly looked ridiculous, but cute.

We decorated the trunk of my BMW with fake cobwebs and spiders and placed a huge bowl of candy inside. On the ground to one side of my trunk sits a mechanical witch with her cauldron and to the right some papier-mâché tombstones. Ava also strung the perimeter with flashing orange lights and hooked up a Bluetooth speaker that plays howling wolves, groaning monsters, creaking doors, and cackling witches.

Despite the amazing setup, she then lamented that she wished she'd had time to go with an entire *Wizard of Oz* theme, but I personally prefer the spooky Halloween version of my car.

While decorating, I've been able to introduce Ava to various players who are participating in the trunk-or-treat. It's mostly the single guys since those with kids will be on the receiving end, and they're really getting into the mood with their costumes.

I have to say it's fun watching the interplay between Ava and those I'm introducing her to. Because I'm new to the Titans, no one knows anything about my personal life other

than I'm not currently married. So I'm getting a kick out of the looks of surprise when I introduce her as my girlfriend.

I struggled for all of two seconds about what to call her when I first introduced her to Baden and Sophie, but quickly realized that calling her just a friend wasn't even close to the truth.

If Ava thought the title inappropriate, she didn't say anything as we worked to prepare the trunk.

In addition to Baden and Sophie, I introduced her to Coen and his girlfriend Tillie; Gage and his girlfriend Jenna; and a host of the single players, including Hendrix, Boone, Camden, and Kirill, all dressed as Power Rangers.

I think Ava might have been overwhelmed by it all because she wasn't her normal outgoing self that I've observed. I've watched her charm and hold conversations with strangers at The Grind, and she doesn't have a shy bone in her body.

So it was obvious she was a little uneasy when I made introductions. She was bright and cordial, but she didn't engage past that. Of course, there wasn't much room to sit around and talk as everybody was scrambling to decorate their cars.

I survey the two rows of cars with open trunks facing each other—it looks like seventeen in all—and most everyone is done. We're using a walled-off portion of the players' parking lot not accessible to the public.

Ava is still fussing with the spiderweb when a woman with a clipboard who's been walking around and making sure things are organized calls out, "Ten minutes until showtime."

This event is only for the children of members of the organization. Not just players but anybody employed by the Titans, which includes hundreds of people. For the next hour, kids will be hopping among our decorated trunks to fill up their treat bags. We're running it from four to five p.m. so they can then go trick-or-treating in their own neighborhoods tonight.

Ava sighs, pulls a spider off one portion of web, and moves it to another. Frankly, it looks no better to me.

I pat her on the back with my big paw. “You okay?”

She glances back at me. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

I turn and settle on the edge of the trunk, pushing into her space. My paws make it too difficult to cross my arms over my chest or even place them on my hips, so I let them rest on my thighs. “It looks like you were a little overwhelmed meeting everybody.”

“I guess it’s a lot to take in,” she admits as she moves to sit beside me. “You just introduced me to some of the most famous people in this city. They’re all local heroes. Most people never get to meet one professional hockey player, and here I am, meeting practically the entire team.”

Chuckling, I bump her shoulder with mine. “You know I’m top dog, right? Head coach and all. If I don’t make you nervous, no one should.”

She rolls her eyes. “I just want your team to like me *because you are* the head coach. A good and happy coach means a good and happy team. I don’t want to be a Yoko Ono or people thinking I’m a distraction.”

I snort. “You’re no Yoko Ono, and I seriously doubt people are wondering about those things when they meet you.”

Ava’s face turns toward me, her expression serious. “No, but they are looking at you as a widower. Maybe they think you’re vulnerable or not in a position to date. It’s a lot of pressure.”

That gives me pause and I can’t disagree. People tend to define me as a widower even if I don’t. “Enough pressure to make you want to run?”

Thankfully, I’m rewarded with the bright Ava smile I’ve become used to. She shakes her head. “I am quite sure I’ll get through the nervousness. I’m not running.”

I grin. “I’d like to pull you into my arms and kiss you right now, but these big paws will get in the way.”

“How about I come to you, then?” she murmurs as she angles toward me. Her lips are soft upon mine, and she pulls back far too quickly, intent on only giving me the tiniest taste.

I’m more adept with these massive furry paws than I thought because I have her up off the edge of the trunk and one of them at the back of her head to kiss her hard.

She tries to push away, and I laugh against her mouth. “Are you afraid of a little PDA?”

“I wasn’t sure if you were into that sort of thing,” she whispers, her lips against mine. I feel them curve into a smile just before I pull back.

“I’m into all kinds of things when it comes to you,” I assure as my arms fall away to allow space between us. “You and I got hot and heavy very fast. It’s going to be a shock for some people that we’re dating, but just remember... we are, in fact, dating.”

“Got it,” she says, and to my surprise clutches the front of my costume and pulls me to her for another kiss.

A coughing sound pops our little bubble, and Ava jerks back from me. I turn my head lazily to see Brienne Norcross standing there, and for a moment, I’m struck absolutely dumb.

She’s dressed as Hela from the movie *Thor: Ragnarok*. And when I say she’s dressed like her, I mean her costume looks like it came straight from the movie’s costume department. She’s wearing a black wig with silver streaks and heavy eye makeup, and if you didn’t know any better, you might mistake her for Cate Blanchett.

“You going to introduce me?” she asks with a grin, her eyes cutting to Ava.

“Absolutely I am, but I have to say, your costume looks so authentic, I wouldn’t be surprised if you told me this was the original from the film.”

Brienne laughs. “Jenna found it for me. I don’t even know who in the hell I’m supposed to be.”

How could she not know who Hela is? Before I can educate her on the Marvel universe, she extends her hand to Ava. “Hi... I’m Brienne Norcross.”

“Ava Cavanaugh,” she says as they shake.

“I’m the owner of the Titans,” Brienne adds.

“I’m an unemployed barista,” Ava quips, and both ladies laugh. It’s just the icebreaker Ava needed.

I slip my arm around Ava’s waist and pull her into me, one fat paw resting on her opposite hip. “Ava was working at the coffee shop I used to frequent but she’s starting a new job soon in marketing.”

Brienne’s gaze cuts back and forth between us, a smile softening the hard angles of the expertly applied makeup. “You met at a coffee shop? That’s seriously the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I went in just about every day because I thought she was pretty, and I wanted to talk to her. I tried flirting, but apparently my skills weren’t that great. It took a lot longer than it should have to get the nerve to ask her on a date.”

“But here you are,” Brienne quips.

“Here we are,” I agree.

Turning to Ava, my boss says, “It was a pleasure meeting you, and I’d love for you to join me in the owner’s box at the next home game. I’m sure Cannon has a great ticket for you but come hang out with me instead.”

Ava looks at me with uncertainty, because I hadn’t had a chance to tell her that I do have a ticket for her. In fact, I’ve got one for all the home games. “You should enjoy the game in the box with Brienne. It’s a gorgeous view, and you’ll have great food and liquor.”

“Plus, you can keep me from becoming bored with some of the businessmen who will be there wanting five minutes of my time to discuss some deal.”

“Um...,” Ava drawls slowly, glancing at me one more time before accepting. “I’d love to. Thank you.”

“Awesome. I’ll have a badge for you at will call, and they’ll have someone escort you up. Now, I better get back to my table. I’m helping with pumpkin carving and crafts.”

Brienne glides off, and the woman with the clipboard says, “Places, everyone. We’re opening the gates.”

I manage one more kiss with Ava and then we’re busy greeting the kids as well as their parents, many of whom I don’t know yet, since my dealings with the administrative side of the organization have been nominal so far.

Just as Ava and I are saying goodbye to a little girl dressed as a fairy, three boys come up and yell, “Trick-or-treat!”

“Now, there’s trouble,” I announce as I take in Colby, Jake, and Tanner McGinn—our goalie Drake’s kids. They’re with his sister, Kiera, who’s dressed as Harley Quinn. I make a quick introduction between her and Ava, who then turns to dump candy in the boys’ bags.

“Where’s Drake?” I ask.

Kiera nods to the right, and I see he’s standing at the craft table, talking to Brienne.

“Did they coordinate that?” I ask in shock, noting that Drake is in a Thor costume that looks every bit as real as Brienne’s.

“They didn’t,” Kiera says with a laugh, “but damn if they don’t look like they both stepped off a movie set.”

“Well, Drake does look just like Thor with the long blond hair and beard,” I point out.

I return my attention to the boys. I’ve met them on a few occasions since they arrived in Pittsburgh three weeks ago.

Drake's new to the team, same as me, and he's a single dad. His sister, Kiera, moved here to Pittsburgh to help care for them when he travels.

"Let's see," I muse as I look at their costumes. "We have a rough-and-tumble cowboy, a brave fireman, and what looks to be a future Titans' goalie?"

"What are you supposed to be?" Colby asks, his cowboy hat just a tad big for him.

"The Cowardly Lion," I lament, bringing my paws up to my face and pretending to hide. I peek through the mitts and see that Colby just blinks at me, unimpressed.

Ava steps into the conversation, giving my shoulder a little pat before bending over to get closer to Colby. "You see, he wasn't born with any courage. So that means he's afraid of all kinds of things. For example, those guns in your holsters probably have him a little on edge. Maybe if you reassured him that you're harmless, he might relax a little."

Colby's eyes alight with mischief. He rests his hands on his toy guns, and in a spot-on Texas drawl, says, "It's okay, Lion... I won't shoot you unless you try to eat people."

"I could never do that," I assure him, although I absolutely have plans to devour Ava after this is over.

For a solid hour, it's nonstop kids and candy. Surprisingly, Ava seems in her element as she explains who she is to those who've never seen *The Wizard of Oz*, engaging in one-on-one conversations with the little humans. She asks questions about their costumes, their favorite candy, and who has been their favorite trunk so far. With the little girls, it's resoundingly Gage and Jenna, who are Cinderella and Prince Charming. I have no clue how Gage pulled it off, but he rented a carriage that looks like it's ready to take them to the ball. There aren't horses attached, but it's magical enough that all the kids get to climb in for pictures.

The boys all loved the Power Rangers, and I've been watching the guys ham it up with the kids.

A slight twinge of sadness hits me. Not only are the kids having a great time, but their parents are too. I thought I'd have this one day with Melissa, and early on in our marriage we often talked about the day we'd start trying for a baby.

As the marriage deteriorated, though, those talks became fewer and further between until kids weren't a dream for us anymore. Sometimes I think it's a blessing that we didn't because I would never want them to have suffered the death of their mom.

"There goes the last one," Ava says as we watch a little boy of only about three, wearing a Spider-Man costume, being carried by his dad, one of the team's assistant equipment managers.

"We have any candy left?" I ask as I glance into the trunk.

"Nope... I gave Spider-Man the last of it."

"You didn't save us any?" I tease, loosening the tie of the lion's head hood under my throat and pushing it backward off me. "Christ, that thing is hot."

Ava snickers at me. "Give me your paws."

I hold out my arms, and she takes the big mitts off and throws them in the trunk. "You were such a good sport."

"Maybe next year I'll be Khal Drogo and you can be Daenerys." And as soon as the words are out, I wish they were back in my mouth. I have no business even assuming we'll be together a year from now, but Ava laughs and turns toward the trunk to start removing the decorations.

I'm still digging the Dorothy outfit and looking forward to peeling her out of it later. We're back on borrowed time because the team is leaving on an extended road trip. Two games in Los Angeles and another in Houston before we head back, taking the entire first week of November.

While I can go without sex and often do because I'm not the type to go prowling like some of the players, the thought of spending next week in an empty bed doesn't sit well.

More specifically, the thought of spending next week in a bed without Ava seems mighty lacking.

I move next to Ava, reaching into my trunk to wind up the LED lights while she works on the webbing. “What do you think about coming on the road trip with me next week?”

Ava turns slowly to me, a frown on her face. “Why?”

I roll my eyes as my arms go around her waist. I tug her into me, our faces close. “Stolen moments, remember? That’s what we get, and we can have a huge stolen moment next week if you come. Your job is remote so you can work in our hotel room while I do my thing with the team. You can come to the games. We can fuck all night after.”

A small smile graces her lips and she pats my chest. “That sounds like an incredible stolen moment, but I can’t.”

“Why not?” I lean in and nuzzle her neck, catching the Power Ranger players walking by with smirks on their faces. I’ve probably freaked them out by bringing a woman to a team event, then showing affection with ease.

“Because I can’t afford to go. I barely have enough money to keep me in ramen noodles until my next paycheck, and well... frankly, I was going to use this next week you’re gone as a cost-saving measure, since even driving into the city to see you is costing me too much in gas.”

I jolt in shock, my arms falling away from her. “What?”

Ava sighs as she drops her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. She closes her eyes briefly before opening them as her hand falls away. Her expression is apologetic. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have dumped that on you, but I’ve got to sort of buckle down for the next few weeks until I can get my first paycheck. Stan didn’t pay all that great at the coffee shop, and I pretty much lived hand to mouth. Unfortunately, there’s been nothing in my hand the last week as my final paycheck was only for three days of work, and Stan hasn’t sent it yet.”

“Jesus, Ava,” I growl, partly angry at her but more so at Stan. “Why didn’t you tell me? I would have given you—”

Ava's hand covers my mouth, effectively shutting me up. "I depended on a man to provide me with the basics of a roof over my head and a job. I'm never going to do that again."

Encircling her wrist, I pull her hand away. "I'd never let you depend on me. I'm merely offering temporary help. Hell, consider it a loan if you're too proud to take any money, and pay me back with interest. But I sure as shit don't want you eating ramen until you get paid."

A smile curves Ava's lips, and she leans in to give me a soft kiss. "Thank you. That's sweet, but I'm fine, I promise."

She tries to pull her hand away, but I clamp tighter. "Fine. You've got things handled. That still doesn't mean you can't come on the road trip with me."

Ava cocks an eyebrow. "If I can't afford anything but ramen, I sure as hell can't afford a trip."

"That's true... but hear me out. We have stolen moments, right?"

She nods.

"And we should make the most of them."

"Agreed," she says cautiously.

"Then you have to take this opportunity—"

"I can't afford—"

This time my free hand covers *her* mouth. "There's nothing to afford. You'll be in my hotel room, and I'll pay for your meals and your airline ticket."

Ava tries to speak under my hand, and I can imagine her argument. *That's still giving me money, and I don't want to be indebted to you.*

I cut off her thoughts. "That would not be me helping you. That would be me taking you out on an expensive date. Me taking you on a trip is like a normal guy taking you to dinner here in Pittsburgh."

Twisting her neck, her mouth slides free. “Dinner is a date. A plane ticket is not.”

“Now you’re just being bigoted,” I say.

Ava’s jaw drops. “How is that bigoted?”

“Because you’re prejudiced against me because I’m rich. Sure, most guys take a girl out to dinner, but I can easily afford a plane ticket. You’re penalizing me because I can afford nicer things for you.”

After another long sigh, Ava sounds defeated. “I’m trying very hard not to let my past decisions with Derek influence my feelings here, but they are.”

“And I’m asking you not to. Give me the benefit of the doubt. Please come with me next week.”

She worries at her bottom lip, her eyes piercing into mine for a long moment before she mutters the most delicious words. “Okay. I’ll go with you.”

I’m so excited, I forget all decorum and the fact that there are a ton of people still here and let out a whoop as I pick her up and swing her around.

Ava laughs as she holds on to my shoulders, and I know I’m dangerously close to letting this get too serious.

CHAPTER 17

Ava

MY FIRST OFFICIAL day working for the Shelley Royce Agency has me sitting at a desk staring out the window at downtown Los Angeles. I flew in yesterday, compliments of a first-class ticket that Cannon had bought me to come out on this extended road trip with the team. I was stunned he spent so much money, and I let him know I would've been completely fine in the main passenger cabin.

After that, he went on a long monologue trying to justify the first-class ticket. He spent an awful lot of time explaining that he wished I could fly with the team, but it wasn't possible. He went on to further explain that he would very much like to have flown out with me but being on the team plane is part of the camaraderie and leadership expected of him.

I knew all of that.

He didn't have to explain it to me, and yet he did, in great detail.

So I listened and chalked it up to Cannon wanting to make sure my expectations stay in check. Maybe it's because I don't know much about hockey, and I know even less about the life of a hockey coach, but it's like he needs to constantly remind me that his position as coach comes first.

All I can do is remind him that I understand, but truth be told... sometimes it's confusing. He makes a big deal about boundaries and stolen moments and yet goes overboard in his romantic gestures. He makes comments that sound like he wants a future with me.

For example, Cannon not only purchased a first-class ticket for me, but he also chose a flight that would land at roughly the same time as the team. While he had to ride with

the team to the hotel, he had a private driver take me so I wouldn't have to deal with a ride service. He met me in the hotel lobby with a soft kiss witnessed by much of the team swarming to check in, and then whisked me up to our room where we almost broke the bed.

The team had last night off, so Cannon took me out to an expensive meal and then later, we met Baden and Sophie in the hotel lobby bar for a nightcap. It was nice getting to know them, and I think that was intentional on Cannon's part. He doesn't want me to be overwhelmed by it all, so he's creating connections for me, a little at a time.

After the nightcap, we went to our room and almost broke the bed again. He then pulled me into his arms, and we slept soundly until he had to get up for early meetings with the other coaches, followed by a morning practice at the arena. He left while I was in the shower, first leaning into the stall for a wet kiss with a promise to see me around lunchtime.

The hotel room is lovely. He upgraded us to a suite with a separate living room area that holds this beautiful desk where I'm set up to work.

I have a Zoom training session with Shelley this afternoon, but for now, I'm trying to absorb every bit of information that is out there on the interweb. I spent over an hour this morning on her website, reading every blog article she's written. I studied her branding and checked for consistency in her messaging. All things I learned while I studied for my degree.

I then went on to her social media accounts and looked at all her posts. I took screenshots of those that I thought were amazing for future reference and some other screenshots of those that I might have done a little differently. I intend to ask her about that so I can get a feel as to what she really wants.

The more I read about Shelley Royce, the more in love I fall with this agency. Shelley is a dynamic, outgoing person, and it seems like every one of the speakers she represents is the same. The marketing content is bright, energetic, and

engaging. I know it's going to be an absolute joy to work in this environment.

Shelley told me that much of my job would involve content writing and graphic creation, although I will be learning some administrative duties to share with her assistant Darcy, who'll be training as an apprentice agent. Although I'm thrilled to have a job doing marketing, the fact that Shelley promotes from within her company makes me wonder if I can do more in the future? I have never once thought about being an agent, but right now, I'm so dazzled by this new job, I think everything looks glamorous.

I hear the door lock click and turn to see Cannon entering. As happens every time I see him, I have a momentary loss of breath. Not just because he's gorgeous but because of the many wonderful things he's shown me over the last two and a half weeks.

He grins and holds up a white bag. "I'm free until two p.m. Can you take a lunch break? I got deli sandwiches."

I grin back. "Of course I can take a break. Shelley said that I can be as flexible as I want with my hours when I'm working remotely, especially with me being out here on the West Coast this week."

A gleam enters Cannon's eye, and his mouth curves into a sexy smile. "So, you can take longer than an hour for lunch?"

I narrow my eyes at him suspiciously even as my pulse quickens. "Theoretically."

Cannon dumps the bag on the desk and pulls me out of my chair. One hand goes to the back of my head, fingers twisting in my hair, and he slams his mouth down on mine. The kiss is explosive and disarming, and I'm immediately drowning in lust.

Cannon hauls me up his body, and my legs go around his waist. My arms encircle his neck, and I kiss him as he walks us into the bedroom.

His tongue rolling along mine and my hips flexing desperately to make contact with what I know will already be an impressively hard cock, has us both panting in a matter of seconds. Cannon and I burn searingly hot the minute we touch each other, and I wonder if that will ever fade.

God, I hope not.

He uses his grip on the back of my head to pull my mouth from his, and I shiver over the glittering promise in his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about this all morning.”

I don’t know if that’s true, since Cannon keeps work and personal separate, but maybe.

I’m not as strong as he is. “I’ll admit you’re breaking into my thoughts during the day too.”

Cannon kisses me again—fiercely swift—and the next thing I know, he’s tossing me down on the bed.

“Let’s make effective use of our time,” he says as he pulls the bottom of his shirt free from his pants. “Get your clothes off.”

It’s a mad scramble of kicking off shoes, hauling shirts overhead, and shimmying out of bottoms. I’ve got a head start on him, though, since I was barefoot, and I’m completely naked by the time he’s shoving his pants and underwear down his legs.

He straightens once all offending material is free, and my mouth waters as I take in his honed, muscular body and his proud erection.

“You’re beautiful,” I say, and then I’m immediately embarrassed by my words. I’ve never called a man beautiful before, but Cannon seems to like it.

He’s on me in an instant, covering my body with his own and kissing me with quiet desperation. Hands are all over me, squeezing my breasts, biting my shoulder, tongue swirling over my nipple. Within seconds, I’m a writhing, squirming

mess of a woman who, without an ounce of shame, begs, “Can we please just hurry up and fuck?”

Cannon’s tongue pauses its tease of my belly button as his head lifts and he gives me a lazy smile. I can read the expression on his face that says the more I beg, the slower he’ll go.

I feel it’s only fair to point out, “You’re the one who said we needed to maximize our time.”

He scoots even farther down the bed and hovers his mouth right over my pussy.

“You mean to tell me that you’d rather me fuck you than lick you?”

I groan at the choice because both are equally delicious. Cannon uses his fingers to expose my clit, and he bends down to run his tongue in lazy circles around it. Garbled babbling comes out of my mouth, and my hips punch upward.

Cannon chuckles darkly, knowing damn well that I’m not going to push him away. So I lie there and take it as he devours me, licking and sucking and pressing his fingers into me. When I’m crazy and half out of my mind with begging—on the precipice of an orgasm—the man surges upward, fists his cock, and drives inside me.

I immediately explode, screaming out and latching my arms around his neck to hold on. Cannon fucks me hard, exactly what I’d asked for earlier, but he gave me the best of both worlds.

“You feel so fucking good,” he mutters as he rams deep.

Cannon comes with a guttural groan of satisfaction, grinding down onto my pelvis while uttering curse words in my ear. He collapses on top of me, brushes his mouth across mine, and then rolls over onto his back.

We look at each other, grinning even as our chests heave in search of oxygen.

“Was that good?” he asks with a smirk.

I shrug. “It was okay. Maybe we can try to do better later.”

Cannon laughs and rolls toward me. “You’re rotten.”

He bends down to kiss me, but I stop with a hand to his chest. “It was beyond unbelievable. Every single time, you take me higher.”

Those are probably the most serious words I’ve said to him. I’ve been so damn careful to stay a little detached, either because I know he’s not wanting something deep or I’m afraid of getting hurt again.

I’m completely surprised by this moment of truth.

Cannon stares at me for a long moment, and I don’t know what he thinks about my proclamation. But his eyes are soft and tender, so I have to think he’s not put off. I can see him collecting his thoughts, and I hold my breath in anticipation of what he’ll say.

Unfortunately, his phone rings, breaking the spell between us, and he exits the bed. “Sorry. Let me see who that is.”

I roll to my side and rest my head in the palm of my hand to watch him as he digs through his pants to find his phone. He looks at the caller and frowns. Then he sighs and scrubs his hands through his hair.

His eyes come to me. “I’m sorry... I’ve got to take this.”

His voice is weary and sounds a little like he expects the world to fall apart at any moment.

“You want me to leave?” I ask hesitantly.

“No,” he says and turns to sit on the edge of the bed with his back to me.

“Hey, Connie,” he says softly. He’s silent for a moment and then says, “Yeah... I’ve got a few minutes.”

I want to reach out to stroke his back, but I’m feeling all kinds of awkward because I’m clearly listening in on a heavy conversation. I don’t know who Connie is, but by the tone of his voice, I can tell she’s someone Cannon cares about.

I can also tell he doesn't necessarily want to talk to her.

I slide out of bed so I can put my clothes back on. I have my panties in hand when his tone turns harsh. "Of course, I haven't forgotten what tomorrow is. How could you even say that?"

CHAPTER 18

Cannon

CONNIE SNIFFLES MEEKLY, but her voice is accusatory. “I haven’t heard from you in several days. It’s like you’ve forgotten all about her.”

I rub at the back of my neck, tightening with tension, which you would think impossible as I had an incredibly forceful orgasm just minutes ago. Movement from the corner of my eye catches my attention, and I see Ava picking up her clothes and tiptoeing into the bathroom. I told her she didn’t need to leave, but I’m kind of glad she did.

Connie is a part of my life I’m not even sure how to explain to Ava.

“Connie...,” I murmur with conciliation.

“Tomorrow is the nine-year anniversary of Melissa’s death. I feel like nobody remembers it but me. Andrew scheduled a work trip, so he’s gone, and you’re the only one I have who understands this pain. You’re the only one I know who has as big a hole in their heart as I do.”

Her words shred me from the inside out, guilt seeping out of those wounds. I don’t have the same hole she does, and sometimes I hate myself for it. It weighs heavily on me that I don’t allow myself to suffer the way she does.

Normally, I would reassure her at this point that I am still grieving, although I’m very careful to never say how deep it is because our depths are vastly different. My grief has become faint over the years, while hers has intensified. Nine years is a long time to hold on to something without any chance of ever getting it back and I don’t know how to let her know that.

“I’m really sorry, Connie. But it’s game day, and you know my time is limited. I’ll call you tomorrow. I promise.”

“I can’t believe you won’t spare five fucking minutes for your mother-in-law,” Connie yells.

I’m so taken aback by her abrupt change in behavior—and because I’ve never heard her yell or curse before—I wince and hold the phone away from my ear, fearful of what might come next.

But then anger bursts within me, an emotion I’ve never revealed to her. “That’s not fair, Connie. Every single time you call me, I give of myself, and I do it without any reservations or limitations. I’m telling you it’s a game day, and I do not have time to talk about this right now. I am so sorry you’re hurting, and I will call you tomorrow. I hope you pick up so we can share memories of Melissa. Okay?”

There’s silence on the other end, and I know I’ve shocked her. A soft murmur comes through. “Okay.”

And then she hangs up.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I toss the phone on the bedside table before scrubbing my hands over my face.

Ava steps out of the bathroom, still holding her clothes before her. I realize she didn’t close the door when she went in.

“I expect you want to know who Connie is?” I ask.

Ava looks like a deer frozen in the headlights. I can only imagine what my end of that conversation sounded like.

“You don’t have to tell me anything.”

With a sigh, I push off the bed and walk toward her. She stands her ground, still clutching her clothes in front of her like they’re armor.

I put a hand to the back of her neck and press my mouth to hers. “Let’s get dressed and eat lunch. And I’ll tell you about my mother-in-law.”

Ava jolts when she hears the words *mother-in-law*. I tighten my grip and give her a sheepish smile. “Is she still considered a mother-in-law even though I’m not technically married because her daughter died?”

“I don’t know,” Ava whispers.

“Me neither, but I care about her still, and sadly, I’m her only sounding board.”

“That sounded like a hard conversation.”

“They’re never fun,” I agree, pressing another kiss to her forehead before releasing her.

To my surprise, Ava drops her clothing and takes my hand. She threads her fingers through mine and leads me back to the bed.

Pulling the covers back, she slides in and beckons me to follow. I hesitate for a moment because talking about a painful and guilt-ridden part of my life seems like it would be easier over deli sandwiches.

Having Ava naked in a bed with her arms wrapped around me seems not only too intimate, but almost too comforting.

I should insist we get dressed and go eat, but it’s ultimately her beautiful eyes that ensnare me. Her expression is open and accepting of whatever I’m getting ready to lay on her doorstep, so I slide under the cool sheets with her.

At this point, I’ve committed to sharing, so I settle against the headboard and pull Ava into my side.

She settles her head on my chest and an arm over my stomach. “You don’t have to tell me anything, Cannon.”

“I know. But Connie is a part of my life, and you’re bound to hear other conversations.”

I take a few moments and ease into the story by telling Ava about my history with Melissa, starting in our sophomore year of high school. I don’t downplay what a special relationship we had. I would never deny that Melissa was my first true

love. I tell Ava all the good—pulling on so many great memories over the years, and I’m pleased to see that she doesn’t shrink away when I talk about my love for another woman.

“Everyone knows about my tragic love story,” I say with a dark but humorless laugh. “About how my high school sweetheart battled cancer and how I left my career in hockey to take care of her until the end.”

I shift my body slightly to look down at Ava so I have her eyes when I tell her the next part. “What no one knows, except my family, is that our marriage was pretty much dead at the time she was diagnosed. It had been faltering for a long time and we were separated.”

“Where did it go wrong?” Ava asks.

“I guess where any marriage goes wrong. Not spending enough time together, not communicating effectively. In our particular case, I was gone a lot playing hockey, and Melissa resented it. And then I resented her resenting it because she knew what she was getting into when we got married, and I had no choice in the time I spent away from her. The last few months before we separated, we were barely speaking. I mean, we played nice whenever her parents would visit or call, but we pretty much led separate lives.”

“By separate lives, you mean...?”

“Sort of like ships passing in the night. Melissa was an interior designer, and she started taking more work out of town. It seemed like whenever I would come back from a road trip, she would be leaving to go visit a client somewhere. Neither one of us seemed to mind anymore that we didn’t see each other.”

“Your family knew?”

“Yeah... they knew and supported me. They knew we were headed for a divorce, and they stood by my side.”

“But that didn’t happen,” Ava says softly. “Because Melissa got sick.”

“Her cancer made all the anger between us moot. Instantly, it was gone. She was terrified, and I was crippled with guilt, so there was no longer room for us to be mad at each other. I immediately moved back into the house to help her through it. Both of us put aside our differences so we could concentrate on her getting better.”

“I think that’s a beautiful decision you made.”

Maybe, maybe not. “When we found out she wasn’t going to get better and was going to deteriorate, I left hockey so I could be her full-time caretaker.”

“You gave up everything,” she murmurs. “Melissa was a very lucky woman.”

A surge of self-loathing hits me, but I continue with my honest purging to Ava. “What’s funny is that everyone thought I was such a saint, sacrificing my hockey career. But honestly, I had to think about it really hard. I had great moments of selfishness where I thought it would be easier for me to just go my own way. In the end, I couldn’t let her go it alone. I might not have loved her the same way, but I still loved her. And I had to do the right thing.”

“It was absolutely the right thing,” Ava assures me.

“But the problem is that Connie saw me give that all up for Melissa, having no clue we were on the brink of divorce. She’s got this romanticized version of events in her head that Melissa was it for me and that I can’t move on. That I’m stuck in grief the way she is. It’s exhausting trying to validate her and stay true to myself at the same time. And then I feel guilty that I don’t feel the way she does.”

“Don’t,” Ava says, sitting up straight and going to her hip to face me. “You went above and beyond for Melissa. You did your duty as a husband through sickness and health. Grieving is so personal, and you cannot expect your grief to be the same as Connie’s.”

Reaching out, I take Ava’s hand, rubbing my thumb over her knuckles. “My grieving started in earnest when we found

out she wasn't going to get better. She was so sick, and it took weeks for her to die. Weeks that I was bereaved so that by the time she let go, I was relieved. Not because I could have my life back, but because she was free and without pain.

“Her mom didn't want her to die and would sit at her bedside begging for her to hang on. I always wondered if Melissa could hear her, but she was deeply sedated because of the pain. Connie would leave, and I'd spend hours talking to Melissa telling her the exact opposite. That it was okay to let go and leave the suffering behind. When she died, most of my heavy grieving had been done. Not all of it, but most. Connie went deeper and just can't seem to climb out of it.”

Ava raises our intertwined hands and kisses my wrist before settling them back down on my stomach. “Melissa was her child. It's going to be so much deeper and more hurtful, and it's wrong for her to think it's the same for you.”

“I know. I need to have an honest conversation with her, but now isn't the time. Tomorrow is the anniversary of Melissa's death.”

“I knew that from the article I read.” Ava lifts her gaze, eyes gentle and sympathetic. “Nine years, right?”

“Nine years.” I lift our hands again before us to study the tenuous bonds before sliding my eyes to hers. “And while I don't grieve deeply anymore, that experience has changed me. You know I'm not a one-night stand kind of guy—not my style—but I don't allow myself to go very deep into a relationship.”

“I think I've figured that out,” she says. I detect no sadness or disappointment in her short acceptance, and I'm not sure if I'm relieved.

“After I stepped back into the dating world, I didn't find anyone who made me want to try for something deeper. I have care to give to another person, and I'm wired for monogamy, but there's never been love. In my short-lived relationships, we never seemed to be on the same journey. They always wanted

to progress, and I seemed to stall. I'm not even sure why I'm telling you this. I just want to be transparent about my past."

Ava pulls our hands down but doesn't release her hold. She tilts her head. "I am not going to assume that your inability to love again was because Melissa was the one and only for you. But I will assume when you're ready for it again, you'll know it. Or you'll know that you'll never be ready."

Something twinges in my chest, because I assume everyone thinks that's why I've remained decidedly single to this day. Because I can't get over Melissa.

Ava doesn't think that, but then again, I've told Ava the underlying truth about my marriage. No one knows that except my family.

"It always boils down to my career. I'm so deep into my work that I don't have time for much else. It was the exact problem that caused my marriage to crumble. I may have walked away from hockey, but I'm back now and fully invested in my new life of coaching. I don't have a lot of room to share myself, and I don't want to feel guilty for loving my career so much."

"Stolen moments," Ava murmurs. "Now I get why you keep talking about that."

"I just want to be honest with you about who I am. We need to have an understanding."

Ava pulls her hand from mine and places it on my chest. "You've been very clear, Cannon. I don't have any pipe dreams, okay? Just... if you get to the point you think we're moving at different speeds and I'm going somewhere you don't want to go, you have to tell me."

"Okay."

"Promise," she demands. "Don't let me chase something that's not achievable."

"I promise," I say, and it's the cruelest commitment I've ever been asked to make because I don't want to hurt her.

And I'm afraid that's going to happen no matter how open we've been about all of this.

CHAPTER 19

Ava

CANNON HOLDS MY hand as we walk toward the restaurant. It's a steakhouse a few blocks down from the Houston hotel we're staying in for the last game of the road trip tomorrow night. Today the team had a light practice, some meetings, and now a team dinner where everyone can relax and have a good meal together.

While many on the team have seen me here and there the last few days—at breakfast with Cannon in the hotel restaurant or hanging with him in the lobby after the team came back from a game—I've not spent any time with them. This isn't due to choice but rather circumstances. It's busy, busy, busy on game days.

Outside of the trunk-or-treat where I met a handful of players, tonight is the first time I'll be interacting with them. I'm grateful Sophie is on the trip with Baden so at least I have another woman to talk to.

The last few days have been... well, I'm not sure how to describe it. The Titans played back-to-back games in Los Angeles—first the Demons, then the Dragons. Cannon was super focused, working with the coaching staff and at the arena practicing with the team. I got to see firsthand how much of him goes into this job.

He spent a lot of time away from our room, which was fine because I was working, but even when he came to join me for lunch, he was always answering calls and texts, checking his iPad, and parceling out tasks. Every night I'd wake up to find him at the desk, his face awash in the glow of the tablet screen, watching video and taking notes.

Even with all that, Cannon handles the stress of his job well. If he's feeling it, I'm not seeing it, but I know it can't be easy.

Still, yesterday I woke up braced for the dawn of November fourth—the nine-year anniversary of Melissa's death. I didn't know what to expect or how Cannon would act. If he was under intense work stress that I wasn't seeing, I worried that the anniversary might push him over the edge. I was prepared for him to behave in a variety of ways—sad, sullen, withdrawn, angry—and I was ready for whatever Cannon needed from me.

To my surprise, it was a normal day. Well, normal for a head coach of a professional hockey team who had a game that night. Outside of a forty-minute phone call with Connie over the lunch break while I worked, Cannon acted no differently. I asked him one time only, just before he headed to the arena to get ready for the game. "How are you doing?"

He knew I wasn't asking about hockey.

Cannon pulled me into his arms and pressed a kiss to my forehead before saying, "I'm good. A little sad, but also not having any problems focusing on the things I need to focus on."

I believed him too.

Then he kissed me again, this time a little deeper before rubbing his nose along mine. "Thank you for asking. And for understanding."

When we enter the restaurant, we're led to a back room reserved for the team. It looks like most of the players and staff are here, which isn't surprising. Cannon talked me into a shower quickie before we came, so now we're a few minutes late.

He introduces me to everyone. There's no way I can remember all the faces and names, and by the time we make it to the table we're sharing with the other team members, my head is spinning.

Gage issues a shrill whistle and tells everyone to take their seats so we can get dinner started. While everyone settles in, Cannon pulls out a chair next to Sophie and I gratefully sit next to the only other woman in the room.

Cannon doesn't sit down on my other side though, but instead walks to the front. Waiters are on standby to take drink orders.

Everyone quiets when Cannon turns to us. "I know we don't get a lot of opportunities for team dinners, so I'm glad we could arrange this. I want everyone to kick back and relax, have good conversation with your mates, enjoy some good food, and we're going to make it an early night so we are well-rested for tomorrow's game. Brienne is picking up the tab tonight, so make sure you all thank her next time you see her. Oh, and go easy on the drinks."

Everyone laughs and Cannon winds his way between the tables back to ours. In addition to Baden and Sophie, a few other players are sitting with us, and Cannon takes a moment to make sure I know everyone at our table. Some I've met and just can't remember their names; others I haven't met yet.

Cannon sits next to me and nods to his left. "This is Hendrix Bateman, one of our defensemen. You met him at the trunk-or-treat."

Hendrix smiles, holding up a hand in hello. "I was the red Power Ranger."

"Aaah." I would've never known since he had his head and face covered. "Good to actually see you this time."

"Next to Hendrix is Drake McGinn, our goalie."

I smile at Drake and barely get one back before his head bows down to his phone, ignoring the rest of us. I don't know this man at all, but I overheard Cannon talking about him to some of the other coaches on the phone the last few days, and they're worried about him. He's been closed off, moody, and playing like shit, apparently.

"And next to him is our left winger, Stone Dumelin."

I remember Stone, as we met a few minutes ago. “Welcome to our team, Ava,” he says.

“Thank you. It’s—”

Hendrix’s phone goes off, and he picks it up from the table, grimaces, and immediately sends the caller to voicemail. “Sorry about that.”

I forgot what I was going to say, but it doesn’t matter. The phone rings again. Hendrix looks pained as he apologizes. “I’m sorry. I have to take this.”

He connects and says, “Is something wrong?”

We all awkwardly wait in silence, but I glance across the table and see Stone smirking. Drake ignores everyone.

“Yes, I’d think there was something wrong since you called twice in a row.”

Hendrix listens a moment and then sighs. “We’re at a team dinner. I can’t talk now, but I’ll call you after.” Another pause as he listens. “Yes, I promise. Give me a few hours, okay?”

I glance at Cannon, who shrugs.

Hendrix hangs up and turns off the ringer, setting the phone back on the table. “Sorry. Girlfriend,” he mutters.

“Dude,” Stone says, leaning back in his chair and looking superiorly smug. “You have got to dump her. You’re one phone call away from her turning all *Fatal Attraction* on you.”

“Hey,” Hendrix says, sounding only mildly offended. “I don’t tell you to dump Harlow, do I?”

Stone frowns at him. “No,” he drawls with a heavy sarcastic tone. “But why would you? She’s perfect.”

Hendrix scoffs, and Stone looks at Baden. “Harlow’s perfect, right?”

“As far as I can tell,” Baden agrees.

His gaze flips to Sophie, who nods exuberantly. “I can emphatically state that she’s perfect in every way.”

That tells me Sophie knows her well.

Stone leans over and nudges Drake, still ignoring everyone. “Harlow’s perfect, right, man?”

Drake doesn’t even lift his gaze from his phone. “If you say so.”

“The point being,” Stone says as he addresses Hendrix, “you want a girl who everyone at the table will agree is great. No one here can say that about Tracy.”

“She’s not that bad,” Hendrix mutters.

“The mere fact you’re not staunchly defending her and ripping into me for calling her *Fatal Attraction* tells me she’s bad enough.”

“She is a bit clingy,” Drake says, and everyone’s surprised he spoke up. “I’m just saying, I met her at Dillon’s party three weeks ago, and that was the vibe I got.”

“Okay, how about we give Hendrix a break,” Cannon says with a light chuckle. “I don’t want Ava thinking you guys are ready to start your own soap opera.”

Laughter ripples around the table—except for Drake—and we move on from Hendrix’s girl troubles.

After a waiter takes our drink and dinner orders, talk immediately turns to hockey, and even Drake engages. The men discuss their opponent for tomorrow night, and I’m lost. But not in a bad way—I just need to learn some stuff is all.

Sophie leans in close. “You don’t know how glad I am you’re here. The hockey talk can get a bit much.”

Laughing, I sip my water. “Do you travel to a lot of the games?”

“At least once a month,” she says. “I’m working on an interior design degree, so I’m a little flexible. How about you? Are you going to come to all the away games, especially since your job is remote?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” I say with a shake of my head. “I think this was a onetime-only thing.”

“It wasn’t a onetime-only thing,” Cannon says, cutting into our conversation. I had no clue he’d been listening, but his head is turned our way. “I’m going to try to get Ava to come to as many games as I can, *especially* since she works remotely.”

I’m stunned by this proclamation, since Cannon has made clear his time is limited. I think I’m a bit of a hindrance and distraction while I’m here, but that’s a chat for another time. I’m not about to have him shelling out money for plane tickets for me, so I most definitely will not be coming to a lot of away games.

“Go back to your hockey talk,” I say with a shooing motion.

Cannon grins and shocks me by pulling me into him with a hand at the back of my neck and kissing me. When I’m released, he turns back to the guys and slips seamlessly into their conversation.

I angle my body toward Sophie, and she’s grinning from ear to ear. “You two are so cute.”

I lower my voice and angle more her way, so Cannon stays out of our conversation. “It’s still very new.”

“That’s the best time,” she says with a knowing wink. “Just learning about each other, having fun. It’s obvious he’s crazy about you.”

My immediate thought is to deny that because if Cannon were crazy about me, we wouldn’t spend so much time talking about his limitations. The conversation would be more geared toward how he can overcome some of his worries resulting from past experiences.

It’s not to say I don’t want him to be crazy about me. It’s only been a few weeks, but I’ve started to fall for this dirty talker with a heart of gold. I’ve been cautious because of my own past woes, but honestly... if Cannon wanted to make a serious go of this, I’d be willing to give it my all.

On the flip side, with the boundaries Cannon has set, it has made things easier. Our time alone is fun and carefree. We laugh a lot and talk about inane things. He doesn't care that I've been struggling to find a stable career, and I don't care that he's a hotshot hockey coach.

All we can do is take it one day at a time and keep our expectations clear.

The rest of the evening is a lot of fun. It's not all hockey talk, and I got to know Stone and Hendrix a little better. Drake was withdrawn most of the evening, but that might just be his personality.

I have to say, after more teasing and ribbing of Hendrix, it sounds like he's got a handful with his current girlfriend. I think he likes her, but he's feeling a little hamstrung by her possessiveness. I'd love to tease him about the spirit of youth, but he and I are the same age. At least I can honestly say I never acted like that with Derek, nor would I ever think of wanting to know Cannon's whereabouts at all times. Sounds like Tracy is exactly the type who Cannon would have no patience for.

We walk back to the hotel with Baden and Sophie. Sophie and I walk side by side, making plans to get together back in Pittsburgh. The guys walk behind us.

"You'll have to come out to our monthly lunch with the girls," Sophie says. I've learned tonight that the "girls" include Stone's allegedly perfect girlfriend, Harlow, Gage's girlfriend, Jenna, and Coen's girlfriend, Tillie. "Sometimes Brienne joins us. Well, she came to one lunch, but she promised to come to others. And she invited us to watch the game with her last week when Baden proposed to me. She's super sweet."

"She invited me to sit in the box at the next home game. She also said I could bring a friend. Want to come?"

"Yeah, that would be great. I've got a season ticket, but I'd rather hang with you and Brienne. Maybe you and Cannon and me and Baden can get drinks after."

“What kind of mischief are you planning up there?” Baden draws.

Sophie looks over her shoulder. “Just drinks with Cannon and Ava after next week’s game.”

My gaze goes to Cannon because I don’t want to infringe on his time. He smiles, though. “That sounds fun. You good with that, Ava?”

“I’m down,” I say.

“It’s a date, then,” Sophie chirps, and I’m actually excited about hanging out with her more. When I was with Derek, I was not able to develop friendships of my own. They were all work pals who I no longer see because of how things ended.

We say good night to Baden and Sophie in the elevator since we’re staying on a higher floor.

When we get into our room, Cannon pulls out his iPad. “Do you mind if I make notes of some of the things we discussed tonight at dinner?”

“Of course not,” I say with a playful push at him toward the desk.

He leans in and snags a kiss, and I love that about him. He has these bursts of spontaneous affection in the form of quick but fierce kisses that always serve as a reminder that he digs me.

And I dig him for that.

I take off my makeup, brush my teeth, and shrug into a tank top. I slip under the bedcovers while Cannon works at the desk in the living area. I pull up a book on my iPhone and read, knowing that when he comes in, he’ll have all sorts of delicious things to hand out.



MY EYES FLUTTER open and I see Cannon in bed beside me, his iPad propped on his lap. He’s shirtless with the covers over his

hips. He's watching game video, his eyebrows drawn inward with intense study.

"What time is it?" I ask sleepily.

Cannon jolts and tips the laptop down so the glare doesn't hit me in the eyes. The room is illuminated by his bedside lamp, which is still on, but the glow is warm. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You should have," I say, pushing up to an elbow and looking past him to the clock on his table. It's just past midnight. I glance at the laptop and then up to him. "Having a hard time turning off your coaching brain?"

He smiles and reaches over to put the iPad on the table. Sliding down, he turns on his side to face me, resting his head in his palm. "Time slips by too easily when I get deep into something. I'm glad you pointed it out."

I immediately backpedal. "I didn't mean you should quit working. If you need to do stuff, don't let me—"

Cannon presses a finger to my lips. "Relax, Ava. I know exactly what you meant."

God, I hope he means that because part of me now feels like I'm going to always compare myself to his wife, and I don't want him to ever see me as disliking the time he puts into his job. I admire him for it.

"I was looking at a new play that Houston's been using. Want to see it?"

I love when he teaches me hockey, so I nod eagerly.

"Lie on your back," he says, and I frown at him. His hand comes to my chest, pushing me until I'm in the requested position.

His eyes gleam as he pulls the covers down, exposing my tank. He grabs the hem and drags it up until my stomach is bared to him.

“Okay, this is the ice,” he says softly, running a palm lightly over my stomach, which causes goose bumps to break out. His fingertips skim the waistband of my panties. “This is the goal.”

I smirk at him, and he winks.

“On the power play, Houston is going to position their left winger up high with their center, with the right winger down low.” He tells me this while marking an *X* on my skin where each player will be. “They’ll execute a series of passes between the left winger and center, wanting to draw our defensemen up high.” Cannon glides his finger over my stomach from my ribs to my sternum, and I wiggle because it tickles. “When they have the opening, they’ll pass it over to the right winger who’s moved down low.” His finger zips across my stomach, just a few inches above my hip bone.

I let out a quavering breath because with each move, Cannon’s voice grows deeper, huskier. I dare a glance up at him, but his eyes are pinned on where his fingertip rests on me.

“The goalie will hopefully be drawn out slightly, leaving an opening. The right winger will already be winding up for a slap shot when he gets the pass, and when he takes a crack at it...” Cannon’s finger shoots straight for the edge of my panties, slips right in and through my slick folds. I groan and buck as his finger presses into me.

Cannon whispers, “Goal.”

He starts to withdraw his hand while leaning toward me for a kiss, but I grip onto his wrist, keeping his hand right where it is. “Let’s leave the puck in the net for right now.”

Cannon’s laugh is booming just before he brings his mouth down on mine.

CHAPTER 20

Ava

“DOES THIS EVER seem surreal to you?” I ask Sophie as we’re escorted to the owner’s box. “You know, because you’ve been around this a bit longer than I have, and I feel like I’m in the Twilight Zone.”

Sophie laughs and loops her arm through mine. “You’ll get used to it. Somewhat. Tonight’s a really big deal though, because we’re playing the Vengeance.”

Oh, I know very well the importance of this game. Cannon’s been hyperfocused on the team the last few days since we returned from Houston where the Titans took a significant loss. I didn’t actually get to see the game as my flight back to Pittsburgh was that day, but I made it home in time to watch it on TV. Surprisingly, Cannon called me about an hour after the game was over, and I had no clue what to expect when I answered. I didn’t know how personally he’d take the loss.

Turns out I wasn’t able to get a good read on him. The only reason he called was to make sure I’d made it home safely and to wish me good night. I was so stunned that his thoughts were of me and not on the loss that I wasn’t quite sure what to say. It was moot since he didn’t have time to talk as they were getting ready to leave for the airport.

Before he hung up, he asked, “Are you up for an early breakfast before I head into the arena? I’ll come by and pick you up.”

I immediately said yes because I missed him after only one day and this would be logged into our diary of stolen moments. I felt guilty he’d come all the way to me, which was

very much out of the way, but he wouldn't have offered if he didn't want to and very much had the time to do it.

At breakfast, I asked him how he felt about the loss, and he was so pragmatic. "It's part of my job as a coach to take the losses and learn from them."

Didn't mean he wasn't upset.

Didn't mean he wasn't driven to do better the next game.

It just meant he has a healthy check on his emotions when it comes to failure, and he most certainly takes the loss squarely upon his shoulders.

Cannon West might be the most grounded person I've ever met, and I admire him so much for that.

He's also turning into one of the sweetest men I've ever had the privilege of knowing. This morning, I woke up in his bed with a Pittsburgh Titans' jersey on top of me. Cannon wasn't beside me—I later found him cooking breakfast—but I was touched that he bought me a jersey.

I was astounded when I found out that he'd had it custom made by their merchandising department with his name on the back. It's one of a kind and no one else has one, although he admitted he was probably going to get one for his mom and sister for Christmas.

Of course, I'm proudly wearing it tonight and hope I'm not too casually dressed. When Brienne reached out to me through Cannon to confirm I was accepting her invitation to join her in the box, she passed along there'd be some executives from two companies here in Pittsburgh that have minor ownership interests in the arena.

The usher who met Sophie and I at will call leads us to a set of mahogany double doors with a brass plaque next to it that simply reads "Norcross."

He opens the door on the left and motions us in.

At first, I'm boggled by the number of people in the suite. I don't take the time to count, but I'd guess close to forty or

fifty. Most of them are in business suits or dresses. I see only a handful in jerseys.

“Eesh,” Sophie says softly as she tightens her arm in mine. “There weren’t this many people the last time I was here.”

She’s talking about two weeks ago when Baden proposed and she was sitting up here. I’d learned that Brienne was heavily involved in pulling that off, which makes her even cooler in my opinion.

“There you two are.” Brienne appears through the crowd, walking our way with a big smile on her face. She’s dressed in a camel-colored skirt and matching jacket, taupe high-heeled boots that I bet cost a fortune, and a beautiful purple and gray scarf—Titans’ colors, of course—hanging diagonally over her shoulder.

She reaches me and Sophie and gives us brief hugs, whispering, “Thank God you’re here. There’s far too much testosterone and they all want to talk about corporate mergers and shit. I just want to watch the damn game.”

I giggle and follow Brienne as she takes my wrist and pulls me through the crowd. Sophie follows, and we end up in front of a bar. “What do you two want to drink?”

Sophie and I both get beers, and Brienne orders a glass of red wine, then she ushers us right down to the front row where three seats bear a “Reserved” sign. We’re motioned down into the plush leather chairs with Brienne on the inside. The players are on the ice warming up, but the coaches aren’t out there, so I can’t shamelessly stare at Cannon just yet.

“Sorry to use both of you as shields,” she says with a conspiratorial whisper. “But that should keep me safe from people wanting to talk business during the game.”

Sophie laughs and glances over her shoulder at the crowd behind us. I don’t look, but I imagine they’re all hungrily ogling Brienne, maybe waiting for her to make eye contact before they pounce.

“What do they all want?” I ask.

“To get a piece of my time, mostly. Make contact. Hand me their card. Hope they can do business one day or request a favor. Hell, most of them just want to give me a favor at some point so I’ll owe them. But that’s how business is done.”

“Are they all here by your invite?”

“God no,” she exclaims, then lowers her voice. “Most of the people here are at the invite of other executives in the organization, and they’re attending to them. But they’ll jump at the chance to have my ear, so I’m hiding out down here with you girls. We’ll brave some food at the first intermission.”

We chitchat about the game and how thrilling it would be to defeat the Vengeance as they won the Cup the last two years in a row. I’d learned from Cannon that the hockey world is already abuzz with how well the Titans are doing this year, considering they’re still in a massive rebuilding phase after the crash.

“What’s Baden been thinking about Drake this past week?” Brienne asks Sophie.

“You mean, you really want to know how frustrated Baden has been with him?” Sophie asks dryly.

I turn from the ice to the conversation because this is an interesting gossip dynamic. Owner of the team and fiancée of a coach discussing a player. And well, I’m the girlfriend of the head coach. I didn’t know such talk was possible, although I don’t know quite enough about the game to participate in any meaningful way. I do know Drake had a horrible road trip last week, but Cannon didn’t seem too worried about it. Said he thought Drake was just having a rough streak.

“He’s definitely not playing to his full potential,” Sophie continues. “Baden said he was going to talk to him.”

“And did he?” Brienne asks. “What did he say?”

I don’t know if Sophie catches it, but Brienne sounds overly concerned about Drake. Not from a business perspective, but more like she has a personal stake in Drake’s well-being.

It doesn't matter though, because Sophie shrugs. "I have no clue since Baden wouldn't share those things with me."

Brienne sighs, and it seems like frustration, but maybe I'm reading too much into it.

We watch the rest of the warm-ups while Brienne asks me questions.

Where are you from?

Where do you work?

What do you do in your free time?

All benign and meant to get to know me better. Nothing too personal, although I don't think her failure to dive deep is because she thinks it's impolite. It's that we run out of time when the game starts.

For the first period, we're all fully engaged in the action and there's no room to talk about our personal lives. The arena feels combustible, like the cheers could turn into real explosions. When the Titans jump out to an early lead of 2-0, most of the fans remain standing and the three of us are practically hanging over the box rail.

With only a minute left in the first period, the Vengeance intercept a pass while the Titans are on a power play. Two players shoot down the ice with our defenseman, Camden Poe, in hot pursuit. Drake squats low as the attackers bear down on him. He's a beast of a guy and fills the net completely, so he's not easy to score on.

The Vengeance players pass the puck back and forth with Drake following their movements, keeping his body square to the goal. Camden makes a solid attempt to stop them by diving forward and pushing his stick toward the puck to knock it out of their possession. He misses by inches as a slap shot flies, the puck zinging like a bullet toward the net. Drake pulls off a miraculous glove save, and the arena erupts.

"Yes!" Brienne yells, shooting out of her seat and throwing both arms up. Sophie and I are right behind her, and then all of

us are high-fiving.

“Whatever Baden said to Drake must’ve been good.” Sophie laughs as we sit back down.

“Yeah,” Brienne murmurs more to herself than to us as she looks up at the jumbo screen where the players are setting up for another face-off. “Seems like he’s out of his funk.”

I frown—although I can tell Brienne is thrilled with the save, there’s an odd underlying sadness to her tone. But that can’t be. I’m misinterpreting something, and when the action commences, Brienne is back in the game.

The buzzer indicates the end of the first period, and Brienne stands. “I’m going to go hobnob as expected. I’ll be back in time for the start of the second. There’s food up there, and obviously get another drink. If you want something you don’t see, just ask and they’ll get it for you.”

Brienne swishes by in a cloud of designer clothing, delicate perfume, and a backbone of steel, and I watch her ascend the steps to the suite’s main area where all the sharks await.

“Want to get another beer and some food?” Sophie asks.

“Let’s do it. I’m starving—I haven’t eaten since lunch.”

We move up the steps and over to the buffet. I note that the guests all swarm Brienne, wanting a moment of her time, which leaves no one at the food. Bonus for us.

Sophie and I load plates with sliced prime rib and pasta salad, and I note the cheesecake that I’ll be back for. It’s simple but elegant.

“This is so fancy,” I murmur to Sophie as I grab real silverware wrapped in an expensive-looking linen cloth. “I’m wondering if we should’ve had wine instead of beer?”

Sophie laughs. “Nah... we are who we are.”

“Damn straight,” I concur. “Want to sit up here at one of these empty tables?”

“Sure,” Sophie says, and we move to one close by. Not sure they’d be empty had Brienne not acted as a magnet to so many people wanting her attention.

Setting my plate down, I pull out the knife and fork to cut into the prime rib when a man’s voice behind me says, “Ava?”

My body tightens with tension, and I slowly turn to see Derek standing there. He looks exactly as he did the day I confronted him about screwing his secretary. Expensive suit, blond hair coiffed to perfection, and an air of superiority hovering around him.

What I didn’t see then was the deviousness underneath the polish, that because I busted him cheating, his revenge was to have me fired.

“What are you doing here?” he says, a hard edge of disdain and disbelief competing in his tone.

I take a moment to gauge my feelings, surprised at the lack of residual hurt over what he did to me. There’s a little anger, but not even enough to tell him it’s none of his business.

The pause to assess the situation takes too long because next thing I know, Brienne is there at the table, draping an arm around my shoulder. She looks past me to Derek. “Ava’s a dear friend, here at my invitation. And you are?”

Derek’s eyes bug out of his head to see Brienne Norcross with her arm around me.

And... we’re *dear* friends?

“Um... um...,” he stammers, and I’m not going to lie, there’s satisfaction in seeing him off-kilter. He never even broke a sweat when I confronted him about banging his secretary.

“This is Derek Burrows,” I say to Brienne. “My ex-boyfriend.”

Now, Brienne has no clue about our backstory, but she clearly heard Derek question why I was here and the tone with which he did it. She knows there’s animosity.

So I'm guessing that's what fuels her dramatics when she looks at me with a sheepish grin. "Guess it's a little awkward that your current boyfriend is the one who introduced us, huh?"

Sophie makes a slight choking sound.

"Current boyfriend?" Derek asks, his words clipped.

Again, I'm given no chance to respond. Brienne is enjoying this too much. Her hands come to my shoulders, and she turns me around so that he can see the back of my jersey. "She's dating Cannon West."

I pivot so I can see Derek's reaction, and it actually makes the hurt, pain, and fear of the unknown that he instilled in me worth it.

His jaw drops as his eyes cut back and forth between me and Brienne. Finally, they land on me, and he tries to sound happy. "Well, that's awesome. Good for you."

"Great for me," I say with a smile. "You cheating and then having me fired was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

Derek's face flushes in anger. "I don't think it's appropriate to malign me to Ms. Norcross."

"It's not maligning if it's true now, is it?" Brienne asks sweetly. "But don't be too put out. How can anyone be mad about it when Ava scored one of the nicest, and certainly most successful men, in this city? Right?"

Derek is done with us having fun at his expense. He manages a smile and bites out, "It was nice meeting you, Ms. Norcross." His eyes then come to me, and he dares to look wounded. "It was good seeing you, Ava."

I give him a polite smile in return.

Derek walks back through the crowd over to two other men in business suits. I don't recognize them, but I'm guessing they're executives at Derek's company and that's why he's here.

Brienne snorts, and I look her way. I try to hold my laugh, but I can't, and it comes out with gusto. Sophie joins in and gasps, "That was the best smackdown I've ever seen."

"That was so much fun," Brienne says as her hand comes to my shoulder, but her expression sobers. "Are you okay, though?"

"I'm totally fine," I assure her. "I would have been fine had you not been here handing him his ass, but that was icing on the cake."

"Poor guy," Sophie muses, casting a quick glance his way. "Replaced by Cannon West."

"It makes me feel bad in a way." I chuckle.

"Not me," Brienne says tartly. "He deserved it for cheating on you and getting you fired. The only thing that would have been better is if you could have somehow slipped in a direct comparison to Cannon's skills in bed."

I bust out laughing, shaking my head. "It would have destroyed him to know that Cannon puts him to shame in all ways. Let's let him leave with some dignity."

"Speaking of Cannon," Brienne says, reaching out and stealing a roll off my plate. But it's okay, we're dear friends. "His birthday is next Tuesday. Do you have plans?"

"Not really," I admit a bit glumly. "His birthday is on an away game day, and honestly, I'm not confident about how to even slot something into his schedule because he's so busy."

"What do you think of throwing him a surprise party? I can orchestrate it to get him there, and you can help with all the planning."

"I'd love it!" I exclaim. "I'd never be able to pull it off on my own since I don't know anyone that well, and I don't understand his availability half the time."

Brienne pulls her phone from her jacket pocket and flips through the calendar. "We're playing away on his birthday... just in DC, so it's a same-day flight there and back. But the

day before is a light practice day and we could definitely work in a surprise party for him that evening.”

“He’s always so busy. The trick will be getting him to stop working and go somewhere.”

Brienne waves me off. “We’ll do it at my house, and I’ll invite him to a dinner for the coaches to get together. I’ll have my assistant connect with you. You work with her to have whatever you want for him, and I’ll foot the bill.”

“That’s very generous, Brienne,” I say softly. Because I could never afford to do something so nice for him.

“It will be a lot of fun, and well...” Her voice takes on a wistful tone, which she plays off with a smile. “I like seeing relationships succeed.”

“Thank you.” Not sure if those words are adequate, so I add, “It means the world to me to be able to help give him this.”

“You’ll just need to get there separately since he’ll think it’s a work event.”

“I can handle that.” And really, that’s about all I could handle for a birthday party for Cannon. I never would have thought it even possible to pull it off, and not just because I don’t know people. My first instinct is that Cannon wouldn’t want to take time away from work, even for his own birthday party. And even if I could pull off the organization and invitations, I’m not sure I’d want to risk him being mad at me for it.

Or maybe he wouldn’t be mad. Maybe he’d love it.

It’s so hard to tell. I thought the boundaries were clear, but they seem pretty muddy right now.

“Excuse me, Brienne.” We all turn to a woman wearing a Titans’ polo, an iPad in hand. “Let me get a picture for IG.”

Brienne gathers me and Sophie to her, one on each side. We smile for the camera, but not before my gaze flicks over to

see Derek watching us with a confused look. Poor guy... not sure he'll ever understand how I landed here.

“Can I tag you?” the woman asks me, before cutting a look to Sophie with a grin. “I already have yours, Future Mrs. Baden Oulett.”

I assume she must be responsible for the team's social media, and I think about the fact that Derek still follows me on IG, even though I never post.

“Sure.” I smile and give her my handle.

CHAPTER 21

Cannon

I OPEN THE door to Mario's, and Baden precedes me in. The place is packed shoulder to shoulder, due solely to the 4–0 ass-kicking we just handed to the Arizona Vengeance.

We wind our way back to a reserved area that is always set aside for the Titans. Normally, coaches don't party with the players, but tonight is monumental enough that we're going to have a few beers to celebrate. Sophie and Ava came here directly after the game and should have a table for us.

While not as widely recognized as some of the star players on our team, Baden and I get a ton of back slaps and cheers as we walk through. The Titans' fans are beyond crazed to beat the defending Cup champions and with a shutout, no less.

Of course, Drake in goal wasn't quite the biggest story tonight. It was that kiss he laid on Brienne when he stepped off the ice that has everyone reeling. I didn't see it, but I sure as hell heard about it as the gossip spread through the locker room like wildfire. When Drake finally appeared, he got so much shit from everyone that he couldn't even respond. He finally just held up his hands, asking for quiet, and said, "Brienne and I are together. It's been in the making. Deal with it."

He said this with a smirk and remained stoic the rest of the night. He buzzed out immediately after showering, and I'm confident we won't find him here tonight.

"There they are," Baden says, and I get a punch of pleasure at seeing Ava sitting at a high top wearing the custom jersey I had made for her. She sees me and waves, Sophie turning to look in our direction.

When we approach the table, Ava steps off her stool and walks right into me for a hug. Her arms wrap around my neck, mine go to her waist, and I pick her up from the floor as we squeeze each other.

She leans her head back to look at me, feet dangling. “Great game. Congrats, Coach!”

“I feel like I’m due a celebratory kiss,” I reply, and then don’t wait for her to give it to me.

I take it.

I’m vaguely aware of people around us cheering, and when I let her up for breath and she slides back down to the floor, several fans around us hoot and clap over that kiss.

Ava’s cheeks flame red and it’s adorable. I settle my hand on her lower back to guide her to her chair and then stand beside her. A waitress appears, and Baden and I order beers to match Sophie and Ava.

“That game was phenomenal,” Sophie exclaims, and then gives a playful punch to Baden’s shoulder. “And your boy Drake pulled out all the stops.”

Baden snorts and looks across the table at me, and I laugh. The girls exchange glances, confused.

“What are we missing?” Ava asks.

Baden shakes his head in amusement as I fill them in. “Apparently—and I didn’t see this myself but heard all about it—Drake came off the ice and went into an interview with a reporter. He declared that he was in love with Brienne and then kissed her right on TV.”

Ava and Sophie blink at me, completely stunned. They look at each other, then back to me. “No,” Ava says dismissively. “We spent the entire game with Brienne, and she didn’t...”

Her words trail off, and I can see something in her eyes clicking into place. She must have picked up on something

from Brienne, but she doesn't offer it up, and I don't push. Women are entitled to their secrets.

"Oh, look," Sophie says, pointing up at one of the wall TVs.

The local news channel leads off with the clip of Drake and Brienne's make-out, and holy hell... that is one claiming and possessive kiss. The sound is off on the TVs, so I have no clue what the reporter is saying, but I'll search for it later.

"Well, that's not the only jaw-dropping thing Brienne did this evening," Sophie drawls, and Ava ducks her head slightly to hide a smile.

"What?" Baden asks.

Sophie looks at Ava, her eyes sparkling with amusement, then brings her gaze directly to me. "Turns out Ava's ex-boyfriend was in the owner's suite tonight. And he approached Ava and asked what she was doing there."

Anger swells within me that asshole would dare talk to Ava. "What happened?" I growl.

Ava frowns at my tone, but Sophie grins. She knows I'm being protective. "Oh, don't get your shorts in a bunch. Brienne totally destroyed him. Made sure he knew that Ava was way better off without him."

My head swivels toward Ava.

"Brienne told him that we were dear friends and that she met me through you. He knows we're dating, and to say he was shocked would be an understatement."

"It was priceless," Sophie says.

"And you're okay?" I press.

Her smile is transparent. "Yes, I'm very okay. It was a short interaction, and I barely said anything. He left with his tail between his legs."

That should satisfy me. I should be happy that the bastard knows she's moved on. And yet, I'm feeling disgruntled. I feel

like I should be the one to let the jackass know what a fuckup he is and how big his loss was.

Which is my gain... in a completely monogamous but very casual way.

The fact that I keep insisting that I'm unwilling to dive too deep with Ava should have me leaving this subject alone, but I feel compelled to say, "Maybe I should have a follow-up conversation with him."

Baden's lips twitch, Sophie takes a sip of beer to hide her smile, and Ava's brow knits together. "You're sweet, but it's not necessary. Brienne put him in his place."

Well, fuck. I want to be the one to put him in his place, but I don't voice that out loud. Baden will give me shit about it, and I don't want to suffer Sophie and Ava throwing me their dreamy eyes.

Instead, I'm going to savor our victory over the Vengeance and then take Ava back to my place for a post-celebration celebration.



CHRIST, I NEARLY pass out from the force of my orgasm, my hips bucking while my hands grip Ava hard to keep her from flying off me.

The post-celebration celebration included Ava pleasuring me with her hot, wet mouth and ended with her riding my cock until I was begging her to finish me off. She was spectacular to behold, especially when she worked herself into an orgasm first, which caused her to fall forward onto my chest, gasping for air and shuddering. I started to roll her to her back to finish the job, but she panted, "Don't. Let me."

She took a deep breath and got back to work, and like I said... fucking spectacular.

"That was..." she says as she once again lies on my chest, but her words fade. I can feel her heart hammering, matching pace with my own.

“Yeah, that was,” I agree with a smile.

“I’m too broken to move off you,” she mutters. “If you want up, you’re going to have to shove.”

Laughing, I wrap an arm around her lower back to hold her in place. I love the feel of her weight and warmth on me. “I’m totally comfortable.”

“Me too,” she murmurs, and I can tell she’s about to fall asleep. I’ll wait for that to happen and then I’ll rearrange her under the covers.

My hand comes up to stroke the back of her head as I stare at the ceiling. Today was a really great day. My team stepped up to the plate and did everything I asked of them. They put forth more effort than I expected. They unified in a way that made me more than proud—it made me implicitly respectful of their abilities.

And of course, the icing on the cake is having Ava in my bed. Actually, she might be the cake, and the win might be the icing.

Not sure.

“What are your plans tomorrow?” I ask, doing a mental run-through of my calendar. It’s a regular practice day with another home game the day after, plus Bain Hillridge joins us. Ironic it’s the day after we handed his former team a defeat, but he’s stepping out of a Vengeance uniform and into a Titans’ one.

Ava’s tone is lazy, her fingers sliding back and forth over my chest. “No one should be this excited to go to work, but it’s my first full day after training. I’ll be working on changing Shelley’s newsletter over to a more robust platform. I talked to her about it, and she gave me the go-ahead.”

Chuckling, I squeeze her. “I love how something that might seem small to others is a big deal to you. You cherish the small things.”

“She’s taking a chance on me. It means a lot.”

“Why don’t you stay here and work rather than go back to your apartment?” Boy, those words popped out with no thought, but I can’t take them back. Besides, it’s not like I’m asking her to move in. Just stay here during the day since I’ll be back tonight.

“Are you sure?” she asks hesitantly.

“Absolutely,” I reply, taking stock of my feelings. Yeah... I meant that. “It will be easier on you.”

“Okay, then. That’s very sweet.” Her voice is barely a whisper, and I’ve come to know her sleeping habits enough to guess that she’s not far from going under. Her hand moves from my chest to my waist, and she gives me a squeeze. “Better be careful, Cannon. You’re going to make me fall for you, then we’re both in trouble.”

My hand freezes on the back of her head, and I wait for her to say something else. Those few words make me question everything once again. Am I not setting clear enough boundaries? Do I have to modify my behavior, so she doesn’t expect more from me?

Or is it possible I’m making more of this than I should? It was probably just a jest, especially since we always talk openly about our personal wants and desires. Ava is the type who, if she wants more, will tell me point-blank.

I’m sure of it.

I have that much trust in her.

Ultimately, she doesn’t say anything else, and I brush my lips over the top of her head. Within moments, she’s breathing deeply and I can move her off me without waking her up.

But I don’t.

I ponder what this is between us. It’s more than I’ve had before—besides Melissa. Not surprising, as Ava is very different from the women I’ve dated in the past.

I seriously contemplate why I’m so uneasy about her developing deeper feelings for me, which means I either have

to step up to meet them... or cut her loose.

The only thing I come up with is that I can't get past the failure of my marriage because I was never able to give Melissa what she wanted. At first, it was all sunshine and rainbows.

Much the way it feels right now with Ava.

In the end, it was bitterness and the desire for both of us to escape the nastiness we kept hurling at each other.

I don't want to go through that again. Moreover, I don't want Ava to be subjected to something that could hurt her because she's already been hurt and let down by a man in her life.

Gently, I slide out from under her body, having come up with no answers to my hypotheticals. I decide to give myself a mental break from my love life and watch some game video.

CHAPTER 22

Cannon

I KNOCK ON Brienne's partially open office door and enter before waiting for an answer. She's expecting me as we'll be welcoming Bain Hillridge to the team soon. Callum is currently giving him the grand tour of the arena.

Sitting behind her desk with her laptop in front of her, the owner of the Pittsburgh Titans looks different to me. Maybe it's because she was outed last night by Drake on a local TV news clip that has since gone national, but she looks relaxed.

Her head lifts and she smiles at me. "Come on in."

I move to her guest chair and plop down. "Not sure if congratulations are in order. What exactly is appropriate when one of my players kisses the owner on TV?"

Brienne is no shrinking violet, and there's not even a hint of embarrassment on her face. In fact, she grins almost mischievously. "I think something like 'You go, girl' is appropriate."

"You go girl," I parrot, and we laugh.

She picks up a newspaper from her desk and holds it out to me. "Have you seen it?"

Shaking my head, I take the paper, flipping it over to see the massive headline: *Titans' Goalie Shocks Team Owner With Kiss.*

My eyes snap to hers, and she nods with bemusement. Gaze going back to the article, I read it out loud.

"Pittsburgh Titans goalie Drake McGinn is no stranger to making headlines. Having spent the last year battling allegations of betting on hockey and

throwing games to benefit financially, followed by a messy divorce, McGinn has had his share of the spotlight. After leaving the league as a result of the allegations, which were proven false, McGinn has managed to keep his personal life out of the media in recent months.

“But last night, Drake McGinn once again set the hockey world abuzz when he seemingly announced his relationship with Titans’ team owner, Brienne Norcross. Following a post-game interview, McGinn made a very public declaration, stating he was “stupid in love” with Norcross before kissing her in front of cameras and media personnel. Norcross looked stunned for a moment before returning McGinn’s kiss... and his pronouncement of love.

“An embattled hockey star and the billionaire team owner who took over following a devastating plane crash? Hollywood doesn’t have anything on this Pittsburgh love story.”

Setting the paper back on her desk, I say, “Wow. That’s, um... quite the...” I pause, searching for the words, and finally just ask, “Did he really say he was stupid in love with you?”

Brienne rolls her eyes at my playful jab. “He did. He’s a romantic. You should take notes.”

The reference to Ava allows me to transition the conversation. “I hear I owe you thanks for putting Ava’s ex in his place.”

Her blue eyes glitter as if filled with shards of ice. “Outside of us winning last night, that was the highlight of my entire day.”

“Pretty sure Drake professing his love was the highlight of your day,” I tease, and Brienne blushes. Chuckling, I drum my fingers on my thigh and try to sound mildly interested. “Any clue why Derek was there?”

“His boss, Kenneth Heborn, is head of America Life, one of the country’s biggest life insurance companies. He recently took over as CEO and sits on a charitable board with me and came at my invite. He brought a few junior executives who will be partnering with our organization on some joint grassroots charity.”

“Such as?”

“Fun runs, food drives... things that will involve and engage with the community.”

“Interesting.”

Brienne goads me a bit. “Bet you wish you were there to take a shot at him.”

“My shot would have been... let’s say... a lot more forceful than yours.”

She snickers, understanding my meaning, but admonishes anyway. “I can’t condone physical violence.”

“I know. But he deserves an ass-kicking for what he did to Ava.”

“She didn’t give details, but she called him out... said he cheated on her.”

“And had her fired, then kicked her out of the house they shared here.” The anger I felt when I first heard this from Ava rears fierce and hot again. “He left her jobless and homeless.”

“With a broken heart?” Brienne asks.

That stops me a moment. Was her heart broken? We’ve never talked about that. Granted, it’s been months since they broke up, and by all accounts, Ava has moved on.

“You know, I don’t know if her heart was broken,” I admit. “Regardless, at the least, he deserves a broken nose.”

“You’re adorable in your zeal to be Ava’s champion,” she coos.

I grimace at the word. No one has ever called me adorable before, but admittedly, Sophie and Ava thought I was last night at drinks when I revved up a little testosterone display.

“While I’d have to fire you if you got physical,” Brienne drawls with a playful expression, “I can tell you there’s a reception welcoming Kenneth Heborn in as the new CEO. I’m going and I could swing two extra tickets if you want to bring Ava and have a run-in with him.”

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t want to expose her to him.”

“Then you come by yourself. You can have your shot—verbally, of course—of knocking him down about twenty pegs.”

That idea has merit. I could embarrass the fuck out of him in front of his boss—hell, maybe I could even get him fired for what he did to her. Or I could take him aside and tell him how inadequate he was as a lover.

But even as the thrill of taking this guy on pulses through me, my brain tells me to slow the fuck down. It’s too proprietary. It implies a level of commitment and dedication I’ve told myself I won’t compromise on again. Putting myself out there to be Ava’s champion sits her on the same pedestal my wife occupied at one point, and for her, it got awfully lonely up there when I couldn’t be around all the time.

It’s best I just let it go and learn how to deal with the burn of anger over what happened to Ava.

“Thank you for the offer,” I say to Brienne just as there’s a knock on the open door. “But I’ll pass. Sounds like you did a great job of it already.”

“Your loss,” she quips as she stands from her chair to greet Bain and Callum. But before moving around the desk, she adds, “I need you to attend a dinner at my house though, next Monday I want to start having quarterly meetings with Callum and the coaches. To help keep me on top of things.”

I do a mental calculation as I rise from my chair. Monday is a practice day, and I would usually make plans with Ava that

night. It sucks that one of our moments will be taken away, but I can't deny the boss when she says I need to be there.

"Got it," I say and then we both turn to Callum, leading Bain Hillridge in.

Our new defenseman is a beast of a man, standing nearly six foot seven without skates on. Despite his size, he's super light on his feet with sharp reflexes.

He also packs a powerful punch and will be our top enforcer, handing out punishment to anyone who would dare try to rough up our forwards. I know it had to be tough on him to leave a team that just won back-to-back Cups, and I'm sure it was even harder to come to a team in a rebuilding phase, since it could take us years to reach the top again.

But when we talked a few times on the phone, he seemed eager to join the team and prove his worth to us. He was more than excited to be back on the same team as Baden as they were close friends when they played together in Arizona.

Callum introduces us officially, since neither Brienne nor I have met Bain in person. All the trade negotiations were handled by Callum with the players' agents, then approved by the league.

"I'm so glad to have you on our team," Brienne says warmly. "And I'll tell you the same thing I've told every other player—I'm here if you need me. That door is always open."

"I really appreciate it," Bain says, his voice a rich baritone one would expect from a man so large. "I'm excited to be part of this team and think this organization has done an incredible job of rebuilding." Bain then turns to me. "And the scuttlebutt in the league is that you're the premier coach to play for, so I'm eager to see how you're going to teach me to be better."

I shrug off the compliment, as I always do. "Well, it's not just me but the team of coaches at my side. Regardless, you're bringing tremendous depth to our team, so I imagine there's not a lot of new stuff to teach you."

Callum looks at his watch. “Okay, enough chitchat. We’ve got the press waiting.”

We head to the arena’s press room, a large space filled with rows of chairs and a small dais at the front with a long table that seats up to five. The table cover has the Titans’ logo on the front, and there’s a backdrop done in dark gray and covered in a repeating pattern of the team logo. Three sets of microphones are set up on the table.

This is where I give postgame press conferences, and it’s where we’ll discuss the trade of Nolan Carrier and a second-round draft pick for Bain Hillridge. It will only be me, Callum, and Bain at the table fielding questions from sports reporters. Brienne won’t join us, which is a good thing today as I’m sure most questions lobbed to her would be about the kiss as well as this morning’s newspaper article. We’ve allotted fifteen minutes for the conference and then the team will hit the ice for practice.



TO THE CASUAL observer, it might look like I don’t do much but watch and scowl at our games and practices. You’ll find me behind the players’ bench with a small pad and pen in my hand, jotting down notes to discuss later with the assistant coaches.

Before games and practices, however, I meet with my assistants, and we go over everything we want to achieve. Then I let them run the show, taking my notes and offering guidance when needed.

I know that makes it sound as if I am a hands-off coach, but on the contrary. Everything that is done on and off the ice is ultimately at my direction and employing my strategies, but I delegate downward.

I’m watching Bain run hinge regrouping drills with his new first line. While I’d watched a ton of video of this guy before we decided to make an offer for him, I’m still astounded by how smooth he is on the ice—both forward and

backward—given his size. My pad of paper stays firmly in my hand as I don't see a single thing today that I need to write down to pass along to him.

It's a good first practice, and if he plays the way he did with the Vengeance, he'll keep the first-line position. That will pressure Camden if he wants to move up, but he first needs to figure out how to secure his second-line position. I watch him take the ice with Hendrix, and after they hinge, Camden's pass is just a tiny bit out of reach of Hendrix, who has to make a slight lunge for it.

I pull out my pad and make a note. I'm not going to do anything with that piece of information other than memorialize it. It will be part of our after-practice debrief.

We stay on the ice only an hour as we have a game tomorrow, although many of the guys will get in a light workout. Mostly, though, my preference is for them to relax today. Well-rested players are strong players.

Baden, Gage, Maurice, and Sam meet me in my office after practice, and we roundtable everything we observed while we devour the sandwiches my assistant had delivered.

As the meeting winds down, I can't help but ask, "Did anyone else know about Drake and Brienne?"

Maurice and Sam shake their heads, but Baden and Gage exchange a look before Baden says, "I only found out before the game yesterday. I was telling him he needed to get his head out of his ass."

Now that makes sense. "They have some sort of falling out that made him play shitty on the road last week?"

"Yeah," Baden says with a smirk. "Had no clue he was going to come out to the world the way he did though."

"I knew a little longer. Apparently, Jenna knew, and Drake assumed that meant she'd told me—which she had not—and he sort of outed himself."

“Another example of love fucking with a career,” Maurice mutters. He’s a confirmed bachelor at age fifty-six and is adamant he has no desire to get tied down. He’s crusty, grumpy, and hard to be around outside of the arena, but he’s a hell of a coach.

And he’s not wrong about love fucking with a career. Or rather, in my case, it was my career fucking with love. But it’s obviously interchangeable.

“I imagine we’ll be seeing you on the front page of the *Times* before too long,” Baden says with a sly grin.

“What makes you think that?” I ask with a laugh.

“Because of that lip-lock you laid on Ava last night at Mario’s. You’re totally gracing the photo gallery of many a fan phone today.”

Chuckling, I crumple the remains of my sandwich wrapper. “If that’s hot news, then people need to get a life. Besides, it’s not serious.”

I wipe at the crumbs on the table, noting the silence.

I look up and then around at four faces staring back at me as if I’m full of shit.

“It’s not serious,” I assert as I pick up my trash and stand from the table. “Ava and I have clear boundaries in this relationship. She knows my career comes first.”

“What does your career and having a relationship have to do with each other?” Gage asks. He looks over to Baden, then back to me. “We’ve got serious relationships, and we still give a hundred and ten percent to our jobs.”

I don’t have an answer to that. The jaded part of me wants to tell them it won’t last. That at some point, Sophie and Jenna will hate how much they’re gone.

But there’s a piece of me—the man who still believes in possibilities—that wonders if Ava is different.

I mean... I already know she's unique. She stands apart from the two other women I dated somewhat seriously by the mere fact that those relationships were kept private. They were not invited into my public life and ultimately, that's part of why I called it off with them. They wanted to be at my side after games and at team events. They wanted to be holding my hand when cameras were flashing, and they wanted the public displays of affection. All things I refused to let myself give, because by letting them into my professional world, I'd be giving tacit permission for them to use that career against me.

But with Ava... I opened the door and brought her right through without hesitation. I did that the first time I got her a ticket to a game and then sealed the deal that this is a different type of relationship when I brought her along for the away trip last week.

Kissing her at Mario's pretty much guaranteed I'd broken all my rules that had held firm and strong the last nine years. I put her at my side publicly, and for all those who wondered if I could give my heart again after my wife died, they're thinking that it's going to happen.

After tossing my lunch trash in the can and ignoring Gage's question, I say, "Let's take a half-hour break so I can go through my notes, and we'll meet with Jack in the film room."

It's the last thing we have to do as coaches—go through compiled clips that our video coach and pre-scout staff put together on tomorrow's opponent, the Minnesota Raiders.

When my office is empty, I call Ava with no guilt since I'm on a break.

Liar.

I've got a hundred things to do, and I normally would be using this "break" to get stuff done.

Still, no guilt. I can budget the time, and I want to see how she's doing. When I left this morning, she was happily sipping a cup of coffee at my kitchen table and working on her laptop.

That was after I woke up to find the bed empty, Ava in the kitchen making breakfast, and me working through the feelings of really enjoying seeing her there.

Waking up to a morning shared with someone.

“Hey, Coach,” she quips as she answers.

“How’s work going?” I ask as I settle back into my chair and kick my feet up on my desk.

“Amazing,” she gushes. “I just had a meeting with Shelley, and she’s just so energetic and loved my suggestions on the newsletter. I mean, I’ve never had a boss who gave me a chance to do something big or risky, and she’s doing it, and I’ve only worked for her a week.”

“I’m really happy for you.” So fucking happy that she’s finally getting the things she deserves. “Maybe Derek firing you was supposed to happen to lead you to Shelley.”

“And to you.” She laughs, and something in my chest expands and contracts with pleasure. “Oh, and she’s coming to Pittsburgh in a few weeks to meet with one of her speakers. She wants to take me out to dinner, and I know you probably can’t do it with your crazy schedule, but she invited ‘my significant other’ too, and well... that’s you.”

“When is it?” I ask, putting her on speaker and pulling up my calendar.

“The twenty-second. It’s the day before a home game, so —”

“I can do it,” I say without hesitation. I’m in town and the next game is home, so it’s the perfect time for me.

“Really?” she breathes out almost like I’ve given her the most precious gift ever.

“Really.”

“You’re the best,” she says. “I know it’s hard for you—”

“It’s fine, Ava. I can make the time, and I’d love to meet Shelley.”

“You’re awesome,” she murmurs, and then almost as if she’s embarrassed about saying that, she adds, “I raided your pantry and fridge and found the makings of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich—you’re almost out of peanut butter, by the way—and in my raiding, I saw enough ingredients that I can whip us up some pasta for dinner tonight.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Before I left this morning, we had a bit of a make-out session in the kitchen, and when we came up for air, I asked her to dinner as well as to stay the night again. “I was going to take you out somewhere fancy.”

“Who needs fancy when I’m going to make my spaghetti and jarred tomato sauce?” she says with a laugh.

Who needs fancy indeed? Ava has repetitively shunned the spotlight and perks of dating a wealthy, famous man. It’s another thing that has set her apart from the women I’ve dated in the past.

“How about we compromise and stay in, watch a movie, and order Italian to be delivered?” I suggest.

“Deal,” she says. “Do you mind if I use your washing machine? I hadn’t planned on staying tonight, and I’d like clean panties for tomorrow.”

A thought strikes, even though I know it’s contrary to the carefully laid boundaries we’ve established.

“Why don’t you run home and grab enough to stay until our away trip on Thursday?” I didn’t ask Ava to go on that trip, so I wouldn’t mind having her in my bed at least for the next three nights.

She doesn’t respond right away, and I can practically hear the gears in her head clicking as she runs through all the reasons why she should decline. This is my fault, of course, since I made things a little stilted with the open and honest discussion about how my wife hated the demands of my career and how it ultimately killed our relationship.

I scrub my hand through my hair and wish to fuck I hadn’t even gone there with her.

Ava's reply is tentative. "I guess I could do that. If you're sure—"

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't sure," I say, although I'm a bit irritated—at myself—that I have to reassure her.

"Okay then, I'll do that."

I lean forward and glance at my iPad with my list of today's meetings. "I can be home around seven tonight. I'll have food delivered around eight, if that works."

"That works fine, and as soon as I get my first paycheck, I'm going to buy the ingredients to make you my famous chicken and spinach stuffed shells."

I wince that she can't even afford to go to the grocery store to buy food to cook for me, and I practically have to bite my tongue off to keep from offering her money or my credit card. She wouldn't accept, and it would probably piss her off.

So I merely say, "That sounds really good. I can't wait."

"It is good. You'll love it."

"I have to get going," I say, pulling my legs off the desk and lowering my voice. "If you greet me at the door naked, it will be very much worth eating cold Italian that will be left in the hallway since we'll be too busy to answer the knock."

Ava laughs, low and sexy, and it punches straight through to my dick. "We'll have to see about that. See you tonight."

She hangs up, and it's a hardship not to make some excuse to go home right now and fuck her. I don't have the time. I'd have to cancel meetings, but I could talk myself into it.

It's a struggle, but instead I grab my laptop and head out of my office, intent on hitting up our video coach a little earlier than planned, if for nothing more than to get my mind off Ava.

CHAPTER 23

Ava

“THIS TOAST IS to Cannon,” Jenna says, holding up her champagne flute. “For being the greatest coach for the Titans and for getting us a limo so we don’t have to drive tonight.”

“Cheers,” I agree, tapping my glass to hers as Sophie clinks hers too.

I take a sip and settle back into the booth. Jenna and Sophie sit across from me, their cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling from the champagne. I’m sure I look much the same way, but I’m also riding high on more than the bubbly.

Cannon is on a road trip with a game yesterday in Florida and another tomorrow in Atlanta before he comes home. I chose to stay here so I could really dive into my new job, and also because I can’t have him buying tickets for me to fly around the country with him. It speaks to the independence I need after Derek fucked up my head.

And while I stick by my decision not to go, it doesn’t mean I don’t miss him. Other than the away games, there hasn’t been a day when we haven’t seen each other since we started dating. Granted, it’s often those stolen moments, as he likes to call them, usually in the form of a late-night dinner, mind-blowing sex, and cuddling in his bed. And honestly, I can live with that. He’s busy and is setting aside time for me. With me starting this new job, I’m busy as well, and I’m also fulfilled by the work I’m doing. If this is how my life is going to go for the foreseeable future, I’m all in. And if something more grows with Cannon, even better.

But for tonight, I am going to revel in the fact that I have an amazing boyfriend.

Yes, my boyfriend. Significant other. Partner.

They all sound like I belong, and they belong to me.

Tonight is a girls' night, compliments of Sophie and Jenna. The other two women who Sophie hangs out with regularly are Stone's girlfriend, Harlow, and Coen Highsmith's girlfriend, Tillie. Unfortunately, Harlow went to the away games, and Tillie is back home in Coudersport where she lives, although I'll be meeting them both at Cannon's surprise birthday party in three days. I learned that Tillie's an artist with a business there, and she and Coen are making a long-distance relationship work. This gives me more confidence that Cannon and I can have something meaningful, even if we aren't spending all our time together.

Our night started off with a huge surprise—Cannon hired a limousine to cart me, Sophie, and Jenna around Pittsburgh. We went out to a nice dinner, which stressed me out a little as I am down to counting pennies in my bank account. But my first paycheck is in three days, so I decided to use my credit card.

Except when we finished dinner, we learned that Cannon had already paid for it. At first, we were shocked because we didn't know how Cannon even knew where we were. But we figured out quickly since Sophie had texted Baden and he must have told Cannon. Those guys are currently in Atlanta, doing God knows what this evening before tomorrow's game.

We then had the limousine take us to a new champagne bar that just opened, and we've been working on our first bottle.

A waiter approaches our table with a fresh offering in one hand and three new flutes in the other. He places the flutes down and holds the champagne out for us to inspect. "A 1995 Krug Clos d'Ambonnay, compliments of Cannon West."

My mouth drops in astonishment that he knows we're here. I look across the table to Sophie and Jenna, and they both shake their heads, a silent statement that they didn't text their other halves that we were coming here.

And then it hits me. Cannon hired the limousine, and the driver must be reporting where he's taking us.

Nothing creepy about that. In fact, it's charming.

"That's an incredibly expensive bottle of champagne," Jenna says as the waiter pops the cork.

"How expensive?" I ask as our glasses are filled.

"We sell this bottle for thirty-four hundred dollars," the waiter says, and I nearly choke while Sophie gasps.

"That man is suave," Jenna says in awe.

When the waiter leaves after depositing the rest of the bottle in the ice bucket beside our table, we all raise the newly filled glasses and toast Cannon again. "To the most thoughtful and romantic boyfriend of the group," Sophie says with a giggle. "Baden is going to have to work on his A game after this."

I can't laugh, though. I'm still stunned that he'd spend that much on a bottle of champagne for us. I take a delicate sip, wanting to savor every nuance so I can tell Cannon all about it.

When I set my flute down, I'm struck with a need. I never call Cannon during work hours, but I've got enough champagne in me to feel a little daring. Besides, it's almost eleven p.m., and surely any work he might be doing won't suffer if I call him.

I choose to FaceTime him instead of a regular call, and he answers after the second ring. As the video connects and his face fills the entire screen of my phone, I have that moment again—a bolt of yearning when I first see him. He looks delicious, especially with the five o'clock shadow gracing his strong jaw. I can tell he's sitting up in his hotel room against the bed, the collar of his white T-shirt barely showing at the bottom of the screen.

He grins at me. "Are you drunk?"

"I'm incredibly tipsy, which is why I'm calling you. I didn't want to interrupt your work."

Cannon's smile softens. "You can never interrupt me, Ava. And seeing your face has made my night."

“We just wanted to thank you for paying for dinner, plying us with expensive champagne, and taking care of our transportation tonight.”

“Yeah,” Jenna says from across the table, and I flip the phone around so Cannon can see her. She and Sophie lean in together, lifting their glasses. “Thank you, Cannon. Please make sure you tell our guys that they need to step it up.”

I turn the phone back around to find Cannon laughing.

“I miss you,” I say and resist the urge to clap my hand over my mouth. Cannon and I have never shared words like that, and I’m always afraid it might put him off. The other night when I was teasing that I might fall for him, his silence told me all I needed to know.

I need to be careful with the things I say.

Cannon smiles, and to my surprise says, “I miss you too.”

A surge of joy rushes through me, and I glance across the table to see Sophie and Jenna watching me with sappy expressions. My gaze returns to Cannon. “I’m going to let you go. I hope you have a good night’s sleep, and you better kick ass tomorrow.”

“I will. Y’all be careful and enjoy yourselves.”

“Bye.” I tap my screen to disconnect the call.

“Okay,” Jenna says as she leans forward, resting her forearms on the table and clasping her hands. “You’ve got to give me more about this relationship with Cannon. I mean, everybody on the team knows he’s an amazing, upstanding guy. But he’s also never been known to date.”

“He’s dated before,” I say.

“Not publicly,” Sophie says. “He never takes women to events.”

“How do you know?” I know this because Cannon and I have talked about it.

Sophie waves her hand at me in dismissal. “I googled him, of course. We all did once we found out he was going to be our coach.”

“It looks like it’s getting serious between you two,” Jenna muses.

I lift a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “I don’t know what we are. It’s complicated.”

“Because he’s a widower?”

“Not really,” I say. And while I would never give away specific details of what Cannon shared with me regarding his relationship with Melissa, I feel confident in explaining the way he’s dealt with the grief. “It was nine years ago, and while Cannon went through a very dark time following Melissa’s death, he’s processed it well. He grieves and has his sad moments, but he has moved on with his life.”

“As well he should,” Sophie says. “People wonder if he’s really past it since he hasn’t dated anyone seriously. But here he is, sharing big displays of affection in public and showering you with road trips and fancy champagne.”

“Our moments together are great. But Cannon has an incredibly demanding career, and I’m just trying to figure out where I fit in.”

“Okay,” Jenna says, leaning in closer. Sophie mimics her actions so she can hear what she has to say. “How is the sex? Because I’m sorry, he just looks like he would be really, really good at it.”

I snort and then laugh. I sip the champagne and once I swallow, I admit, “Let’s just say I thought I knew what sex was before meeting Cannon, but clearly I didn’t.”

Jenna nods with sage wisdom in her expression. “He puts you first, doesn’t he? And no one has ever done that in bed with you before.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I have the same thing, and I recognize that in you. Sophie has it, too, I bet.”

“I am not talking about my sex life with Baden,” Sophie says sternly and then immediately giggles. “Oh, who am I kidding. I’m totally going to talk about it.”

For the next twenty minutes, fueled by champagne, we share the highlights from our relationships. We compare notes, though not exactly in a tasteful way.

Okay, maybe in a very lewd way. I’m not sure we would be giving this level of detail if it weren’t for the bubbly.

My phone rings and I snatch it up, assuming it’s Cannon. I’m stunned when I see Derek is calling me. I hadn’t removed him from my contacts.

I flip the phone toward Sophie and Jenna. “It’s my ex-boyfriend.”

“The one Brienne so thoroughly humiliated at the game?” Sophie asks, and when I nod, she says, “Answer it. See what he wants.”

It was only five days ago that we were with Brienne in the owner’s suite at the arena. After she made it expressly clear to Derek that I had not only moved on but was doing quite well for myself, I never thought I’d hear from him again.

And I have just enough curiosity to answer. “Hello?”

“Hey... Ava, it’s Derek.”

No shit. “Why are you calling?”

There is silence on the other end for a moment, but then he says, “I’ve been thinking a lot since I saw you at the game. I think it was a bit of a wake-up call for me.”

“Wake-up call?” I ask, frowning in confusion.

“That I made a mistake. That cheating on you was probably the worst mistake I ever made. And that I miss you.”

My jaw drops, but I collect myself. “You made a mistake in cheating on me? How about having me fired, then kicking me out of our home? I had no money, nowhere to go.”

“I know. But I was just so angry that you had confronted me—”

“You were angry? You jackass, I had every right to confront you about cheating on me. And fine, that was the end of our relationship, so be it. But I worked in a different area of the company, and you never had to see me again. You could’ve given me a few days to get a place to live before you kicked me out. You could’ve done so many other things to make it easier for me to transition, but you didn’t. You are the biggest asshole I’ve ever known, and I cannot understand, for the life of me, why you are even calling.”

“To apologize,” he says. “I was hoping maybe we could meet for a drink so I could do this in person.”

It’s with astonishment that I push the mute button and look across the table at my friends. “He’s calling to apologize and wants to meet for a drink so he can do it in person.”

Jenna rolls her eyes dramatically and snatches my phone from my hand. I watch as she unmutes it and then puts it to her ear, “Listen here, douchebag... the only reason you’re calling Ava is because you know she’s hot shit right now. Great friends with Brienne Norcross and dating Cannon West. You either want to get in on that action or you want to break them up so you can feel like a real man. But I’m here to tell you, it’s not going to work. Ava and Cannon are deeply in love, so there’s no way she’d ever look twice at you again. Take your apologies and shove them straight up your ass.”

And then she disconnects the phone.

My eyes bug out of my head, and my mouth hangs open. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“That was...,” Sophie says, but then pauses, at a loss for words.

“The most amazing, spectacular thing I have ever witnessed in my life,” I gush, and then laugh hysterically.

Jenna and Sophie join in, and we spend the rest of the evening finishing off our champagne, making fun of Derek, and lifting more toasts to Cannon for making it such a great night.

CHAPTER 24

Cannon

AFTER EXITING AND locking up my car, I pocket my keys and pull out my phone. As I walk up the driveway to Brienne's house for the coaches' dinner she's hosting, I make a quick call to Ava.

I almost hang up after four rings, but then she answers. "Hey... what's up?"

"Just getting ready to go into Brienne's for this dinner. Thought I'd do a quick check-in. What are you doing?"

It definitely sucks not being able to see her tonight. Because I don't know how long this dinner will run, she's staying at her apartment.

"Oh, I'm just settled on my couch to get some work done."

"Well, I wish I were with you instead of here," I say.

And that's the absolute truth. There are some things in my job I don't enjoy, and while attending a business dinner isn't overly bad, the fact it's keeping me from Ava leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

What's worse is that I'm leaving tomorrow for an away game to DC, so I won't see Ava until the day after that.

"I'll call you tonight when I'm on my way home, if it's not too late."

"It won't be too late," she assures me. "I'll talk to you later."

I walk up the porch steps and ring the doorbell. "Talk to you later. Bye."

I no sooner get my phone in my pocket than the door swings open and what seems like hundreds of voices scream,

“Surprise!”

I’m having a hard time processing what I’m seeing, but right before me stands Brienne and, to my utter shock, Ava, grinning at me.

I start to make out other faces—all my hockey players, the other coaches and their significant others, the equipment staff, the trainers, and even some of the front office staff.

My eyes go back to Ava, and as I step across the threshold, she moves into me. With her hands to my shoulders, she goes up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. “Happy early birthday, Cannon. Hope you’re not too shocked.”

I come out of my stupor and circle an arm around her waist to pull her into a hug. I whisper into her ear, “Did you do all this?”

She pulls back to look me in the eye. “It was mostly Brienne, providing the place and funding, but she let me plan it all. We had to have it tonight, though, since you’ll be in DC tomorrow for your birthday.”

Releasing Ava, I turn to Brienne, who is standing there with Drake. His arm drapes over her shoulders, and I step into her to kiss her cheek. “Thank you. You sure surprised the shit out of me.”

She laughs and then calls out, “Okay, people... disperse. Get back to the food and drinks and we’ll congregate soon for birthday cake.”

Brienne and Drake walk off, but other people move in, wishing me a happy birthday.

I take Ava’s hand and we mingle as we talk to all the guests. Ava has met a good chunk of them already, but I make introductions where necessary. Someone brings me and Ava beers, and we eventually circle over to a room with a large buffet. Another table holds a massive sheet cake with a large hockey puck on top and “Happy Birthday, Coach!” written in purple icing with the Titans’ logo below it.

Ava and I plate up food and walk through the Norcross mansion until we find an empty corner where we can talk.

“I still can’t believe that you not only did this, but that I had no clue.”

“I’m very good at keeping secrets,” she quips with a grin. “Just in case you ever need to share any with me in the future.”

“So noted,” I reply. “And here I was bemoaning that I wasn’t going to see you tonight.”

“Oh, I have a good birthday present for you later,” she promises, and there’s enough innuendo in her tone that if I could get away with it, I’d drag her out of here right now and take her back to my condo.

But it’s my party, and that would be rude. We finish our food and return to mingling. Somehow, Ava gets pulled off into a group of women consisting of Sophie, Harlow, Jenna, and Tillie. I use the opportunity to check on Bain, who’s standing with a group of the other players. I clap a hand on his shoulder, and he turns to me. Offering his hand for a shake, he says, “Happy birthday, Coach. What are you, like, twenty-two or something?”

I laugh because that’s the running joke since I’m the youngest coach in the league. “You settling in okay?”

“Doing fantastic. Really happy about the transition here and feeling good with my line mates.”

I nod and clap him on the shoulder again. “You keep up the good work.”

I move around some more, always keeping my eye on Ava. I’d like to steal her away and bring her back to my side, but I can’t deny how much I enjoy the way she is assimilating so well with the people on this team. Mostly the players’ girlfriends and a few of the coaches, but it makes me happy to see her so engaged. Although I fucking hate making comparisons, Melissa was never one to get involved in team social functions. It’s not that she didn’t support me as a player,

because she did, and she attended the events that were expected. But she never developed friendships with anyone. In hindsight, maybe that was why she was so lonely when I was on road trips. She didn't have anybody as her support system.

I exit the library and turn the corner to head back into the sitting room where a bar has been set up. I run smack-dab into an all-out fight between Hendrix and his girlfriend, Tracy. I met her earlier in the evening and was not impressed. She clung tight to Hendrix's arm and looked bored when he was talking to other people. We were standing in a group, and she kept trying to get his attention back on her, and I could tell it embarrassed him.

I'm starting to see why the other players don't think she's good for him, but then I hear her say, "We've spent enough time here already. We need to go."

"This is my team, Tracy. It's my coach's birthday, and I want to hang out."

"You already spend enough time with these people, and you don't spend hardly any time with me."

I immediately turn around and walk away, their conversation almost duplicative of the many I had with Melissa over the years. I'd love to pull Hendrix aside and tell him to dump her because she's trying to compete for his attention over the team, and it won't end well. But I don't, because he hasn't asked for my advice, and I'm not going to nose into his business.

A warm hand slips into mine, and I look down to see Ava. She smiles up at me. "Happy birthday."

I bend down to kiss her. "You've already wished me happy birthday."

"I'll do it again a few more times," she says. "So get used to it."

"Are you having fun?"

Ava's eyes shine with happiness. "You work with the absolute best people. All the players are so great, and the women feel like sisters to me."

I squeeze her hand. "I'm glad. I like seeing you in my world."

She tips her head back as if to ready herself for a kiss, and I dip closer to give it to her, but then Brienne calls out, "Everybody gather in the dining room for the birthday cake."

There are two entrances through to the dining room, and everybody crowds as close as possible, just barely squeezing in. Brienne beckons me and Ava over to her where Drake finishes lighting the last of the candles. "Let's sing a fast happy birthday to Cannon before all thirty-seven of these candles catch the cake on fire."

There's laughter, but then everyone bursts into song. Ava's voice rings clear as she sings, her arm wrapped around my back and her other hand pressed to my stomach.

When the song ends, Ava says, "Make a wish."

I lean forward, and the first thing that comes to mind is that I wish things could remain this perfect with Ava as we move forward. I suck in the biggest lungful I can manage and blow out all those fuckers in one attempt.

Everybody cheers, and I pull Ava to me where I give her a hard kiss. When I let her up, I see our social media person standing there, taking pictures of us, and there's no doubt in my mind this will show up on the team's Instagram. I'd like to say I'm bothered by it, but I'm not.

I'm too fulfilled to be bothered by anything tonight.



TWO MONSTROUS ORGASMS in the books—one for each of us—and my birthday celebration is coming to an end for the evening.

"I know your birthday isn't officially until tomorrow, but..." Ava rolls away from me and bends over my bed,

reaching underneath it. I'm shocked that she stowed something under there, and when she rolls back, she's holding a small blue gift bag with white tissue paper. "I got my first paycheck, and the first thing I bought was your birthday present."

I sit up against the headboard and pull her into me as I accept the bag. "That orgasm you just gave me was present enough."

"That doesn't count because you gave me an orgasm too," she says primly, then nudges me in the ribs. "Open it."

Laughing, I reach into the bag, past the tissue paper, and pull out a leather-covered journal. It's small enough to fit in my palm and has an ink pen attached to the spine inside a leather sleeve.

"I thought it would be nice for you to hold this during the games to make your notes in, rather than that little spiral notebook you use."

I'm beyond touched by the thoughtfulness of her gift. "It's perfect. I will absolutely use it."

"And then I figured, you should save them. You could always keep a box of your journals of game notes. It'll be interesting one day to look back through them."

Warmth flushes through me that she would look out for my future in that way, that she recognizes these are memories in the making that I'm taking for granted, but they might be important to me down the road.

I put the journal and bag on my bedside table before turning to her. We lie facing each other, close enough I can put my arm around her waist. "It really meant a lot to me that you would help plan my birthday party."

"It was my pleasure."

"You're starting to mean a lot to me," I say gruffly, helpless to stop this confession.

Ava jerks slightly in my hold, and I can tell I've shocked her. "Ditto," she murmurs.

And that's all I need to hear back.

"I wanted to talk to you about the next few weeks," I say, and Ava tips her head in curiosity. "After tomorrow's away game, I'll be in Pittsburgh until Thanksgiving, except for the away game the day before. I was wondering if you would like to stay here the entire time, even during that away game, and we could celebrate Thanksgiving together. That is, unless you want to go home for Thanksgiving. But you hadn't said anything."

"I haven't decided what to do. I assumed you would go visit your family."

I shake my head. I'd like to go visit them and I could, but I would have to fly there and literally fly back the next day. That's a lot of travel for only about ten hours of family time.

"So you really want me to stay here until then?"

"It's definitely easier when you're here. I live close to the arena, and you live outside of town." I tell myself I'm not exactly asking her to move in, but I would like her to stay here more. "Maybe you could just keep some of your clothes here. Duplicates of toiletries. That way you don't have to worry about carting stuff back and forth."

There. Definitely not an invitation to move in, but an open door to stay more often.

You know, for convenience.

"Okay," Ava says, and I exhale my relief. "I'll bring some stuff to keep here, and I'll plan on staying at least through Thanksgiving. Since you're going to be gone the day before Thanksgiving, I'll handle prepping all the food."

"Perfect," I say, leaning in to kiss her. When I pull back, she gives a little yawn. "Now, let's get some sleep."

I release her, reaching back to the table for my phone so I can set our alarm. There's a notification that I've been tagged on Instagram by the Titans.

I tap the screen and the post comes up. It's not a picture of the kiss I gave Ava after I blew out my candles but when we'd just pulled apart and were smiling at each other. The look is intimate, both our faces full of joy.

I turn the phone to Ava. "We're official."

She leans in and makes a soft sound in her throat. "Oh, that's such a good picture of us." Her eyes then slide to me. "Is this weird?"

"A little," I admit as I look at the photo again. "But mostly, it's pretty amazing."

"Yeah," she agrees, snuggling into me. "It's pretty amazing."

CHAPTER 25

Ava

I AWAKEN EASILY when Cannon walks into the bedroom. I'm usually a sound sleeper, but I knew he would be coming back from the game in Washington, and I was so excited, I just couldn't fall into a hard slumber.

I'd left the bedside light on for him so there'd be no stumbling around in the dark. "Hey," I murmur, lifting up on my elbow.

"Didn't mean to wake you," he says with apology and immediately starts stripping.

"I wanted you to." I watch parts of his body revealed with every article of clothing he removes. "Happy birthday."

He smiles at me as he shoves his pants and briefs down, kicking them off. "My birthday was yesterday."

"Technically," I reply, eyes darting to the bedside clock. It's a little after one a.m., and his birthday officially ended an hour ago. "But since you weren't here for the actual event, I've got a birthday kiss waiting for you."

Cannon grins as he slides into bed and opens his arms. I move into him and accept his mouth on mine for a luxuriously slow kiss.

"Happy birthday," I whisper, and then roll over so my back is to his front. His strong arms pull me into his body.

I feel weirdly hyped with desire but also calm and replete with peace. The mere fact that Cannon can evoke such dichotomous feelings within me only affirms how special he is.

“Mmm, you feel good,” he murmurs, doing nothing more than holding me tight. I know he’s not going to be content just to cuddle because I can feel his erection at my backside, but he seems in no hurry.

My arms come over his, and I wiggle my rear against him.

Cannon sucks air through his teeth, growling into my ear. “That’s a good way to get yourself fucked fast.”

God, I love his dirty talk so much, and it only makes me writhe against him more, my ass pressing firmly against his cock.

He growls, a sure indication I’m driving him crazy. I love it when Cannon is a little hard and rough in his zeal to have me, but he merely rolls me onto my back and bends over to place his mouth against mine.

The kiss is immediately erotic. It’s a slow mating of our lips with his tongue lazily searching for mine. His hand comes to the side of my face, cupping it as he nibbles against my lips. I turn toward him, matching his movement with my palm against his cheek.

I don’t know how long we kiss, but Cannon takes his time. His lips slide along my jaw, down my neck, and to my collarbone before he moves his body over mine and settles between my legs.

And then he continues kissing me, deep and claiming. I rotate my hips, seeking friction between us, demanding he give me what I want. I know he wants it too.

My hand slips down to his ass, and I dig my nails in. Cannon hisses and bites my lower lip before licking it. “Do you know how much you drive me crazy?”

“Says the man who said I was on my way to a fast fucking but seems content to just kiss,” I mutter as his lips go back to my neck.

“I’ll get you there, baby. You’ll be screaming soon enough.” Cannon moves down, his stubbled cheeks scraping

against my breast. His mouth closes over a nipple and he sucks hard while his hand squeezes. “But first I want to play a little.”

“Cannon,” I moan as he inches down my body, alternately kissing and nipping at my skin with his teeth.

Pushing my legs apart, Cannon’s eyes move up my body and lock with mine. “This has become my favorite part of any day.”

“What’s that?” I whisper.

“Making you feel good. Making you come.”

My heart contracts from the declaration, and my entire body feels coiled tight like I might burst apart if he touches me again. His mouth lowers, eyes still pinned on me. His breath wafts over my pussy causing my body to tremble violently.

And then his mouth is on me, hot breath and forceful tongue along with gentle flutters like butterfly wings. True to his word, he gets me there, and it’s fast. My orgasm rips through me, and I come so hard, I see stars.

“Gotta let go, Ava.” Cannon’s voice penetrates my thoughts.

“Huh?” I mumble, lifting my head to see that my fingers are threaded through his hair and curled into tight fists. “Sorry,” I gush, releasing him.

Cannon grins and lunges up my body, slamming his mouth back down on mine. I’m drowning in his kiss as he raises one leg to curl around his hip before driving into me.

Bending his head, he looks down between our bodies. “Look, Ava,” he whispers. “Look at me lodged deep inside you.”

“I see.” My voice is hoarse, barely audible.

“Feels so good, doesn’t it?” he asks, almost as if he’s talking to himself.

He gives me no chance to answer because he starts moving, and I can’t come up with a coherent thought as he

slides in and out of my body. His movements are wild, his gaze coming back to meet mine, filled with heat and carnality. Cannon looks like he wants to devour me... not just my body, but my soul.

Sounds rumble around me—curses and grunts as Cannon fucks me faster and harder. I wrap my other leg around him and hang on for the ride.

“Fuck, Ava... I’m going to come but I don’t want to.”

“Don’t hold back,” I pant as his thrusts rocket through me. My fingers slide up his neck, along his jaw, and over his temple. His hips continue to piston, but he focuses on me. “I want you to come hard, Cannon. I want you shredded right along with me.”

“Goddamn,” he mutters just as he plants deep and wraps his arms around me. His weight crushes me onto the mattress as he comes. My hands move to his back, and I feel the muscles along his spine rippling as he groans in pleasure. He grinds against me, face buried in my neck. “Fuck, that’s so good.”

A wave of affection for him sweeps through me that I wouldn’t have thought possible following the eroticism still flowing between us. I want to wrap him up in a warm hug, even as our bodies vibrate with pleasure.

Cannon rolls to the side so he’s not crushing me anymore and loosens his hold. I pull my head back to find him grinning at me.

“I think I’m broken,” he says, pressing a soft kiss to my mouth.

Laughing, I stroke my hand down his arm. “Me too. But in a good way.”

“Yeah, in a good way,” he agrees, letting out a long exhale before his eyes turn serious. “In fact, there’s no good reason on earth why we shouldn’t be doing this every day and twice on Sundays.”

Giggling, I run my foot down his leg. “Unfortunately, we’re not together every day.”

“Which means you should come to more away games,” he says, that boyish smile charming me to my bones.

“I’ll come to some more,” I assure him, but I won’t commit to how many. I still feel a little funky about him paying for my travel.

“Come to next week’s away game,” he says.

“No,” I admonish because we’ve already had this conversation. “That’s the day before Thanksgiving, and I have far too much to do to get ready to knock your socks off with an amazing meal.”

“It better be damn good,” he teases. “Then come to the next away game after that.”

“Okay,” I say and nearly forget to breathe over the look of happiness on his face. One tiny word split his face into the most beautiful smile ever.

“Did Melissa go to away games with you?” I ask.

“Not really.” His fingers play with a lock of my hair. “She wasn’t overly invested in my career. I mean, she came to the home games, but she wasn’t really into it. Not the way the other wives were.”

I consider that. It makes me wonder if she was being selfish or perhaps trying to punish him for being gone. “I bet that hurt your feelings.”

Cannon shrugs. “I’m not sure, to be honest. I was so focused on playing, I’m not sure I really even noticed. And that’s a good example of what was wrong with our marriage. She wasn’t there, and I’m not sure I cared.”

“You know I care about your games, right?” I ask softly. “When I can’t commit to every away game, a lot of that is me feeling weird about you paying.”

“I know,” he assures me. “But I’ll keep asking.”

“And I’ll come to as many as I can. I promise.”

“Does it bother you when we talk about Melissa?” Cannon asks, and I blink in surprise. “I know you asked about her, but —”

“No, not at all.” I prop up on my elbow to look more directly into his eyes. “She was an important part of your life—both the good and the bad—and I just happen to be very interested in you. I want you to always feel comfortable talking about her to me, especially the good times, which I’m sure you had plenty of. You can tell me anything about her. I’m assuming she had to be a pretty special woman if you loved her.”

A myriad of emotions flicker in Cannon’s eyes, but it’s his soft kiss and murmur of “thank you” that has me believing the most important one is gratitude that he doesn’t have to keep that part of his life separate.

CHAPTER 26

Cannon

IT'S A HOME game day, and I finally feel like I've settled into a good routine. While I had coaching experience abroad and in the minor leagues, my role with the Titans is vastly different. First, we're on a bigger stage—national eyes on us. Because I'm the figurehead of this team, it's important that my face is seen. I'm the first one here and the last to leave, and it's not lost on me that I'm a role model to all these men.

We finished our morning skate, and I debriefed with my assistant coaches after. Today's game is monumental because it's against my former team when I was a player—the Toronto Blazers. Gage also played with them, although he hadn't been with the team long before Melissa got sick, so I didn't get to know him all that well. We both share in the nostalgia, though.

I have about an hour to eat lunch, and I plan on spending some time cleaning out my emails. Then it's off to review the last bits of video we'll be playing at a short team meeting before the guys suit up.

Moving to my desk from the conference table where I'd been sitting with my assistant coaches, I pick up my phone and see a missed call from my mom.

I decide to call her back as I walk over to the team meeting room where there will be a massive spread of food set out for the players.

It's a Thursday, so Mom will be at work, but since she's the boss, I'm not worried about interrupting her. She answers quickly. "How's my sweet boy?"

"Hardly a boy." I laugh as I exit my office and head down the hall. "I saw you called."

“Just wanted to hear your voice. And wish you good luck with today’s game.”

“I appreciate it. How’s everyone there?” I listen to my mom hand out updates on everyone in the family, including the grandkids. I reach the players’ room but don’t enter since I’m still on the phone, instead moving past it for privacy and leaning up against the wall.

“Are you sure you can’t come home for Thanksgiving?” my mom asks.

I texted her yesterday letting her know I was going to stay in Pittsburgh. I didn’t give a reason why, although the reason is Ava and we’ve made plans to spend it together. I probably need to tell my mom about her, since I guess it’s considered pretty serious. I know my mom will think so, given that I’m going to spend a holiday with her and not my family.

“Or maybe we can all fly there to Pittsburgh,” my mother offers.

“No,” I exclaim, and then grimace because that came off harsh. I lower my voice and say, “I’m actually spending Thanksgiving with someone.”

My mom gasps in surprise and then laughs with delight. “Oh, tell me everything, Cannon. What’s her name? How did you meet her? Are you going to cook together or will you go out? Tell me everything.”

Chuckling, I move farther down the hall, away from players going in and out of the room. Scrubbing a hand through my hair, I take a deep breath and tell my mom all about Ava Cavanaugh.

When I’m done, my mother makes a sound of joy. “You know, I’ve been waiting a long time for you to call me and tell me you met someone.”

“I’ve met girls before,” I say.

“But none you ever told me about,” she chastises, and I can see her patented mom look in my mind. “And it makes me

happy that you have someone special enough to tell me about.”

There’s no doubt, Ava has definitely moved squarely into the category of special. “You’d really like her, Mom. When y’all are able to make a trip here, I’ll definitely introduce you.”

“Can I give you some mom advice?”

“Always.”

“Remember the mistakes you made in your marriage to Melissa, and make sure you don’t make them again.” My heart melts for those words because my mother means them only to soothe my conscience. When Melissa got sick, I felt incredibly guilty about not making my marriage work. My mom knew that, and she knew all the ways I felt I’d failed as a husband. On the flip side, she knew all the ways Melissa had failed too. It was not one person’s fault over the other.

My mom is specifically talking about communication, making sure I am always clear and truthful about my needs. It goes without saying, but I need to be sure Ava does the same. It also might mean something else. I probably could’ve put forth greater effort into giving Melissa more of my attention. I could’ve given up extra practices and free skates with the guys, hanging out with the other players during our free time to develop camaraderie, working out with my buddies constantly. There were bits and pieces of time I could’ve given to her, but would it have been enough?

Probably not, but then again, my mom isn’t talking about me saving my marriage. She’s reminding me to learn from my mistakes.

“Thanks, Mom. You know I trust your wisdom.”

“You don’t need it. You’re a smart and intuitive man, and I’m sure you’ll do just fine.” She pauses and then asks, “Have you talked to Connie lately?”

“A few times.” My mom knows about that awful call the day before the anniversary of Melissa’s death, as well as the stilted call we had the next day. “It’s the same old, same old.”

“You need to tell her, Cannon.” She means the truth—that I’m in a vastly different place than she is with regards to Melissa. “It’s not fair for her to pull on you like this.”

“She doesn’t have anyone else. Andrew’s pretty much checked out of the marriage.”

My mom sighs. “You’re such a good man.”

“You raised me right, and you’re the best mom. You always give the best advice.” And that gives me an idea. “Mom... I’ve got to go.”

“Okay, baby. Good luck tonight, and we love you.”

“I love you too.”

Pocketing my phone, I head back to my office where I grab my car keys. On the way out, I see Gage in his office and stick my head in. “I’m leaving the arena for about an hour... maybe an hour and a half. I might be late to the video meeting, so don’t wait for me.”

Gage blinks in surprise. “Sure thing. We got you covered.”

“I know you do.”



ARMED WITH A BOX of chocolates and a lush bouquet, I slip my key in the lock and open the door to my condo. My eyes immediately land on Ava sitting at my kitchen table, working on her laptop. She lifts her head, eyes rounding when she sees what’s in my hand.

I kick the door closed behind me and move to her.

Tipping her head back, she asks, “What are you doing here?”

I hand her the flowers and put the chocolates on the table next to her laptop. Bending down, I give her a soft kiss. “It’s lunchtime, so I decided to take a break and eat with you.”

Ava’s mouth hangs open, and I put my knuckles under her chin to close it. “What would you like to eat?”

“I think all we have is peanut butter and jelly. You remembered to get peanut butter.”

I laugh and coax her up from the chair, giving her a longer, deeper kiss. My body reacts to her scent and taste, but I step away. I’m here to have lunch with my girl and then I need to head back to work.

“Come on.” I grab her hand and pull her toward the door. “We’ll run down to the deli.”

“Okay,” she says, sounding discombobulated. “You have time to do this?”

I stop with my hand on the knob and look back at her. “I’m making the time.”

Ava’s eyes glow with affection. I expect her to tell me it’s not necessary, as she always does, and I’m prepared to clap my hand over her mouth.

Instead, she smiles and grabs her coat. “Well, let’s hurry, then. I know you’ve got to get back.”

I open the door, but she tugs against my hand. I raise an eyebrow in question.

She steps into me, lifts her mouth, and I bend down to kiss her.

“Thank you for the flowers and chocolate. No one has ever done that for me before.”

“Well, it’s a first for me too,” I assure her, and because of that look of wonder and delight on her face, I know it won’t be the last.

CHAPTER 27

Cannon

“I DON’T GET it,” I say, pointing at the TV. “There’s enough room on the door.”

“Ssh.” Ava reaches out and pushes my hand down.

I glance over at her, the glow of the TV highlighting a slight mistiness in her eyes. My other arm, around her shoulders, pulls her closer to my side. I want to argue with her because I don’t fucking understand why Jack doesn’t get on that door with Rose.

We’re watching *Titanic*, one of Ava’s favorite movies. I saw it a long time ago but don’t remember much about it. I certainly don’t remember what is, a stupid decision by both of them not to figure a way to get him out of the water and onto the door. But I hold my tongue until after Jack freezes to death and Rose lets him slip under the icy water.

“So tragic,” Ava whispers as she blinks away tears.

I’m alarmed she’s actually on the verge of crying, so I grab the remote and pause the movie.

She twists her head to look at me. “It’s not about there being enough room. It’s that Jack didn’t want to risk it capsizing and putting Rose in danger. He knew she was safe, and that’s all that mattered. His entire mission since that ship hit the iceberg was to save her, and he did.”

“Oh,” I murmur, looking back at the screen paused on a close-up of Rose crying as she stares into the water. “That makes sense.”

Ava laughs, and I look back at her. While her eyes are still a bit shiny, she’s clearly amused by me.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, my hand on her ribs for a tickle.

She yelps and squirms away, pushing against my chest and grabbing my hand. “It’s just... you were analyzing all that through a coach’s eyes. Up until the end, you were trying to figure out how to win the game.”

“I’m just saying, they should have tried more than once to get him on the door.”

Shaking her head, she chuckles and then snuggles back into me. “We have to work on your romantic nature.”

“Hey,” I say, offended, reaching for the remote to restart the movie. “I just brought you flowers and chocolate yesterday. I’m watching a chick flick with you now.”

“I know,” she drawls and pats my stomach. “And I’ll make you happy about those choices later on.”

The doorbell rings, and I slide the remote onto the coffee table. “Chinese is here.”

“That was fast,” she says as we both push up off the couch. She flips on the lamp.

“You get the door, I’ll get the plates. What do you want to drink?”

“Water’s fine,” she says as we head in opposite directions.

I consider grabbing paper plates or just eating directly from the boxes with chopsticks but decide to make it nice. I grab two plates and rummage in a drawer for forks, just in case.

When I turn to set the stuff on the island, Ava stands there looking distinctly uneasy.

“Cannon,” she says gently. “You have a visitor.”

Her tone causes my hair to stand on end. I lean to the left, looking past her shoulder, and see Connie standing in my foyer.

I immediately round the counter, handing off the plates and silverware to Ava. “Connie... what are you doing here?” I ask with worry as I take her in. She’s wearing a winter coat, purse over her shoulder, and hands clasped before her, but it’s her expression that tells me everything. She’s upset, and given that she lives in Michigan but is standing here in my foyer in Pittsburgh, I’m guessing it’s serious. “Is everything okay?”

Her eyes flick to the kitchen—presumably to Ava—and then back to me. “I certainly didn’t mean to interrupt you and your girlfriend.”

I don’t like her tone. It’s accusatory, bitter, and I’m not going to be cowed by it. It appears she’s itching for a fight, but I’m not going to give it to her.

I sweep my hand toward Ava. “This is Ava Cavanaugh. Ava, this is Melissa’s mother, Connie Waite.”

Poor Ava looks like a deer in the headlights, but she manages a welcoming smile. “Hello, Connie. It’s very nice to meet you.”

Connie doesn’t respond vocally, but her lip curls in disgust as she turns to me. “How could you, Cannon?”

“How could I what?” I ask, although I know damn well what she’s inferring. I’m not going to let her be passive-aggressive toward me.

“Disrespect Melissa this way.”

My neck tenses with stress. “Just how am I disrespecting Melissa?”

“I’m talking about her.” Connie points at Ava, and I glance over my shoulder to see Ava take a step back, her expression pained.

Now I’m getting pissed. My attention goes back to Connie, and before I can say anything, she lays into me. “I saw pictures of you and this woman on the team Instagram account. It’s so hurtful that you would flaunt how happy you are with life now that Melissa’s not in it.”

Fury flushes through me. “Now just you wait a minute, Connie. That’s not fair. Melissa died nine years ago, and I’m entitled to move on with my life.”

“You left Melissa long before she died,” Connie yells, her face contorted with anger. “All you cared about was your career. I bet you didn’t think I knew about that, but Melissa told me everything. You always put yourself above her.” Connie leans to look past me to Ava. “If you know what’s good for you, you should run. He’ll never devote himself to you. He doesn’t have it in him and he’s going to hurt you.”

She slices a hateful gaze back at me. “You were an awful husband, Cannon. Only cared about your career.” Her voice cracks and she stammers, “You left Melissa behind, left her alone. You failed the marriage and your duty as a husband. You were selfish. You only cared about yourself.”

I can’t take another fucking second of her accusations. “I gave up my career to take care of Melissa,” I roar. “I was devoted to her until the end.”

Connie smiles at me and I can tell she wanted that reaction. She was baiting me. “You only took care of her because you felt guilty about failing her in all other ways. That’s the only reason you stayed. The only reason you cared for her.”

“Maybe,” I murmur, an admission that’s painful but true. Connie gasps, and I hate to think what Ava thinks about me now. “But the fact of the matter is, I did give up everything for her. I cared for her for months, and she died in my arms. In the end, I did what I thought was the right thing, and I sleep peacefully at night because of it. I’m sorry you can’t move past her death, but you have got to stop making me feel bad about it.”

“It’s not fair,” she cries, tears pooling in her eyes before overflowing down her cheeks. “I don’t want to be the only one who feels bad anymore. You’ve moved on, Andrew moved on, all her friends moved on.”

I step up to her, pull her into my arms. “But we’ve never forgotten, Connie. I think about Melissa every day. I focus on the good memories, and we had lots of them before things went to shit.”

“Well, good for you, Cannon.” She jerks free from my embrace and glares at me. “You’re a winner. Achieving something that I can’t.”

Sighing, I tuck my hands in my pockets. “Connie... what is this? Why are you doing this?”

She steps back and sniffs, dragging her hands over her cheeks to wipe her eyes. Her chin lifts defiantly. “I just came to say that I won’t be calling anymore.”

“Connie,” I say gently, with a hint of chastisement. “Don’t say that. Come in, let’s sit down and talk.”

“No.” She looks to Ava again, eyes hard with disdain. “You’ve got your life to live now. I hope you’re happy. I hope you’ve learned from your mistakes.”

She turns for the door, her hand on the knob. I make one more stab at salvaging our relationship. “Don’t leave it like this, Connie.”

Her laugh is mirthless and cold. “There’s *nothing* here to leave. Nothing at all.”

She pulls the door open, and I do an internal check of my feelings. There’s no compulsion to make an extra effort where she’s concerned. I can’t give her anymore.

So I let her walk out, and I stare at the door when it closes.

I’m startled by Ava’s hand on my back. “I’m so sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” I say, still staring at the door. “She spoke from her heart.”

“But she was wrong, Cannon. She didn’t acknowledge the truth of what you went through and what you did for her daughter.”

I turn to face Ava and her hand falls away. “I failed the marriage. I put my career first. She wasn’t wrong about that.”

Ava shakes her head. “You were one half of a marriage that didn’t work. That wasn’t failing. And in the end, you gave up your career when it mattered most. Don’t let her make you feel bad.

She steps into me and slides her hands up my chest and rests them on my shoulders. “What can I do?”

“I’m fine.” I stare down at her, my gut tightening over the worry on her face. Is she feeling bad for me or is she perhaps wondering if she should run like Connie told her to?

Connie said she hoped I’d learned from my mistakes with Melissa, but have I?

“All I’ve done is set boundaries with you, Ava.” I reach up, take her hands from my shoulders, and squeeze them. “Connie’s right in that I put myself and my career first.”

“That’s fine,” she assures me. “Because I put myself first too. Right now, you’ve done nothing that interferes with that. Right now, we work.”

“But we might not always.”

“Then we’ll deal with it when we get there.” Her hands tighten on mine for emphasis. “But don’t let her get in your head and make you think you don’t have anything good to offer me.”

I do have something good I offer Ava.

Mind-blistering orgasms.

I might not be able to give of myself fully and all the time, but I sure as hell can be super devoted in the time I do have.

I tug my hands free, putting them to her face as I bend to kiss her. I take her by the shoulders and, without breaking the kiss, I walk her into the door. When her back is flat against it, I drop to my knees and tug at her sweatpants.

“What are you doing?” Ava gasps.

“Giving you a piece of myself,” I mutter, pulling one leg free of her pants. I ease her leg over my shoulder, put my other hand to her ass, and pull her to my mouth.

The first strike of my tongue on her clit has her crying out as her hands come to my head. She doesn't dare push me away but instead rotates her hips, holding me to her.

I eat her pussy like a starved man, listening to her sounds of pleasure. I'm giving her something important.

The doorbell rings, and Ava pushes at my head. “Stop. The food is here.”

I merely lick her harder and she groans so loud, I know whoever is on the other side of the door heard that.

Ava's voice is strangled, hoarse, but she manages to call out, “Just leave the food. We'll get it—” I suck on her clit and she bucks hard, crying out as she starts to orgasm. Her head falls against the door and she sags.

I tip my head to look at her, pleased to see her so utterly wrecked. I surge up, lift her in my arms, and walk toward my bedroom.

“The food,” she says weakly.

“We'll get it later,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple. “Much later.”

CHAPTER 28

Ava

THE MAÎTRE D' leads me through the restaurant to the table where Shelley Royce awaits. She sees us approach and stands, moving from her chair to greet me.

Holding out her hand, we shake as she says, "I'm so excited to meet you in person. Granted, Zoom makes our meetings so much more intimate than just phone calls, but it's important for us to have real face-to-face time."

"I agree," I say with a laugh. "I'm so glad you could make time on this trip."

Shelley looks past my shoulder, back to me with a slight frown. "Where's your boyfriend? I thought he was joining us?"

My stomach tightens, and I have to fight the disappointment that fills me. I manage what I think is a bright smile. "Cannon unfortunately had to work late."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that," she says and motions to our chairs. "Oh well... there will be other times, but this gives us girl time. No business tonight. This is about hanging out and having fun."

I sit adjacent to her and unfold the napkin on my lap. "Girl time it is," I say with a forced smile. "Good thing for us Cannon's schedule can be a bit hectic."

Which is true, except for the fact he told me he could come to this dinner. I'd given him plenty of notice, he checked his calendar, and he said he would come. He made time in his schedule for me.

Then he dropped the bomb this morning as he was preparing to leave for the arena.

“Hey, listen,” he said as he rinsed his cup in the sink. I was at the kitchen table, my makeshift workspace at his condo, creating some new website content. I turned to face him, tense from the tone of his voice. His back was to me when he said, “I’m not going to be able to make dinner tonight.”

I didn’t ask why because I already knew, and it had nothing to do with working late.

Although that was the official explanation he offered.

In reality, he started withdrawing somewhat after the visit with Connie two days ago. It rattled him hard, and after he made me come against the door, he hauled me off to bed and fucked me. I tried to bring up the subject, but he shut me down swiftly.

Since then, he’s been a little off.

A bit distant.

Quiet.

We still talk, but it’s about things we’ve already talked about before and there aren’t any laughs. I don’t know how to fix the tumult that Connie caused because he won’t open up about it and my best hope is that he’ll get out of his own head and back to the way things were.

But I’m not sure I can forgive his bailing on dinner. These plans had been solid for days, and I’ve come to understand his pregame day schedule well. Dinner tonight is completely feasible, and the only reason he’s not here is to prove some misguided point to himself that his career is still first.

It’s almost as if Connie’s attack merely reinforced in him that he’ll be the way he wants to be, just to prove to her that it’s a viable lifestyle.

What he doesn’t understand is that I don’t mind sharing him with his career. I’ve told him that time and again, and I don’t know how to make it any clearer. So, instead of us cherishing those small moments we have, he’s pulling away, and it makes me sick to my stomach.

“Ava?” Shelley says, and I blink out of what had been a deep dive into my feelings about Cannon.

“I am so sorry.” I laugh nervously, because as much as Shelley makes the work environment fun and casual, this is a business dinner. I need to get my head in the game. “What was the question?”

“I asked what Cannon does for a living.”

“Oh.” I try to figure out how to best explain. It’s not something that has come up during our workdays yet, and I suppose it’s because most of our conversations are done via email. When you work remotely, there’s no time for water-cooler chitchat. “Cannon is the head coach of the Pittsburgh Titans, and they have a game tomorrow. So he got stuck doing some more prep and couldn’t make it tonight.”

Shelley’s jaw drops. “You’re dating the head coach of a professional hockey team? And you never thought about bringing this up?”

Smiling, I shake my head. “I know it’s a big deal, but it’s also new and... complicated. Plus, it’s not just some bomb you drop in a conversation.”

“Complicated?” she asks, but the waiter appears and asks for our drink orders. Shelley grabs the wine menu, not sparing me a glance. “Do you like red?”

“I do.”

She peruses the menu, then orders a bottle that sends the waiter’s eyebrows up in appreciation. I think that means it’s expensive.

“So, Cannon’s complicated, huh?” she asks when we’re alone again.

One might think it nosy on her part, but I don’t mind. Shelley seems to be easy to talk to and she took such a chance on me, I don’t mind taking a chance on her.

“He *can* be complicated at times,” I say, a mild defense of the weeks of great times we’ve had so far. “But he’s also

wonderful.”

She smiles. “I imagine he’s got to be incredibly busy with a job like his.”

I nod, my fingers playing with the handle of the butter knife. “We make it work. Stolen moments are what we get, but we make it work.”

Except it didn’t work tonight, not because his schedule wouldn’t allow it, but because he wanted to set that boundary firmly back in place.

The waiter arrives with our wine. He pours Shelley a glass. She tastes, deems it excellent, and both our glasses are filled.

When he moves away from the table, I’m shocked when I blurt out, “I’m mad he’s not here. He was supposed to come and dumped it on me this morning that he couldn’t.”

Shelley’s expression says she understands. She lifts her glass, and I do the same. Tapping it against mine, she says, “Let’s drink to feelings.”

“Mine are ugly right now,” I mutter, then take a sip. I hold the wine on my tongue and let it slide down my throat. “Oh, wow... that’s good.”

“It is,” she says, setting her glass on the table. “Why are you mad he’s not here? Is it not legitimate he had to work?”

I shrug. “Maybe. But deep down, I don’t think so.”

Shelley’s eyes widen. “You’re not saying he’s cheating.”

“God, no,” I exclaim, and then laugh. “No, Cannon is as solid as they come. Truly a good man, and while I’m mad at him, it’s the only time he’s ever given me reason to be.”

“Yet you are upset,” she muses.

“It’s just...” I stop a moment to choose my words. It’s one thing to huff out frustrations to my boss—who has opened the door by asking—but I’m not about to divulge personal stuff about Cannon. “Let’s just say he’s had a prior experience that

sort of skews his idea of what he's able to give in a relationship.”

“And his accepting the invitation to come to dinner tonight was perhaps him giving more of himself than what he thought he could, but then, for whatever reason, he decided he couldn't do it.”

“Pretty much,” I say, but I know the reason. It was Connie's visit and the guilt she laid on him.

“Well, I can tell you this... there's nothing easy in love. It takes work, communication, and concession. You let up on any one of those things, you're headed for disaster.”

“Is that how you've stayed happily married for so long?” I ask because my feelings run very deep where Cannon's concerned. I learned from Darcy during training that Shelley's been married for twenty-two years and has two children, ages fifteen and eleven, so surely she has some sage wisdom.

Shelley snorts. “It's definitely how I've stayed married for so long. Has all of it been happy? No. But have I worked through those issues with Bill? Yes.”

“Sounds like I need to talk to Cannon about this. At the very least, get it off my chest.”

Lifting her glass, she smiles. “That's exactly what you need to do.”

I take another sip of wine and then say, “I don't want to waste your time with my personal problems.”

Shelley laughs and taps her finger on the table. “First, my employees' personal problems are important to me because I want my people happy and fulfilled. So this conversation was not a waste. But one of the things I wanted to talk to you about was if you would consider moving to Charlotte.”

The air seems sucked from my lungs, and I immediately want to tell her that's not an option. But I know it has to be an option because I love this job already and I have the potential

to grow. I have to consider it. “Is it a requirement for me to move to Charlotte to keep my job?”

Shelley shakes her head. “Not at all. I hired you with the promise you could work remotely if you travel to Charlotte once a quarter. I’m just saying that I would love to have you with us as you’ll learn more and learn it faster.”

“Oh.” This is huge. An offer that would put me in a better position, but I’d have to leave Pittsburgh. And on top of that, I might have reason to go. Or rather, no reason to stay. “That’s really something for me to think about.”

“That’s all I want you to do,” she assures me. “Just think about it.”



IT’S ALMOST ELEVEN p.m. by the time I get to my apartment. Cannon expected me to come to his place, because I said I’d stay there up through Thanksgiving, but even that offer sounds like he’s making all the rules and reinforcing boundaries.

Or maybe I’m just being too sensitive. To give him the benefit of the doubt, I’m tired, and it’s been a long night. Regardless, I texted him before I left the restaurant that I was going to stay the night at my place.

He hasn’t responded.

It takes me no time at all to get my makeup off, moisturizer on, and a good scrubbing of my teeth. I choose a pair of fuzzy flannel pajamas, which is a far cry from sleeping naked with Cannon, and I crawl into bed.

I’m just setting my alarm for seven a.m. when my phone rings.

It’s Cannon.

Part of me doesn’t want to answer it because I’m itching for a fight, and I expect he probably is, too, since I texted I wasn’t coming to his condo with no real explanation.

But Shelley was right... we need to communicate.

“Hey,” I say when I connect the call.

“Why did you go to your place?” he asks, and I don’t detect any anger, but Cannon’s such a level guy, he might be hiding it well.

“I’m tired, so—”

“My place was closer than yours to the restaurant,” he cuts in over me. “If you were tired, it would have been easier to come here.”

I take in a breath and let it out before telling him my honest feelings. “I’m upset you didn’t come to dinner, so I wanted some space.”

“I knew this would happen,” he says with a heavy sigh, but there’s clear accusation in his tone, and that flares my anger to downright fury.

“No,” I snap. “You don’t get to play the victim here and act like I’ve overstepped. I asked you to come to dinner with plenty of notice and on a particular day that I know you can usually cut out of the arena fairly early. You checked your schedule, and you accepted. There was no reason for you to cancel other than you’re having doubts.”

“I had to work,” he maintains. “I’ve been clear that my career comes first, and you accepted that about me.”

“Yes, you’ve told me that time and time again, Cannon. You set the boundaries, and I accepted them. But then you kept erasing them with your actions. You had me come to away games, and keep my things at your condo, and you left work to bring me flowers and chocolate. So that had me thinking maybe I was special enough to get a little more of your attention. I had the right to assume you could offer more because you *were* offering more.”

“You shouldn’t have assumed—”

My laugh sounds maniacal, and I feel like I’m spinning out of control, because I keep waiting for him to apologize and tell me I’m right and that he’s just scared. But it doesn’t come. “It

shouldn't come as a surprise at all that I fell for you because you were doing all the things a man would do if he cared for a woman."

I pause, let that sink in. I wait for him to affirm that he does care for me, but there's silence.

Tears prick at my eyes. "I had you promise me once that if we were moving at different speeds... if I was going somewhere you didn't want to go, then I needed you to tell me. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah, I do."

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, one arm across my stomach as I hunch over. I'm barely able to choke out the words. "You promised you wouldn't let me chase something that wasn't achievable with you. I need you to keep that promise."

Holding my breath, I wait for him to ease my mind or crush me.

"I think we need to take a break," he says flatly. "I'm going home for Thanksgiving. I need to figure things out. We can talk when I get back."

Pain lances through me, punching deep into my chest, and I squeeze my eyes shut as I let my breath out. It doesn't expel the hurt, but when I inhale, I feel steadier.

I open my eyes. "I don't need a break to figure things out, Cannon. I know what I want, and I know, without a doubt, that I'm not willing to go backward. I deserve better than that."

I don't give Cannon a chance to respond. Despite how disappointed and let down I feel right now, I know he would only want me to have the best.

So I don't need him to say it.

"Goodbye, Cannon."

CHAPTER 29

Cannon

PACING MY HOTEL room, I glance periodically at my laptop. I should be working as we have a game tonight. The team will be heading to the New Jersey Wildcats arena in three hours, and the players are all relaxing after lunch.

This is the time I use to go over my notes, make any last-minute adjustments, and review video clips of our opponents one more time to be sure I didn't miss anything—the time I sit in front of my laptop, hone my focus, and be a goddamn coach.

Except I can't fucking concentrate, and I'm seriously concerned that I might be broken. Hockey has always been the most important thing in my life. It cost me my marriage, after all.

But all I can think about is Ava and the fact that I pushed her away. She didn't fucking deserve that. In truth, it made me no better than her ex-douche Derek because we both selfishly put ourselves first.

And yet, I couldn't fucking help myself. To say I'm all up in my head is an understatement. I have no clue when exactly I screwed up, but I know it started festering after Connie's visit.

She drummed up all the old guilt I'd felt for failing Melissa and my marriage, as well as renewed anger over losing my hockey career to take care of her. It was more than anger... Connie's failure to give me even an ounce of credit started something ugly brewing inside me.

A renewed affirmation that I've been wise to hold myself back from anything serious, and self-loathing for letting myself weaken where Ava was concerned. She wasn't wrong when she said my actions didn't match my words. I had set the

boundaries and then little by little—as she called it—I kept erasing them.

By the time Connie rolled into town, I was having some pretty deep feelings for Ava. I had opened up my narrow world and let her in. Not only did I let her in, but I enjoyed the direction our relationship was going. She was important to me, and I'd given her every reason to think we were progressing.

I'm ashamed to admit, but I canceled that dinner simply because I needed to pull back, and I knew it would send a message. What I hadn't counted on was her calling me on the carpet for it. I stupidly thought she'd go back to accepting what I was willing to give.

And it was stupid because Ava would never fall for that shit. She's been through too much, has made a new life for herself, and she's done it through pure strength of will.

I know what I want, and I know, without a doubt, that I'm not willing to go backward. I deserve better than that.

Those words hit hard because she deserves so much better than what I gave her.

A knock interrupts the rotating thoughts bouncing around my brain, and I breathe out a sigh of relief. I need a break from them.

Crossing the room, I swing the door open to find Baden. "What's up?" I ask as I step back for him to enter.

"Just checking in," he says.

I close the door and follow him into the main living area of the suite. I rub my hand over the back of my neck and gesture toward the laptop. "Was going to go through some more video clips."

"Why?" he asks, turning to face me.

"You know... in case I missed something."

"You didn't miss anything, Cannon. You're more on top of this team than any coach I've ever worked with or under."

“Yeah, but as the head coach, I’m responsible for everything. It makes me feel better to do all the double- and triple-checking.”

“Does it make you feel better about doing the best job possible as a coach or because it keeps you insulated from dealing with other things?”

The hair on my neck prickles from the challenge in his voice, yet he just smiles at me, hands tucked casually in his pockets.

“What are you talking about?” I ask hesitantly.

“Oh, I think you know.” Baden moves to the small sofa and sits, propping an ankle on the opposite knee.

My jaw locks. “Why don’t you enlighten me?”

“I can’t figure out if you’re being obtuse or just blissfully ignorant,” he drawls.

“You do know I can fire you?” I grit out.

Baden shrugs. “Maybe, but I doubt you’d do it. You’re an upstanding guy and won’t penalize me for giving you some truths you’re apparently not seeing on your own.”

“I feel like I’m in the Twilight Zone,” I mutter, pulling out the desk chair and plopping into it. “You’re obviously here to talk about Ava.”

“I was a little shocked when you told me you two had broken up.”

“Well,” I say, holding out my arms, “shit happens.”

“Dude, don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Act like you don’t care.” His eyes bore into mine. “Because I know you do.”

“Caring’s not the problem.”

I don’t say anything else, and he tries to wait me out, but I don’t want to talk about this.

“Okay, if caring isn’t the problem, that means you care for her. Yet you broke up. I guess she didn’t care for you, then.”

“She cared.” My stomach rolls. She cared far more than I deserve.

“I see... you weren’t attracted to her anymore.”

“I was totally—” I stop because I see what he’s doing.

“Oh, I get it,” he drawls with a smirk. “She was done with you. Tossed you aside and hurt your feelings.”

“No,” I growl in frustration. “I wanted to take a break, she didn’t, so it ended.”

“Why in the fuck would you want to take a break?” he asks in astonishment. “By all accounts, Ava made you happy. I saw it. Everyone saw it. Am I wrong?”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Well, if you’re still attracted to her, and you care for her, and she made you happy, what in the hell am I missing here?”

Damn, he’s making me uncomfortable, and I launch out of my chair to resume my pacing. Baden merely watches me as I make two full passes across the room.

I’m halfway through a third when I spin on him. “See... here’s the thing. I had established boundaries with Ava, and we were both doing fine, and then we both started operating outside the boundaries, and things got confusing.”

“That’s as clear as mud,” he says, then nods over to the chair. “Might as well start from the beginning.”

I don’t want to sit down and tell Baden my woes. We have a game in a few hours, and I need my head in it. Except, I can’t seem to get there on my own. Maybe I just need a purge so I can expel all the nasty feelings and get back on track.

With a sigh, I take the desk chair again. “Okay, I’m going to make this succinct and fast, so try to keep up.”

“I’m with you.” He settles into the sofa, casually draping an arm over the back.

“Before Melissa was diagnosed, we were on the brink of getting a divorce. The marriage was in tatters, we were barely speaking, and I had moved out.”

I pause to see if that’s a shocker, but Baden merely nods.

“But she got sick, and I felt so guilty about how things had gone between us. When we found out it was terminal, I left hockey behind to care for her.”

“That took a lot of guts,” Baden says.

I don’t affirm or deny that. I only did what needed to be done. “At any rate, Melissa died, I grieved, and I moved on. It was nine years ago, and I have a new career. I haven’t found anyone I wanted to have a committed relationship with. Dated some women long term, but no one ever moved me to step outside of the new world I lived in.”

Baden cocks an eyebrow. “I’m guessing it was a carefully orchestrated life.”

“Not to ever get too close.”

“Because you couldn’t get over Melissa dying and failing her?”

“No. I’ve reconciled with how my marriage failed. I mean, I hated it, but we wanted different things. Melissa wanted me home and couldn’t handle my career. And I don’t want to get back in that position again. I love my job too much, and those were the boundaries Ava and I put in place. She knew I only had so much to give, and she was fine with it.”

“Until?” he prods.

“Until I fucked it up and blurred the lines. Until I started giving her more than she ever expected, and I let her believe there could be more. Then my former mother-in-law showed up, got all in my head by throwing guilt bombs at me, and I got scared. So I pulled back. I needed a break to think things through.”

“That seems kind of pansy-assed,” Baden says.

I blink at him. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You’re one of the strongest, most put-together people I know. For you to base your future on things that happened in your past is shortsighted and, frankly, disappointing. You’re also one of the most forward-thinking people I know. You’re all about second chances and building strong relationships. You have all these life skills that make you an amazing coach, and you didn’t employ a single fucking one to keep Ava.”

My jaw drops and remains hanging open as I stare at him. I try to speak but nothing comes out. The truth he just slapped me with has left me so rattled, my mind is blank.

Baden stands from the sofa. “Look, I’d love to stay around and chat about your feelings, but I can see I’ve scrambled your brains. I hope you clear the fuzz from your head long enough to pay attention.”

I blink again but manage a nod.

“Ava is moving to Charlotte,” Baden murmurs.

“What?” I say, exploding from my chair.

Baden nods. “She told Sophie last night. Had just made the decision, which is really why I came by to talk to you.”

“Jesus,” I mutter, looking left and right but not sure what I’m hoping to see. My eyes go back to Baden. “When?”

He shrugs. “Not sure. But I do know she’s back home in Raleigh and will be there for the Thanksgiving holiday. I expect she’ll move after that.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, pulling out my phone. “I have to stop her.”

Baden snatches it from my hand. “Not like this. You cannot just call her up and demand she not move, because I can see it written on your face that’s what you’re about to do. Ava needs an apology and some groveling, face to face. On

top of that, you have a game you need to get ready for. So, much like I told Drake a few weeks ago, get your head out of your ass and into the game. Fix your personal shit after.”

My shoulders slump. He’s right, of course, but I hate that I can’t do anything right this moment. Every fiber of my being wants to hop a plane to Raleigh right now and say fuck the game tonight.

But that’s not an option, and no matter how much Ava might be hurt or disappointed in me, she would never want me to leave this team when they need me.

I can, however, put some wheels into motion. I grab my phone back. “I’m going to change my Thanksgiving flight from Denver to Raleigh.”

“Good luck with that.” Baden laughs as he moves to the door to let himself out. “Day before Thanksgiving? Doubt you’ll find anything.”

“Well, wish me luck,” I say, pulling up my Delta app.

The door opens but before Baden steps out, I call for him. “Hey!”

He glances over his shoulder, eyebrows raised.

“Thanks for talking sense into me.”

Baden grins. “My pleasure.”

CHAPTER 30

Ava

“WHO’S READY FOR pie?” my mom asks as she stands from the table and we all groan.

My dad pats his belly. “I’m going to need a little more time to digest.”

“I’m not eating until tomorrow,” I mutter, glad I’m wearing black leggings under a burgundy sweater tunic. They’re quite stretchy and help minimize the misery from all the food I ate, but I do it every Thanksgiving.

“Y’all are lightweights,” Rob says, and then smiles at Mom. “I’ll have pumpkin.”

Why I’m doing this, I have no clue, but I say, “I’ll have a slice of pecan.”

Dad laughs and says, “I’ll have a small slice of both.”

I stand and clear plates, and when Rob just sits there, I kick his leg. “Get up and help.”

“That’s woman’s work,” he says and then scrambles up when Mom turns her head his way with that look that makes grown men cry.

Snickering, I nudge him. “You’re going to get it if you keep talking that misogynistic crap.”

“He’s certainly not going to find a good woman,” my mother says as she doles out slices of pie.

I make decaffeinated coffee for everyone, and we all settle in for tiny bites of dessert so we can get it down. I expect each of us will pass out watching football in about fifteen minutes.

“I’m so glad you were able to come home for the holiday,” my mom says as she swirls her fork through the whipped

cream.

“Yeah, me too,” I murmur, my stomach clenching from the absolute lie that just fell from my mouth. I push my plate back, knowing I’ll puke if I put one more bite in my mouth, and not because I’m full.

I stand from the table. “I’m going to take a walk, see if I can burn off some of these calories.”

My mom smiles, oblivious to my pain. “Take a jacket. It’s chilly out.”

“I will,” I assure her.

Grabbing my coat from the rack in the foyer, I shrug it on and head out into the crisp fall day. My parents live in an older neighborhood with large lots, tons of trees, and rolling hills. I make it to the end of the driveway when I hear, “Hey... wait up.”

I glance back to find Rob jogging toward me.

“Didn’t want to get left alone with Mom wanting to know why you and Kristin broke up?” I tease as we head out.

“Something like that.” He laughs as he falls into step beside me. “If I have to hear her lament one more time about how much she wants grandbabies, I’m going to puke.”

“Yeah, well... at least you didn’t hook up with a cheater who got you fired and kicked out of your home.”

“There’s that,” he agrees. “But I have to wonder why you’re so silent about your new beau.”

“Not my beau anymore.”

“What?” Rob takes hold of my arm and pulls me to a stop. “Why not?”

I gently pull free and start walking again. “Things didn’t work out.”

Rob catches up to me and takes my arm again, forcing me to turn to him. “Did he hurt you?”

“Yes,” I reply, holding his gaze. “But not the way Derek did. It’s just that we want different things in a relationship, and I had thought maybe it could be more.”

“Does he think you’re not good enough?” Rob snarls.

“No, nothing like that. And honestly, he was truthful from the very beginning about his limits, and he was truthful in the end.”

“But you’re still hurt,” Rob says, hooking his arm through mine.

“Yes, I’m still hurt, but I’ll let you in on a little secret that I’ll tell Mom and Dad later. I just didn’t want them to make a big deal about it the entire time I was home for the holiday.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m moving to Charlotte. It was my choice to work remotely from Pittsburgh, but given that things didn’t work out with Cannon, my best move is to... well, move.”

“Mom and Dad are going to flip out since you’ll be closer,” Rob muses.

“And they’ll expect me to visit more, which is why I thought I’d let them in on this before I leave. I don’t want Mom pulling out her calendar and scheduling monthly visits.”

“Oh, we’re not that bad,” Rob teases.

“Of course you’re not,” I lob back with a grin. “But I want to put some serious effort into this job. Shelley promotes from within, and I could potentially be an agent one day.”

“That’s going to kill Mom and Dad.” Rob squeezes my arm. “You won’t be a real estate agent, but you’ll be a speaker agent.”

I laugh. “Well, it’s an agent, so they’re getting at least half of what they want. But enough about me... tell me why you broke up with Kristin.”

I listen as Rob tells me the same story he’s told me with every girlfriend. She got too serious, he’s not ready to settle

down.

Not all that different from Cannon's boundaries, but for different reasons. Rob just isn't ready to settle down, and while Cannon enjoys a low-key, monogamous relationship, he's afraid of the commitment from an emotional standpoint.

Still... the same. Not wanting to take that next step when the girl does, and so it ends.

We head back after about a mile with plans for Rob to come to Pittsburgh to help me pack up and move my stuff with a small U-Haul trailer, since I don't feel comfortable driving one. I can barely park straight.

When we reach our parents' house, I notice a car in the driveway. "We expecting anyone?"

"The Gentrys were going to come by sometime today," he replies, but it could be any one of a dozen different friends of my parents. They are absolute social butterflies.

We enter in through the mudroom and hang our jackets on the rack. I hear voices in the kitchen, and as I head that way, a tingle rushes up my spine. I'm not sure why... maybe just a vibe.

Turning the corner out of the short hallway that connects the mudroom and kitchen, I see Cannon seated at the island with a bottle of water and an empty pie plate with crumbs. My parents are opposite him, both leaning on their forearms, my father regaling Cannon with tales of the real estate market.

Cannon's eyes snap to mine when I enter, and I halt so abruptly, Rob barrels into me. His hands on my shoulders steady me and then squeeze reflexively when I ask Cannon, "What are you doing here?"

My tone is part surprise, but there's censure in it as well. Mostly irritation because my heart pounds with joy at seeing him, but I can't forget he was so unsure of things, he asked for a break.

I'm clearly being impolite as my mom—ever the graceful southern host—chastises me. “Ava... honestly, where are your manners?”

“I left them back in Pittsburgh when Cannon told me he wanted to take a break,” I retort, never taking my gaze off him.

Those hazel eyes of his glitter in challenge. “I took a break, and now I'm done with it.”

“And so you think you can just waltz in here and what... charm your way back into...?” I almost say “my pants” but catch myself just in time.

“I charmed you once,” he says confidently. “Why not again?”

“Ava,” my mom says, and I can tell by the look on her face that whatever short time she just spent with Cannon, she likes him a lot. “He drove through the night from New Jersey to get here as there weren't any flights.”

Okay, that touches me, but I don't want it to. I suspect Cannon's evaluated things and probably wants to make a go of it, as there's no other reason for him to be here. But I'm going to make him work for it so I can be absolutely sure he's not going to get wishy-washy on me again.

My eyebrows draw inward as a thought strikes me. “How did you even know where to find me?”

“Sophie told Baden who told me yesterday that you came home for the holiday. I called Brienne after the game. Asked her to use her power to get up with Derek's boss, who in turn called Derek and provided your parents' address.” Wow... I bet Derek loved that. “I couldn't get a flight, so I rented a car and hit the road after the game was over.”

My mom sighs—one of those light, dreamy ones that tells me she thinks that's completely romantic. For all her dislike of Derek, she seems to have fallen hook, line, and sinker for Cannon already.

Admittedly, he went through a lot of trouble to come here, and yes, fine... I might have some internal sighing going on. Not sure if it's because I'm charmed or frustrated.

"Who's Brienne?" my dad asks, finally saying something. "And why does she have a connection to Derek?"

"Brienne's the owner of the Pittsburgh Titans," Cannon says. "She's got connections everywhere."

My father's eyes almost bug out of his head. "You know the owner of a professional hockey team? Well enough to track down an address late at night?"

My parents go to a lot of the Carolina Cold Fury games, so they know the other teams, but they wouldn't know enough to know that Cannon is the Titans' head coach or that Brienne is the owner.

I turn to Cannon. "You didn't tell them who you are?"

"I gave them my name," he says blandly. "I assumed you had told them who I was."

"Who are you?" my dad asks, clearly intrigued and guessing Cannon is hot shit whoever he is.

"I'm the head coach of the Titans."

"Oh my word," my mother says on a long breath.

My dad chokes out as he turns to me, "Why didn't you tell us?"

I throw my thumb over my shoulder at my brother. "I told Rob. I assumed he'd tell you."

Which isn't true since I specifically asked him not to, but it takes the heat off me. My parents both look at Rob with accusatory eyes, and he mutters, "Thanks for throwing me under the bus, Sis." He then moves to our parents and ushers them out of the kitchen. "Let's give them some privacy."

My parents' place is huge, and he leads them into the den, which is on the opposite side of the house. When we're alone,

I move to the counter where my parents had been standing as it feels necessary to put the island between us.

I press my palms down and ask the questions. “Really... what are you doing here?”

“You know why I’m here,” he says, rising from the stool and moving around the counter toward me, clearly not liking the barrier. “There’s only one reason I would have missed my flight to Denver for Thanksgiving, rented a car, and driven eight and a half hours through the night to get here.”

Turning to face him as he comes to stand toe to toe with me, I have to tip my head back to maintain eye contact. “You said you’d never hurt me intentionally, and you did it anyway.”

“I know,” he says softly, his tone laced with shame. “And I hate myself for it. I can’t stand how weak I was, and I will absolutely understand if you can’t forgive me for it. You deserve so much better than what I gave you.”

My heart throbs for that tiny concession.

“I made a terrible mistake, Ava, by pulling away when I should have been pushing full steam ahead because of how you make me feel.”

“And how is that?” I whisper.

“Alive, happy, whole,” he says, sliding a hand along my neck and grazing my jaw with his thumb. “I feel complete when I’m with you, and I want to feel that all the time. I’m tired of worrying about making the same mistakes again. As someone pointed out recently, it’s disappointing that I have all these amazing life skills and wisdom to build strong relationships within the team, and I don’t bother using any of them on myself to make me worthy of you.”

My head spins over the meaning behind his words.

“Ava,” Cannon murmurs, bending in closer to peer right into my eyes. “I want to be worthy of you. Actually, that’s not

right. I'm ready to be worthy of you, if you'll give me a chance."

"Oh, wow," I say with a gust of pent-up breath. He's saying all the right words, but I'm afraid. He was doing all the right things before but then got scared. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure I love you," he says, and my knees wobble. "I've never been more sure of anything."

I pull away from Cannon, putting some distance between us because I was very much just in danger of falling right into him.

"I have to think about this," I say, rubbing knuckles on my sternum, which is tight with worry. I'm in a bit of an overload right now. In a million years, I never would've expected Cannon to be standing here saying these things.

"Answer me one question first," he says, and my hand falls. "Do you love me?"

This is not something I have to think about. "I knew I was in love with you when you wanted to take a break. My heart wouldn't have been so shredded if I weren't."

"Then let me fix it, Ava," Cannon exclaims, reaching out and taking my hands. "I swear I'm solid and I'll heal your heart. I want to leave here with you. I want us to start a life together. Come back to Pittsburgh with me tomorrow, and you can move into my place—"

"Whoa, wait a minute," I say, pulling my hands away. "This is the exact thing Derek said to me, and we know how that turned out. I don't want to make the same mistake."

"I'm not Derek," Cannon says, a hard glint in his eye. "It's only a mistake if you think I'm like him."

"Of course you're not like him," I snap, irritated.

"If it makes you feel better, come back to Pittsburgh and ask me to move into your place. Go on... ask me right now."

I scoff and roll my eyes. “You can’t move into my place. It’s a hovel, far too small, and you’re used to so much nicer.”

“I need you,” he asserts, and once again, his hands have mine and he’s jerking me into him. “I don’t care if we live in a small, one-bedroom apartment with peeling paint on the walls and water stains on the ceiling. None of that matters as long as I’m with you.”

“Cannon,” I whisper softly, touched by his words. “You spent so much time making sure I understood you have limits and—”

“Listen, Ava... I can’t give up my career. I mean, I would if I could—for you. I did it for Melissa, and if I could, I’d do it for you.”

“I’d never ask that,” I growl.

Cannon nods, a smile on his face. “Yeah, I know you wouldn’t. But I would if I could. The truth is, I can’t. This isn’t like walking away from a playing career, and you don’t have cancer making things grim. As a coach, I have too many people who depend on me. Except now, I don’t want that career to be a barrier to time with you. I want you to be a part of that life with me.”

“How? What does that mean?”

“It means I want to share my world with you in whatever way I can. I want you to come to away games with me when you can, and I want to do more work at home rather than at the arena, so at the very least, I can do it on the couch with you by my side. I want to have more balance, which means maybe delegating a bit more so I can have more personal time to spend with you. I want you to come to team functions with me, and I want the gossip columns to wonder about me dating and what it all means. I haven’t got it all figured out, but everything I’ve suggested so far seems like it’s exactly the right thing.”

I’m speechless. Cannon is telling me things I never thought he’d be able to say.

“I got scared, Ava,” he continues, bringing his hands to my face. “And I’m so sorry I wasn’t a better man for you. But it took me no time at all to figure out I fucked up. I came straight to you to make it right. And if you want to make me work harder for it, I will. I’ll devote every bit of free time I have to showing you—”

I lurch forward, my arms going around Cannon’s neck, and I hop right up on him. My mouth plasters to his as his hands go under my ass to hold me.

Pulling back just enough to speak against his lips, “Enough already. I forgive you, and I’m ready to get back on track.”

I try to kiss him again, but he jerks his face away. “And you love me?”

I know I said it once already, but I was talking about the past. He’s talking about right now. “Yes... I love you.”

“And you’ll come back to Pittsburgh?” he presses, the expression on his face tense with worry.

“I have to talk to Shelley. I told her I was coming to Charlotte.”

Cannon sighs, closes his eyes, and lets his forehead drop to touch mine. “Okay... if you need to go to Charlotte, we’ll make it work.” His face lifts and he stares at me. “We can be together in the off-season. Maybe Shelley will let you work remotely to be able to travel to some away games. I can fly in to see you at Christmas. We’ll figure it out.”

I shake my head. “No, we won’t figure it out. I’ll talk to Shelley about letting me work in Pittsburgh. I don’t have to go to Charlotte. Yes, it was a great opportunity, but I was only doing it because we’d broken up.”

“I was on a break. I did not break up with you,” he points out.

“Fine.” I laugh. “If that’s the way you want it remembered. But I’ll come back to Pittsburgh.”

“And we’ll move into your apartment,” he says.

Grimacing, I tip my head back as I consider but then grin and shake my head. “Nah... let’s live in your condo.”

“Oh, thank God,” he mutters and kisses me again.

Slowly, with a tenderness that makes my heart contract almost painfully because it belongs to him now.

“Think I can have another piece of pie?” he asks as his mouth lifts. “Maybe some turkey. I’m starving, and I’ll love you forever.”

Laughing, I wiggle to hop down from his hold. “Yes. Let’s get a Thanksgiving meal into you. And I’ll love you forever too.”

CHAPTER 31

Cannon

SITTING ON THE sofa armrest, my fingers play absently with Ava's hair as she and my sister, Belle, jabber about some new show on Netflix. My brother, Connor, is giving horse rides to our nieces, and everyone else is in the kitchen, drinking wine and talking. I glance around my condo, Christmas music playing in the background and the smell of spruce in the air from the tree we finally decorated this morning. It feels like Ava and I have been going nonstop since we made up—i.e., she decided to forgive my foolishness—almost a month ago.

She indeed came back to Pittsburgh with me, moved into my condo, and works remotely for Shelley's agency with an office we set up in the spare bedroom. Ava comes to some of the away games, usually the extended road trips, but she is at every single home game in a seat just two rows back from the Titans' bench. I know I should feel guilty looking over my shoulder at her sometimes, and never during live play, but she's always there to give me an encouraging smile, a thumbs-up, or an air kiss.

Last night was our last home game before the Christmas break, which consists of basically today—Christmas Eve, and tomorrow, Christmas Day. I surprised the hell out of her during the third period by turning around during a TV timeout, pulling a rose from inside my suit jacket, and tossing it over the glass at her. The season ticket holders in that general vicinity have come to know who Ava is and what she is to me. We've made some news columns, but we're nowhere near the big news item that Drake and Brienne are.

When she caught the rose, the fans sitting all around her went nuts, and her cheeks flushed beet red. When her eyes came to mine, I mouthed the words, "I love you."

She mouthed them right back.

This morning we woke up early because we had a lot to do. I set the alarm for half an hour earlier than we really needed to be up so I could make love to Ava, and we both had smiles on our faces as we decorated our Christmas tree. It's been set up for two weeks, but we literally haven't had the time to put the ornaments on until this morning.

We probably wouldn't have had the families not been coming in. My family and Ava's met tonight for the first time over an amazing meal she made of beef tenderloin, au gratin potatoes, and charred Broccolini. At first, I thought she'd burned it by mistake, but she assured me it was a recipe, and holy fuck was it good.

Now as I look around at two families coming together, getting to know one another, I can't help but think I'm the luckiest son of a bitch in the world. Her family adores me, and they've been here once before to visit. My family adores Ava, and while they'd only met over FaceTime, it was immediate hugs from my clan as soon as they stepped through the door today.

Ava and Belle hit it off, and both sets of parents are enjoying telling stories of their respective kids, trying to embarrass us.

I glance down at my watch and lean to whisper in Ava's ear. "Be right back."

She looks up at me, smiles, and nods. "Good luck."

Can't help myself when I take the time to kiss her and ignore my sister giggling.

I head back to our bedroom and shut the door—closing off the evidence of my new life. The music, the laughter, the happiness.

Pulling out my phone, I call Connie.

"Hi," she says as she answers.

"Merry Christmas," I say.

“Merry Christmas.” There’s a tiny pause, then she asks, “How are you doing?”

“I’m good. It’s been so busy, but I’m glad to have a few days’ break. How about you? You and Andrew doing anything special?”

“His sister and her husband are spending the holidays with us. And you know how crazy she is.” Connie launches into a story about Sybil, who is indeed a little crazy but in a fun way, and I settle back on my bed to listen.

My relationship with Connie has changed, hopefully for the better. After our blowup last month, which sent me into a tailspin and almost caused me to lose Ava, I had to have a heart-to-heart with her. Unfortunately, it had to be over the phone, and I initiated it the week after Thanksgiving. With Ava being a part of my future, I knew I had to shed the last vestiges of my old life.

And I don’t mean forgetting about Melissa and her family.

No, I mean I had to stop letting Connie use me as a crutch to keep herself rooted in grief. I told her those very words, and I asked her to please continue to be my friend, but only with healthy boundaries. I thought she’d hang up on me, but surprisingly, she listened.

And from that one phone call, we’ve started to evolve. She doesn’t call me when she’s stuck in melancholy, but rather when she has a good memory of Melissa she wants to share. I’ve been calling her more proactively once a week, just to check in.

We don’t discuss Ava or what my future looks like. It’s enough for me that Connie understands I want to move forward, and it’s enough for her to continue to be friends.

I spend about fifteen minutes on the phone, and she’s the one who cuts the call short. I hear Sybil in the background yelling that she mistakenly spiked the eggnog with gin. The thought makes me shudder.

We say our goodbyes, and just as I'm lurching up off the bed, the door opens and Ava walks in. She looks beautiful tonight in black pants, high heels, and a deep green velvet blouse that's cut somewhat low but still very tasteful. It's one of those wrap-around garments, and I can't wait to unwind her from it tonight.

"How'd it go?" she asks, closing the door and moving toward me. She steps close, running her hands up my chest to link her fingertips behind my neck.

"It was good."

"I'm glad." Ava smiles, goes on her tiptoes, and kisses me lightly.

"How's it going out there?"

"Very well. Belle and I are doing a girls' trip this summer to Charleston."

Grinning, I wrap my arms around her back to pull her in closer. "You are?"

"Yup. And I think my parents are going out to Denver to stay with your parents in January to do some skiing."

Laughing, I bend down to nuzzle her neck. "Anyone else in the family bonding?"

"Yeah, my brother is apparently going to hang out with your brother in Wyoming to do some hunting."

I pull back to glance down at her. "It's a good thing we made up, huh? Just imagine all these new friendships that would have gone unrealized."

"A travesty is what it would have been," she says, then tugs free and takes my hand. "Now come on... we still have hosting to do, and we can't stay back here too long or tongues will be wagging."

Let them wag is all I can think, but I let her pull me from the room. In the hallway, I whisper, "When can we kick everyone out?"

“Stop it,” she hisses, elbowing me in the ribs.

“I’m just saying... I’ve got some Christmas orgasms to give you...”

“I’ll feign a headache in about an hour.” Her eyes gleam with mischief. “It’s your job to usher everyone out.”

“God, I love you,” I say in awe, thrilled she’s willing to be as duplicitous as I am so we can have alone time. Besides, we’re all getting together tomorrow for Christmas Day.

“I love you,” she says as we reach the living room, breaking free and moving into the kitchen where our moms are talking.

I watch her walk away, unabashedly taking in the curves of her ass that I can’t wait to get my hands on later, then turn my attention to our combined families filling my once-empty condo. My future is here, in this place, with the people who are the most important to me, and I am so grateful for this second chance at love.

Hendrix Bateman is determined to live each day as if it’s his last. He wasn’t on the team plane the night it crashed and feels like he’s been given a second chance at life. So when fate puts Stevie Kisner in his path, he’s ready to take his shot, but is Stevie ready to get in the game? [CLICK HERE](#) for details about Hendrix.

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About the Author



New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling author Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy romance, and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing fiction to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to her very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonderfully naughty dogs.

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