

SOLA EMPIRE  
HOCKEY ROMANCE



*High Stick*



**HEART THROB**

LONDON CASEY

# HIGH STICK HEART THROB

SOLA Empire Hockey Romance

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# LONDON CASEY

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## HIGH STICK HEART THROB

**It was supposed to be ‘WIN A DATE WITH A HOCKEY  
PLAYER’ ... not ‘GO OUT ON A DATE AND GET  
PREGNANT!’**



*The best way to end a bad week?*

Get dressed up and go to some charity event and eat and drink  
for free.

That’s what my best friend made me do.

What I didn’t know was that I would be part of a **“WIN A  
DATE WITH A HOCKEY PLAYER”** contest.

*And it just so happens... I won.*

I ended up on stage with this gigantic hunk of a man.

Next, we’re going out on a date.

The part where I ended up in his bed?

*That was all my decision.*

The part where I ended up peeing on a pregnancy test and it  
came up positive?

*Well, let's just call that fate...*

## Chapter One

---

### ATLAS



*WIN A DATE WITH A HOCKEY STAR?*

*Win a date with Atlas...?*

*Win a date with me?*

I considered kicking down Tucker's door, but instead threw it open and stormed toward his desk.

The way he jumped up and put his hands slightly out told me this wasn't the first time someone did this kind of thing.

Which didn't shock me.

Tucker Tarmelo had been my agent for my entire hockey career.

He was a slimeball the day I met him, but all I cared about was getting a pro contract and proving myself in this league. *And making a ton of money in the process.*

Which I did.

I proved myself.



I made a ton of money.

Was I a superstar that kids begged their parents to get a jersey with my name on it?

*No.*

Did diehard hockey fans line up outside the arena before a game with pictures and posters of me, screaming my name, wanting that illusive autograph session?

*No.*

But I was the guy who threw the first punch, took a hit or two, and always threw the last punch on the ice. I was the guy that could take an otherwise boring game and turn it into something wild and violent. I was the guy who could change the entire vibe of a game with one punch or hit.

People cheered for me on the ice because I was safely contained there.

Only right now I wasn't on the ice.

By the time I reached Tucker's desk, he had leaned back and lifted his right leg up.

Tucker didn't have the dexterity to actually lift his leg high enough to expose his foot. And to attempt to kick me? Not a chance in hell.

My left hand shot across the desk and I grabbed the front of his expensive shirt.

I pulled him toward the desk.

“Atlas, you can't do-”

My right hand connected with Tucker's mouth, ending his sentence.

It wasn't even a hard punch - at least not for me.

Tucker wasn't tough.

He wore a suit, talked a big game, and knew how to get things done for his clients.

So why was I punching the guy who made me rich?

“Win a date with a hockey player?” I growled at Tucker. “Are you fucking joking right now? You trade me to the worst fucking team in the league and then pull a stunt like this? I asked you if there were any fucking catches with the contract and you told me no. You said it was one year and that was it. It was the best offer I had on the table. And now I'm supposed to parade around like a fucking clown for a fucking date?”

I pulled Tucker toward me again.

He put his hands up.

They shook.

*Good. They should be shaking. I'm going to need a new agent soon. And a good defense attorney because I'm going to throw him out of a fucking window in about three seconds.*

My teeth clenched tight and my top lip curled like a hungry dog.

“Atlas,” Tucker said. Blood stained his right front tooth. “You might want to give me a second here. To allow my guests to leave.”

“Guests?” I growled.

Lost in my own world of pissed rage - *Someone is going to win a fucking date with me?* - I didn't realize someone else was in the office.

I turned my head and saw a woman sitting on a chair.

A young boy next to her.

My mouth started to open.

I felt the words ready to slide out - *Who the fuck are these people?*

My brain quickly registered reality.

I knew who they were.

*They owned the Sola Empire - the hockey team I now played for.*



THE VERWERT FAMILY were well known for their real estate holdings across the world. Kind of a quiet family compared to other outspoken billionaire families, but still... they were billionaires and they owned the hockey team.

They were the ones who signed the contract that brought me here.

Oscar was the bigwig.

His wife - Ellen - stared at me.

Their son stared at me too.

I released my hold on Tucker's shirt.

I noticed a fancy looking tissue box, swiped one and handed it to him.

“Clean yourself up,” I suggested. “We have royalty here.”

“Royalty?” Ellen laughed.

I turned to face her and threw a quick grin on my face.

Her son continued to stare up at me.

The little guy wore a *Sola Empire* hoodie with a flannel over it.

Way overdressed for this West Coast beach weather, but he was trying to look the part of a cool skater kid.

Even though the kid was worth billions already.

“And who is this guy?” I asked, nodding to the kid.

“This is Timothy,” Ellen said. “My son.”

I offered my right hand. “Nice to meet you, Tim.”

“Wow,” the kid whispered. His right hand shook as he reached for mine. “You’re... huge...”

“Timothy, that’s not polite,” Ellen said.

“No, it’s fine. I am huge. I was well over six feet tall when I was in middle school. Everyone thought I’d be a basketball player. Want to know why that didn’t happen, Tim?”

“Why?”

I grabbed his hand. My hand swallowed his up.

Then I crouched down and curled my lip. “Because I liked to fight people. I liked to beat them up. I liked to rough them up. You can’t do that in basketball. They would kick me out. But in hockey...”

I smiled.

Timothy’s eyes lit up and he smiled too. “Cool.”

“Do you play hockey?” I asked.

“No,” Ellen said. “He refuses. He likes his goofy skateboard.”

“I have a skateboard park in my backyard!” Timothy yelled at me.

*Of course you do, you spoiled little shit. Please don't grow up to be some entitled punk, or kids who grew up like me will kick your ass.*

“And he liked to surf,” Ellen said. “That scares me to death. I can't build him an ocean in the backyard.”

I looked at Ellen. “Why not? Does that cost *trillions*?”

“Atlas!” Tucker roared. “Show some respect!”

Ellen smiled back at me. “You're a nasty one, aren't you? I heard about you. Big. Mean. Forgive my language here... but you're an asshole.”

Timothy gasped. “Mom! You said the *A-word*!”

“Oh, kid, that's nothing compared to the words I know,” I said to Timothy. “Maybe we can catch some waves and I'll teach you how to properly curse.”

Tucker let out a gasp.

He lunged forward and smacked his left hip off his desk.

The entire desk jumped, knocking over picture frames.

He let out a yelp and looked ready to fall over in pain.

He reached for the wall and forced a smile.

“He's just kidding, Mrs. Verwert,” Tucker said. “Atlas likes to run his mouth. That's just part of his charm.”

“I have charm?” I asked Tucker.

“Atlas, please,” Tucker whispered.

“Oh, relax, Tucker,” Ellen said. She started to stand. “He's just being himself. Can't blame a man for that.”

“But he should have more respect,” Tucker said.

“Since when do I have respect?” I asked.

I stood up too.

Ellen and I began to face off.

It didn't intimidate me for a second that the woman before me was worth billions.

I didn't give a shit about the fact that her husband was the guy who signed my big paychecks either.

She knew that as she looked back at me.

She was taller than Tucker but much shorter than me.

Not an ounce of fear showing, though.

Her eyes were crystal blue, but aged.

As was her face.

She definitely wasn't some plastic surgery addict.

But she did have some work done.

Just the basics though.

"Mom, aren't you scared?" Timothy asked.

"Of what? Atlas?" Ellen asked. "I think he's a big teddy bear."

"More like a grizzly," I said. "And I don't care what someone is worth..."

"Okay, this feels extremely tense," Tucker said. "Atlas, focus that anger on me. I'm the one who screwed you over here."

"No," Ellen said. "It was me. I chose you, Atlas. Out of the entire team, I chose you to be the one for our little promotion."

My lip snarled. "Little promotion, huh?"

“It’s not a secret that our organization is the worst team in the league, record wise. But I feel we have a great organization from the inside. We take care of our fans. We take care of our city too. But I decided I want something bigger as we move into another season. Maybe we aren’t destined to win a lot of games, but we sure as hell are going to be visible.”

“So why not give kids some free shit when they show up to a game?” I asked.

“Atlas,” Tucker growled.

“Tucker, stop,” Ellen said. “Atlas, I wanted to be here today to see you. I wanted to shake your hand, welcome you to the family, and then thank you for your support. We have a very rabid fanbase. The thought of someone winning a date with you is a very enticing offer.”

“Couldn’t have picked the star on your team?” I asked.

“You are the star now,” Ellen asked.

“I’m far from a star, Ellen,” I said.

“That’s Mrs. Verwert,” Tucker whispered.

“Ellen is just fine,” Ellen said to me.

She offered her hand to me.

“Am I supposed to shake your hand and agree to this nonsense?” I asked.

“No. You can shake my hand because this is the first time we’re meeting. The *win a date with a hockey player* event is already set. You’re going to be there, Atlas. And from myself, my family, and the entire *Sola Empire* organization, we thank you for doing this. And we look forward to a productive and exciting hockey season with you here.”

I gently touched Ellen's hand and shook it.

"Mom," Timothy whispered and he tugged at her shirt.  
"Please?"

"You can do it yourself, Timothy," Ellen said to her son.

Timothy then looked at me.

In shock and fear.

"What is it, Tim?" I asked.

"I... can... you... sign..."

"Are you asking me for an autograph?"

Timothy's face turned red as he nodded.

I crouched down. "I don't sign autographs, kid. Who the hell wants my signature?"

"The son of the owners," Tucker said.

"Let him talk," Ellen said to Tucker.

"Why is your mother afraid of you surfing?" I asked Timothy.

"She thinks I'll drown. Money can't bring me back to life."

"Good answer," I said. "What do you want me to sign?"

To my surprise, Timothy slid a hockey card out of his pocket.

One of my cards.

*Christ... look at that...*

It was amazing they put me on a hockey card.

I signed the card for Timothy and then looked at Ellen.

"Want me to sign anything?" I asked.



“You already did,” she said. “The contract that brought you here. Thanks again for your support, Atlas.”

With that said, Ellen led her son out of the office.

I looked at Tucker.

He put his hands out and smiled at me. “Atlas...”

“She wants me to be the guy for this stupid promotion? I’m going to ruin it.”

“I think she knows that,” Tucker said. “I think that’s why she chose you. You’re bad news, Atlas. And you’re always full of surprises.”

I turned and walked away without putting Tucker through a window.

*Win a date with a hockey player?*

I shook my head.

*I felt bad in advance for the woman who was going to step into my world.*

## Chapter Two

---

HAZEL



I SLOWLY LIFTED up to my toes on the wobbly step stool.

Believe me, the logical part of my brain begged me to stop and get a ladder, or wait for someone taller to help me.

*But who? Huh? Who did I have in my life now? Huh?*

So up on my toes I went, reaching for an old box on the top shelf in the dusty closet.

My fingertips swiped at the box.

I lost my balance.

The first thing I did was scream.

As though that was going to save me.

The step stool was no longer under my feet.

For a quick second I began to float in the air.

Then I realized my hands were clutched tight to the closet door frame.

All of this in the span of a split second before I fell to the floor.

I wasn't even sure how I fell the way I did, but I managed to land on my left foot, bend my knee, and gently topple down to my butt.

I gasped for a breath and hoped nothing was secretly broken.

“Okay, I’m fine,” I said.

The box fell off the top shelf and hit the floor with a loud thud.

That scared the hell out of me. I screamed and threw a punch at the air.

My heart jumped into my throat.

The lid from the box landed a few feet away from the box itself.

Pictures spewed all over the bedroom floor.

The first picture I saw was of my grandmother and me.

At the ocean.

On the beach.

I was maybe eight years old.

Wearing a very unflattering bathing suit that was one piece with a large unicorn across my body.

I stood there, holding a large seashell, smiling a toothless smile. My grandmother was behind me, looking like a super model with her big smile and gigantic bug-like black sunglasses that she always loved to wear.

I reached for the picture and studied it.

Then I looked around the bedroom.

It still smelled like her.

That subtle hint of her perfume.

I put my head back and looked up to the ceiling.

My eyes filled with tears.

Then I saw a few specs of red staining the ceiling.

*“Gram, you can’t be walking around with food in your hand.”*

*“The hell I can’t. Watch me.”*

*“You’re using a walker.”*

*“I know that. I’m thrusting my hips at it to move it. Don’t underestimate these hips, Granddaughter. These hips turned boys into men and made men lose their minds.”*

*“That’s something I did not need to hear.”*

*Gram shuffles her way into her bedroom.*

*I never met a woman so stubborn before.*

*But what could I say to her?*

*Nobody in life is ever trained to be told they’re going to die in six months.*

*(Or the fact that her six months was up three months ago... literally living on borrowed time.)*

*Gram stops in the middle of the floor in her bedroom.*

*She’s out of breath.*

*I know not to point that out to her.*

*I slowly sneak into the bedroom behind her.*

*After a few silent seconds pass by, I reach for her right shoulder.*

*“Hey, Gram.”*

*Gram lets out the loudest yell I’ve ever heard.*

*She throws her plate of toast with butter and jelly into the air.*

*“Holy fucking hell!” she screams.*

*She spins around, ready to attack me, but she falls forward.*

*I’m there to catch her.*

*We both look at each other and start laughing.*

*Then I look up to the ceiling and there’s a piece of a toast stuck to it.*

*Gram looks and howls with laughter.*

*We both laugh so hard we gently collapse down to the floor.*

*We laugh until we cry.*

*We laugh until our stomachs hurt.*

*“How do we get that down?” I ask as I wipe my cheeks.*

*“The fuck if I know!” Gram says as she tries to catch her breath.*

*Not even two minutes later the piece of toast falls from the ceiling down to the floor.*

*Gram and I look at each other again.*

*We laugh again.*

*We cry again.*

*Then I hug her.*

*I'm going to miss her so much when she's gone.*

And then she was gone.

In the blink of an eye.

Gram made it a full extra six months past her *death date*.

I uprooted my entire life to take care of her.

I didn't once for a second regret it either.

Except now I had this big house to clean up and figure out what to do with it.

Maybe I moved extra slow doing that on purpose.

*Maybe I just wasn't ready to say goodbye for good.*



I OPENED the front door and Hannah pointed at me.

“You were crying alone again, weren't you?”

“It wasn't like that.”

“Then what was it, Hazel?”

“It was... it's a long story.”

I started to turn and my best friend grabbed my arm and spun me back around.

“Tell me everything.”

“I fell off a step stool and almost hurt myself. Then I saw a picture of me and Gram when I was a little girl and it brought back memories. Then I looked up and saw the jelly stain on the ceiling...”

“So it was good crying then.”

“I guess,” I said.

“Come here, I want to show you something.”

Hannah grabbed my hand and dragged me out of the house.

I honestly couldn't remember when I met Hannah.

We were just always friends.

Always together.

Hazel and Hannah.

Hannah and Hazel.

We kind of grew up the same.

She didn't really have her parents in her life. Neither did I.

Her father left before she was born and her mother worked and loved to drink a lot.

I lost both of my parents when I was young.

They weren't the best parents to begin with either.

I wasn't sure if I missed them or even how to miss them.

No matter what happened in life, Hannah and I had Gram.

I called her Gram.

Hannah called her *Grellie*.

That came from Gram's name - Evelyn.

She didn't want to be known as *Gram* from everyone.

So Hannah being the smart-ass she was, she called Gram *Grellie* and it just stuck.

Even at Gram's funeral, Hannah stood up, gave a beautiful eulogy and called her *Grellie* one more time.

Now Hannah and I snuck around to the back of the old house like we used to do when we were kids.

We played all kinds of games in and around the house.

From pretending we were princesses-slash-warriors and fighting off imaginary bad guys to sneaking boys here when we were teenagers, hoping to find the best place to make out.

All the way to sitting on the front porch steps, each with a drink, crying our eyes out when Gram was diagnosed with cancer.

Life in a strange way had moved full circle.

Hannah stayed put in town and worked for a marketing company with a nice office near the beach.

I helped myself to a big jump in life and moved to the east coast and worked for a marketing company that overlooked a bay.

Hannah and I made good money and visited each other all the time.

Then came Gram's diagnosis and the reality that she wasn't going to survive.

I quit my job, sold everything I could, and left.

To be with Gram until the end.

And now I was beyond the end.

I guess this was considered overtime?

And I felt like a giant mess.

Around the back of the house, Hannah finally stopped.

She pointed to an old picnic table.

“Sit.”

“On that thing? Do you know how old that is?”

“Just sit down,” Hannah ordered.



I carefully took a seat on the very old picnic table.

Hannah sat across from me.

She smiled and reached into her pocket and brought out a pack of cigarettes.

“Really?” I asked.

“Remember we used to sneak out here and smoke?”

“Of course I do.”

“And remember the night *Grellie* caught us?”

I smiled. “Of course I do.”

“She sat right next to me, lit up a cigarette and smoked with us,” Hannah said. “We were so scared we left our cigarettes just burn out.”

“Then she stood up and walked back to the house, just looked back at us and shook her head.”

“We never smoked at this table again,” Hannah said.

“I stopped smoking all together,” I said.

“I didn’t,” Hannah said. “Not until she got sick. Then I quit. Cold turkey. I thought I could convince the universe to make her better.”

“Yeah, we all went through that,” I said. “I begged night after night but it didn’t matter.”

“So?”

“So, what?”

“Let’s have a smoke,” Hannah said. “In honor of *Grellie*.”

“She died of cancer.”

“Do you think she would care right now?”

“No.”

“Did she try to do anything to save herself?”

“No. She refused it all. She just lived her life.”

“That’s right. So let’s live. And then you’re getting out of this house.”

“To go where?” I asked.

Hannah took a cigarette out of the pack and handed it to me.

She took one for herself.

“There’s an event my company helped to set up,” she said. “It’s a hockey thing. Some goofy promotion. But it’s a night out. We can get dressed up, maybe even a little slutty. Free food and drinks.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Hazel,” Hannah said. “You have to get out of here once in a while. You need to experience life. *Grellie* would be pissed at you right now. You putter around that house, pretend to clean it up, work, and then do nothing.”

“Way to find a subtle way to call me a loser.”

“So, let’s go out for one night then. For fun.”

I shook my head.

Hannah lit her cigarette and took a deep drag.

She coughed for a second and then sighed. “Wow, that tastes way too good.”

She tossed me the lighter.

I looked up to the sky.

*Sorry, Gram. Hannah has always been a bad influence.*

I put the cigarette between my lips and brought the lighter toward it.

One flick of my thumb and a small flame danced in front of my face.

Just as I touched the flame to the cigarette, the picnic table seat broke.

The old wood said *goodbye*.

Hannah jumped as my butt smacked the ground.

“Hazel! Are you okay?”

“I guess Gram didn’t want me to smoke,” I said.

We both started to laugh.

Hannah smushed her cigarette out on the picnic table and came around to help me up.

We laughed until our eyes filled with tears.

We both knew they were laughing tears though.

They were also tears because we missed Gram.

Hannah nodded to me.

And I nodded back.

*We both knew I was going to go out to whatever hockey event her company helped plan.*

## Chapter Three

---

### ATLAS



THE *DRESSING ROOM* felt like a cleaned up broom closet.

*Or maybe I was just that big.*

I stared forward at the fancy gold hook that held the tuxedo.

I folded my arms.

I chomped on a piece of gum that had lost its flavor thirty minutes ago.

The door opened behind me.

“Still staring at it?”

I looked over my shoulder at Henry.

Being a hockey player like me - *the guy who traveled from team to team as a career* - I played with a lot of guys. But of all the guys I played with and sort of knew, Henry was probably closest as a friend.

We played together in the minors for a little while.

We even shared a shithole apartment at one point.

He got called up way before I did.

A big, mean, and really fast right winger, the second he had the chance to prove himself, he went for it.

Henry was also a dreamer.

That's what put him on the worst team in the league, thinking he could carry it all on his back. Wanting to be the hero.

"I'm not fucking putting that thing on," I said to Henry. "I'm not going to look like a penguin."

Henry chuckled. "We're all suited up here, man."

"That's a tux. Not a suit. And fuck the rules. Fuck anything that suggests tradition. Why aren't we talking strategy? Why aren't we on the ice right now working on all the issues this fucking team has?"

"Didn't think you cared enough about that, Atlas."

I turned, pushed by Henry and looked around.

The backstage area of the large catering hall was in full swing.

People running around with food, coats, barking orders at each other.

I spotted Ellen at one point, wearing a gold, glittery dress.

She had her arm hooked through her husband's.

She smiled at me.

Her husband didn't.

The only reason they owned the team was to say they did. That's what billionaires did. They didn't care about the sport.

They wanted the assets of the team and everything that came with it.

I rubbed my jaw.

“Hey, Atlas, you’re not dressed yet!”

From my right, the rest of the guys began to appear.

Jago wore a dark gold suit. A little swagger to the goalie, with a killer smile and calculated eyes.

Next to him, Rome was in a full tux with his hair slicked back. This guy even went as far as to stick a monocle against his right eye. This guy was full of energy and thought he was a fucking jokester all the time.

He squinted and pointed at me.

“Where’s your tux, *son*?” Rome called out.

I growled under my breath.

I glared at Henry.

“I know,” Henry said.

Then there was Joe and Sebastian.

Joe and I were the defensemen. He was as big as me.

Close to being just as mean too.

The guy loved the whole *let’s fist bump each other all the time*.

Joe threw out his fist.

I offered mine. Not happy about it.

Look, this whole *Sola Empire* experience was new to me still.

These guys were about getting closer. I was about wasting time and getting paid.

The star of the team was Sebastian.

The rock star. The guy who played center.

He scored the most goals. He wasn't afraid to fight.

He was the face of the team. Kids wanted his autograph and his jersey.

"Atlas," Sebastian said to me. "What a disaster of a night, huh?"

"Yeah," I said.

"They do this every year," he said. "They love to get their rich friends together and have some kind of made-up event. Last year I had to give hockey lessons to a group of kids."

"And the worst part?" Rome asked. "There wasn't one single mother there."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

"Single moms are fuckable," Rome said. "Hear me out for a second." Rome got closer to me. He adjusted the monocle and squinted his right eye to hold it in place. *This guy looks like a fucking moron right now.* "Single mothers are tired. They're emotional. They're worn down. And most of all..." He had three fingers up. He turned his hand and began to wiggle his fingers. "They're desperate as fuck."

I couldn't help myself.

I reached up and plucked the monocle from his eye, threw it to the ground and stomped on it.

"Finally," Jago said. "Been waiting for someone to do that."

“Atlas, don’t mind Rome,” Henry said to me. “He thinks his dick and his hockey stick are the same thing.”

“I never stop scoring either,” Rome said. “And I always come prepared.”

Rome stepped away from me and reached into his pocket.

He took out another monocle.

This one he put against his left eye.

I took a step toward him and Joe put an arm out.

“Focus, Atlas,” he said. “You’ve got a big night ahead of you.”

“Do you want to swallow your own jaw?” I offered.

“We can talk about that later,” Joe said. “Right now you need to play your part.”

“How the fuck does this help the team?”

“It doesn’t,” Sebastian said. “But we all pay our dues. You have an easy one.”

“A date is an easy one?” I asked.

“Fuck yeah it is,” Rome said. “Imagine if you get some hot and horny hockey babe...”

“And even if it’s someone you don’t click with, who cares?” Jago asked. “You can just show up, take a few pics, have something to eat, and call it a night. This is easy.”

“Then trade with me, Jago,” I said.

“You were the one they chose, brother,” Jago said with a smug grin.

“I’m not wearing the fucking tux!” I roared.

I heard a chuckle to my left.



“Hey, Coach *Detom*,” Rome said.

“What the hell do you have stuck to your eye?”

“Don’t even ask him,” Henry said.

*Coach Detom. Denny Tomans.*

*Tall. Skinny. Glasses. A clean-cut face. Narrow eyes.*

He looked like the kind of guy you could take down in a second, but he had a reputation. He played for years. Traveled around like I did. And he loved to fight and was good at it. In fact, after he retired from hockey he got into boxing and went undefeated before coming back to hockey as a coach.

The guys all called him *Detom*.

“Atlas,” he said.

“Coach,” I nodded.

“Do me a favor.”

“What?”

“Have a drink with me,” he said.

He had a drink in his hand.

Some kind of expensive martini.

But he opened his suit jacket and took out a flask and handed it to me.

“Booze or not, I’m not wearing the tux,” I said.

I took the flask and took a drink.

“Defiant,” Coach *Detom* said. “Use that on the ice for good.”

“Is this a pep talk?” I asked.

“Hey,” Sebastian said, pointing at me. “Show a little respect here, Atlas.”

I handed the flask back to Coach *Detom* and I showed my hands. “My apologies, Coach.”

“You want to be a prick?” Joe asked me. “*I’ve got an idea.*”



JOE TOOK his suit jacket off and threw it to me.

He nodded.

“I came here on a one year deal,” I said. “A nice deal. A decent payday for me. The worst team in the league. No expectations.”

“You came to the wrong team then,” Sebastian said.

“It’s been a rough road for a while here,” Henry said. “But we’re not a bunch of losers.”

“I would never call you guys losers.”

“We’re a good team,” Jago said. “We play tough. Not everything goes our way. Why do you think you’re here, Atlas? We needed the help.”

“Joe needed the help,” Rome said.

“I’ll make you eat that monocle,” Joe growled at Rome.

“I’m just making it clear, you guys know this is a one and done for me,” I said. “One year. That’s it. That’s the kind of player I am. I’m a floater. I go where I’m needed. A temporary piece.”

“Then this stuff shouldn’t bother you,” Sebastian said.

“Oh, it bothers me,” I said. “And after all this? I’m done already with this team.”

“Just go out there, stand on stage and look pretty,” Jago said.

Joe patted my shoulder, went into the *dressing room* and came back out with the tux jacket.

“That’s going to look ridiculous on you,” I said to him.

“Yeah, it is,” he said. “That’s what teammates do.”

Joe walked away.

The rest of the guys left, minus Henry.

I look at Henry and sighed.

“Don’t sweat it,” he said. “You’ll settle in. You’ll find your place. It’s a good group of guys. Just not the record-breaking team.”

“I’m not wearing a tux,” I said.

“I know,” Henry said.

“If that pisses them off, I don’t care.”

Henry laughed. “I know, Atlas.”

I wore black jeans and a gray t-shirt.

I forced Joe’s suit jacket onto my arms and flexed, hoping the sleeves would rip into shreds.

The suit jacket fit nice.

On top of that, when I patted the left side, I realized Joe had a flask too.

I helped myself to another drink and caught myself grinning.

These guys weren't all that bad, huh?

One more drink and I put the flask away.

I took a few steps and I heard someone whistle at me.

I froze and turned my head.

That's when I saw Ellen looking at me.

Oscar at her side.

The billionaire owners of the *Sola Empire*.

"No tux?" Oscar asked.

"No tux," I said.

Ellen smiled. "You look really good, Atlas. Thanks for being here tonight."

Ellen guided her husband away.

I stood alone for a second or two.

I felt angry.

I growled under my breath.

To make this seem fair to me, I had one option.

*Whoever wins this date with me... I'm going to make it the worst night of their life.*

## Chapter Four

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HAZEL



I HID in the women's restroom and looked at my phone.

An email had come in from one of the supervisors looking for opinions on some marketing material.

At first glance I knew the colors were all wrong for the campaign.

The client wanted something big and bright, but these colors didn't mesh.

They actually didn't even collide the right way.

In other words, it was too forced.

I closed my eyes and pictured a palate of colors.

Trying to find the perfect colors.

Someone knocked at the bathroom stall.

"Occupied," I called out.

I cringed.

I never knew what to say when someone knocked on a bathroom stall door.

Not that these were typical bathroom stalls here either.

They were like mini rooms.

Plenty of space to spread out a little.

But what else would you expect from a super fancy place, right?

I mean, after all, the people throwing this little event tonight were billionaires.

They owned a hockey team, among other things.

In fact, I could have just hung out in the bathroom stall all night and worked.

Someone knocked again.

I looked up from my phone.

“Seriously?” I called out.

*Knocking again.*

“What the fuck,” I mumbled under my breath.

Then I cleared my throat. “Someone is in here!”

That didn’t work.

The person knocked again!

“You want to know what I’m doing in here?” I called out.

“Want me to describe it in detail? Want to take a picture?”

Now came two hands knocking at the door.

A bubble of anger popped in my belly and I unlocked the door.

Not even thinking logically that if this were someone who wanted to hurt me - *or worse* - I was doing the cliché dumb horror movie thing by opening the door for the person.

Then again, the mood I was in, I was ready to throw a punch.

I opened the door and saw Hannah standing there.

Hands on her hips.

Looking really annoyed.

“Are you serious?” I called out.

“Are you?” she yelled back to me. “You’re hiding in a bathroom? On your phone? Tell me you’re not working right now.”

“Well, Mark wanted to know-”

“Mark? You’re worried about an email from Mark? He thinks he’s a supervisor. He wears that fucking name tag like he works in a restaurant or something. Fuck that guy. He pawns his work off while he’s at bars buying drinks for women. He lies about himself to get the women into bed. He’s disgusting.”

“Do you know this from experience?” I asked.

Hannah frowned.

“Really? Mark?”

“He told me he was on the board,” she said. “When I first started. Okay?”

“And you fell for that? That made him hotter to you?”

“Do you really want to do this?” Hannah asked. “You’re in a bathroom stall, Hazel.”

“Yeah.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“I don’t even want to be here, Hannah. You dragged me here.”

“You wanted to come with me. Look at you... you know what? Come here.”

Hannah grabbed my wrists and pulled me out of the bathroom stall.

I stumbled forward, feeling like a newborn giraffe as I tried to walk on the shoes she gave me to wear.

They weren’t quite high heels but they were far from actual comfortable shoes.

I couldn’t necessarily wear sneakers because I was in a dress.

A dress that I compromised on wearing because the first one Hannah picked out was insane.

I would have been better off coming here wearing nothing but a bath towel.

The first dress was so tight, I could see the shape of my belly button. I could see the outline of each areola too. And my boobs were pushed so far up, my chin had a place to rest.

It did not look good on me.

So I traded that dress for a dark red dress I bought a long time ago for no reason at all.

It fit comfortably.

I felt like I looked good.

*No. I look good. I look really good.*



The color red brought out the color of my brown eyes.

I had the ability to somehow pull my hair back in one shot and use a clip to hold it there.

It was messy yet put together.

It worked.

As far as makeup went?

*Please. Nobody has time for that.*

Plus, I wasn't out tonight looking for anything other than to have a few drinks with Hannah and make fun of rich people.

Even though I currently had been hiding in a bathroom stall, thinking about work.

"Look at this woman in the mirror," Hannah said.

"Please don't do this right now," I said. "You know how things are for me. I've been stuck in a routine for so long. It's hard to break it."

"Tonight, you're breaking it. You're breaking everything, Hazel. Maybe you should find a rich guy here, take him home and break your bed."

"Oh, yeah, sure," I said. "I'm sure someone would love to come back to the house my dead grandmother owns and fuck me senseless."

Hannah snorted and shook her head. "No more work emails. You missed all the good shrimp cocktail. There's expensive champagne out there now. It tastes horrible. And I saw some really sexy looking guy with a monocle. I think he's a hockey player. I'm not sure."

"Is that the guy who's offering a date?"

“I don’t think so,” Hannah said. “But, come on, let’s find out. You said we were going to have fun.”

“No, *you* said we were going to have fun. I just agreed like an idiot. I was traumatized after my ass broke the picnic table.”

“That’s right, *girl*,” Hannah said. “Let’s see what else that ass can do tonight.”

Hannah slapped my ass and it echoed around the bathroom.

I spun around and almost fell over. “Hannah!”

“You really can’t walk in those heels, huh?”

“I don’t know what these are that you gave me. I hate them.”

“Fine. Trade with me. You’re going to be even shorter then.”

“I don’t care.”

Hannah and I traded foot attire.

My feet sighed in relief.

Hannah grabbed my hand and we walked out of the bathroom together.

As I stepped toward the main ballroom area, the biggest man I ever saw in my life appeared right next to me.

He looked like a lumberjack. Or a biker. Or some kind of fighter or something.

He was massive.

Tall.

Jacked with muscle.

And he looked *angry*.

Wearing jeans and a suit jacket...

My mouth fell open.

He looked at me for a second and then kept walking.

My eyes began to follow him.

Hannah reached under my chin and closed my mouth.

Then she whispered to me, “Good to know your vagina still has a pulse.”

She giggled.

*I instantly started to blush.*



HANNAH and I sat next to each other.

I was at the end of a row and felt comfortable there.

Having the chance to just stand up and run like hell felt good.

A viable option.

The expensive champagne tasted gross, but I drank it anyway.

The appetizers were really delicious though.

Food that was way out of mine and Hannah’s pay scales.

At one point I leaned toward Hannah. “How did you get tickets for this?”

“Andrew,” she said. “He helped planned this. He and Christian.”

“And *how* did you get tickets?”

Hannah looked at me. “I helped too. Gave advice.”

“Which one did you sleep with?” I asked. “Or was it both? At the same time?”

“I’m sorry, are we talking about your fantasies now?”

“Uh, no,” I said.

“Just shut up and relax, they’re going to do the date thing next.”

I stared forward and rolled my eyes.

Ellen Verwert took to the stage in an elegant dress with a big smile.

“Thank you all for joining us tonight,” she said. “This has been a great excuse to get together with old friends. And new.” She pointed to someone in the crowd. They laughed. “I just feel blessed to have the platform I do. I’m not going to stand here and ramble off everything I’m involved in. You all should know it by now!”

Ellen pointed again.

More people laughed.

She knew how to work a crowd.

I obviously did my research before showing up.

Ellen Verwert was heavily involved with programs and charities that ranged from helping women get out of abusive relationships to providing education to those in need. As much as the billionaire stuff made me want to roll my eyes into next Tuesday, at least she did something good with some of her money.

“But tonight we’re here to celebrate our team. To celebrate the *Sola Empire!*”

More applause.

“Now I’m not one to shy away from things,” Ellen said. “We’ve had our struggles. But this team is good. And I hope to see a lot of you at the games. Maybe the score doesn’t always reflect who we are, but these games are darn sure entertaining. And speaking of entertaining, we have a treat for you all tonight. I’m bringing out the newest member of our hockey team. Recently traded all the way from Phoenix. I’m going to make it just his first name. That’s all he needs once you see him. Come on out here, Atlas!”

Applause again.

That’s when I saw him walk across the stage.

The gigantic, angry man I had seen earlier.

“He’s a monster,” I whispered.

“I wish I was under that monster,” Hannah whispered to me. “If this were a fairy tale, the knight who was going to save me could go fuck himself. Let the monster win.”

“Will you be quiet?” I whispered.

Hannah offered me a mischievous grin.

“Atlas, care to say something?” Ellen asked.

Atlas glanced at her.

Ellen laughed.

“He’s not much for talking,” Ellen said. “But who wouldn’t want to win a date with this man, right? And as you know, your seats are numbered and based on how much you donated to my charity depends on how many votes you got into the lucky bag we’re going to choose from.”

“Hey, how much money did you spend?” I asked Hannah.

“For myself? Nothing.”

I lifted my eyebrow.

I wanted to ask what that comment meant.

*Not for herself? Then for who?*

“Are we ready?” Ellen asked. “The lucky person I choose gets to go out on a date with Atlas. Everything will be paid for. It’ll be a *wild* night with a *wild* hockey player.”

Whistles and hoots came from the women in the audience.

It was a little cringeworthy.

Ellen reached into a silk bag and took out a piece of gold paper.

“I’m looking for seat number... oh, wow... sixty-nine!”

Everyone began to look around. A few clapping.

Then I realized very slowly that everyone began to look at me.

I looked at Hannah.

She smiled ear to ear.

My eyes grew wide.

I felt a white light suddenly hit me.

I slowly looked down to find my seat number.

I blinked fast.

I was in seat sixty-nine.

*Meaning I just won a date with Atlas.*

## Chapter Five

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### ATLAS



EVEN FROM MY DISTANCE, I saw the look on her face.

Pure shock. Utter surprise. Intense panic.

A lot of hatred for the woman sitting next to her.

I assumed this had been one of those kind of situations where the best friend set up the other one, thinking it was what she needed.

*Great. As if this entire thing can't get any worse. Now I'm going to have some woman up here who clearly does not want to be up here. Who clearly does not want to be near me. And I feel the same about her.*

Then again, when I saw the so-called *lucky woman* step out into the aisle, my left eyebrow jumped up for a second.

The color of her dress, so dark red it almost looked black.

Legs, hips, a few more interesting curves that definitely caught my attention.

A nice dress, not meant to show off anything more than what would show in a pair of jeans.

I wasn't sure why I liked that but I did.

Her hair messy, but in a quick put together way.

A far cry from the rich people around me who probably paid triple to have personal hair stylists come to their houses to do their hair.

“Come on up here!” Ellen's voice boomed next to me.

This woman really wanted nothing to do with the event.

And for that I really did like her.

I felt someone elbow me.

My head turned to the right and Ellen stared at me, smiling.

“Make it enjoyable for her,” Ellen growled.

I felt like growling back that I would breach my fucking hockey contract with her husband's failure of a hockey team and jump ship across the world to play hockey for another country.

“Atlas,” Ellen said. “This is important to me.”

Not that I needed to give a shit about Ellen's feelings...

I looked forward again and walked to the edge of the stage.

And I jumped off.

There were a few gasps as though I wasn't a professional athlete and the stage was only five feet off the ground, if that.

I landed with ease and walked toward the woman who had just won a date with me.

When she saw me coming toward her, she froze.



Her eyes went wide. Her mouth slightly parted.

The color of her cheeks began to shade rose-red.

I fully expected her to pull out some mace and soak my face.

I couldn't help my menacing look and size.

Not that I cared either.

I closed in on the woman and skipped any and all normal pleasantries.

I touched her arms - *bare arms... smooth arms...* - and I leaned down to close in on her.

There were some whistles and catcalling going on then.

“Listen, love,” I said into her right ear, “we both have no choice right now. The longer it takes you to get up on that stage, the longer this bullshit goes on for. So just take my hand and come with me and get this over with. Yeah?”

“Okay,” her voice said.

Her breath tickled the scruff on my face.

I clenched my teeth for a fraction of a second before standing tall again.

I turned, grabbed her right hand with my left, and we walked toward the stage together.

The applause got louder once more.

She looked back at her friend a few times.

I kept my gaze forward.

On the stage.

At Ellen.

*Wondering where the hell this night was going to go next.*



“AND WHAT IS the lucky woman’s name?” Ellen asked.

I was still holding her hand.

I felt her shaking.

She really didn’t want to be part of this facade.

*Neither do I, love. Neither do I.*

“Don’t be shy,” Ellen said. “Atlas is big and mean... but I’ve seen him smile. I’ve seen him be a little bit... *soft...*”

That got people chuckling.

I didn’t need cheap jokes at my expense.

I leaned down toward the woman again.

“Tell me your name, love,” I said. “Help me end this ridiculous scene.”

She nodded. “Hazel.”

“Like the color of someone’s eyes?”

She looked at me. “Yes.”

I looked at her eyes. “Your eyes aren’t hazel though.”

“Are they supposed to be?”

“Oh, do you see what I see here?” Ellen asked. “Anyone else see some sparks flying right now?”

*Great. More cheers.*

*Half-drunk rich people loving the sight of this.*

*Like they’re watching a live reality television show.*

That's when I knew Hazel and I needed to get off the stage.

"So now the next question," Ellen said. "The obvious question. When is the big date?"

She asked as though I had this stuff planned out.

She was good on the microphone.

She could have made a career as a paparazzi.

That's when I decided to have my voice heard.

I grabbed for Ellen's hand and the microphone.

"We're going to have a drink and get to know each other first," I said. My voice boomed through the speakers. Shaking the room like an earthquake. "Then we'll talk about the date."

*"Try it before you buy it, Atlas!"*

That was Rome yelling to me.

Then came some whistles.

I wanted this thing to end and end right now.

So I played the game for a few seconds.

Pointing. Nodding. Winking.

Then I turned, taking Hazel with me.

I leaned toward her one more time. "We have to get out of here, love. There's a bar down the street. Want to make a run for it with me?"

"Please," Hazel said.

That's what we did.

We walked off the stage to cheers and yells.

Ellen quickly began to talk about her charities again.

There were more things happening for the night and I didn't care one bit.

I found the closest door and led Hazel out.

Two more doors and we were outside.

I took a breath.

So did she.

We looked at each other.

She looked as pissed as I felt.

I was still holding her hand.

"Right down here," I said to her.

I opened the door to the corner bar and held it open for Hazel.

She chose the corner of the bar - the perfect place to sit - and she pointed to the bartender.

"Glass of whiskey," she called out. "Quick."

"Double that order," I said.

The bartender nodded.

Hazel looked at me.

I looked at her.

I offered my right hand. "Guess we should do the introductions properly now. I'm Atlas."

She placed her hand against mine.

I curled my hand and my thumb rubbed the back of her hand.

"Hazel," she said. "That's me."

"That's you," I said.

The bartender put our drinks down on the bar.

We reached for our glass at the same time.

“Cheers to you, Hazel,” I said. “What a weird night.”

“You have no idea, Atlas.”

“Then give me an idea,” I said. “I’m not going back there tonight. In fact...”

I stood up and took the suit jacket off.

“Must be nice,” Hazel said.

“What?”

“You get to feel comfortable.”

“You don’t feel comfortable in that dress?”

“No,” Hazel snapped. “I didn’t want to wear a dress. I mean, I did pick out this dress. Compared to the one my friend wanted me to wear...”

My eyes suddenly blinked a few times.

My brain zapped itself as my cock demanded I ask what kind of dress Hazel was supposed to wear.

*How tight? How short? How much leg showing? How much cleavage showing? Her hips... are they even curvier than they look now?*

“How about this then...”

I stepped behind Hazel and offered her the suit jacket.

Her size compared to mine meant the suit jacket was the size of a blanket.

I gently placed it over her shoulders and she was suddenly covered up.

“Okay,” she said. “This isn’t all that bad. Thanks.”

“Yours to keep,” I said. “It’s not even my suit jacket. They wanted me to wear a tuxedo. No fucking way I was going to do that.”

“So you’re always like this?” Hazel asked.

“Like what?”

“Mean.”

“Yeah. It’s not a show. This is who I am.”

“Can we have this drink now, Atlas?”

“Sure, love,” I said. “Cheers to both of us. For a fucking crazy night.”

I watched her throw back the shot of whiskey with ease.

Drinking it like water.

*Red flag or very sexy?*

“Another?” I offered.

“Yes,” she said. “But just one more for me, okay? Don’t try being a douchebag and forcing drinks on me.”

“Never would.”

“Good. Then we’ll get along.”

“I guess we will,” I said, then I sat back down. “Tell me about this friend of yours. She tricked you, huh?”

“How do you know that?”

“I could read it on your face, Hazel. The second your number was called.”

She sighed. “Yeah. Hannah thinks she means well. I’ll be honest, she kind of forced me to come out tonight. I was even

trying to hide in the bathroom and get work done. She dragged me out. Now I know why. I have no idea how much money she spent but I guess her plan worked.”

“I guess it did,” I said. “Sorry you got stuck with a grump like me. I wanted nothing to do with this either. I guess there was some bullshit fine print in my contract that got me stuck with this.”

“Well, maybe this is the best case scenario then,” Hazel said. “We both don’t want this. But we’re stuck with it. So we don’t have to be fake with each other.”

“I guess that’s a good point,” I said. “Because you know this isn’t the date, right? And Ellen is not going to let this slide. We’re going to have to go out on a real date.”

“I know.” Hazel stood up. “Thanks for the drink. And the jacket.”

“That’s it? You’re leaving so soon, love?”

“You said it yourself, this isn’t the date,” she said. “I’m going to go home.”

I reached for her hand. “You wanted a second drink.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Bad breakup?”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“You didn’t want to come out. You didn’t want to wear that dress. You want to run right back home. You’re going through something.”

“Is it your problem?”

“I guess not,” I said.

“Then good night, Atlas. We’ll talk soon about that date?”

I stood up and towered over Hazel.

I again pointed out to myself that her eyes weren't hazel.

They weren't hazel at all.

They were brown.

A rich brown color.

Her eyes were full of *something*.

Emotion. Pain. Grief.

I wasn't sure.

"One more thing before you go, Hazel," I said.

"What's that?"

*"I need your number so we can plan our date."*



## Chapter Six

---

HAZEL



I POURED myself another cup of coffee but purposely left it on the counter.

My hands were jittery already.

Actually, my entire body was jittery.

I hadn't even had a chance to think about what happened with the whole dating a hockey player thing.

*Tonight was the date.*

*In fact, the date was happening in just a few hours.*

*Hours!*

I looked down at myself.

I was still in pajama pants.

Pajama pants with cartoon trees, bears and bumblebees on them.

And I had on an off-white hoodie that was old but fit so damn good, I never wanted to take it off.

*How's this for the date, Atlas?*

I heard a knock at the door and it startled me.

For some reason I pictured Atlas standing on the other side of the door.

Him standing ten feet tall in jeans and a suit jacket. His sexy, jet-black hair that was long and messy. The mean look on his face and in his eyes.

I pictured people all around him with cameras.

And Ellen with her phone out, recording, wanting to capture everything about the date that I so-called *won*.

The knocking kept going.

“Hazel, it's me!”

*Hannah.*

“I forgot my key! Let me in!”

I unlocked the front door and opened it for her.

“You look ready to fuck,” she said to me.

“Excuse me?”

“Your date.”

“A fake date,” I said. “There will be no fucking on this date.”

“Says who? You have a chance with a hockey player!”

“This is your fault, you know.”

“And you're welcome,” Hannah said.

She breezed by me and went right for the kitchen.

She picked up my coffee cup and smelled it.

Her nose wrinkled.

“You drink this crap?”

“It’s coffee,” I said.

“This is not coffee. You need a better setup in here. A good coffee station. To get properly caffeinated.”

I tilted my head.

“You’re still mad at me?” Hannah asked.

“It has been two full days since you screwed me over!”

“I didn’t screw anything. It was pure luck that you even won. I thought I would throw your name into it and tell you later. But look what happened. You won! This is amazing.”

“What is amazing? You didn’t meet him. Atlas. He’s not a nice guy.”

“So?”

“Right. I have to force myself to go out with this guy. All for show. Wow. That’s exciting.”

“It’s better than sitting around this place.”

“You know, Hannah, people grieve in their own way.”

“Are you grieving right now?”

“Of course I am. I have to make decisions about this house. I have to clean it up. Clean it out. I have a lot on my mind.”

“So you get a night out to get it off your mind,” Hannah said. “You need it. You can’t even argue that. Now, can we change the subject and talk about what you’re wearing right now?”

“These are pajamas,” I said. “I’ll dress myself when the time comes.”

“A nice dress? Low cut? Show off some skin? You know, if you leave your hair down, the ends will gently touch the tops of your boobs. Gets their attention.”

“I don’t think a guy needs any help with attention when it comes to breasts,” I said.

“You never know. Maybe Atlas is going to be a gentleman about it.”

“He doesn’t want this,” I said. “Neither do I. This is a joke. It’s stupid, Hannah. Totally stupid.”

“Fine,” she said. “Stupid. But it’s a night out. For fun. For free. You’re welcome.”

“You know, I’m kind of mad at you about this, Hannah.”

“I figured. Now can you go get changed? Show me what you’re wearing out on your date?”

“I need to shower and all that first.”

“*All that?*” Hannah grinned. “Need to clean up the garden for Atlas?”

I snorted. “Gates are closed. Flowers aren’t bloomed.”

“I doubt that,” Hannah said. “You’re a sucker for men who are as tall as he is.”

“Shut up, Hannah,” I snapped.

She laughed at me.

I rolled my eyes and went upstairs to the bathroom to shower.

*Did I shave?*

*Of course I did.*

*I was due to shave my legs anyway.*

*And while I was doing that... sure... maybe I cleaned everything else up too.*

*Not for Atlas. Not for any man.*

*For myself.*

*To feel good. Clean. Confident.*

*That's all.*

I exited the shower with my towel around my body.

I then felt frisky for some reason and wiped my hand on the foggy mirror.

Then I opened the towel and looked at myself.

Fully nude.

Just for a second.

I closed the towel and went into my bedroom to get dressed.

*For my big date tonight!*

It was more of a production than anything else.

Atlas texted me as soon as I got home from the bar.

Along with Hannah, wanting to know what happened to me.

I addressed Hannah first and then I texted Atlas for almost thirty minutes.

Back and forth, him telling me the unfortunate details of this date.

We were going to get pictures together.

It had to be a spectacle, but only in the beginning.

Once the date actually started, we were going to be left alone.

*Joy, right?*

I finished getting dressed, running the entire night through my head, predicting the exact moment I would return home and be done with it all.

Let it fade into a memory.

I walked out of my bedroom and downstairs.

As I stepped into the kitchen, I saw Hannah looking at her phone.

“Hey, tell me if you think this dick is real or fake,” she said.

She turned her phone around and I put my hand up and out.

I did not need to see an unsolicited picture of some guy’s dick.

“Fine,” Hannah said. She looked at me. “And... damn...”

“*Damn?* What does *damn* mean?” I asked.

“You look hot,” she said. “White shoes. Jeans. A flannel. It’s sexy and messy all at once. Just... *damn*...”

I wanted to feel comfortable, and I did.

Sexy wasn’t on my mind.

Neither was *damn*.

Atlas texted me a reminder that our date was coming up soon.

*As if I didn’t know and hadn’t been thinking about it obsessively.*



A PRIVATE CAR picked me up just before seven and drove me to the headquarters for the *Sola Empire*.

Outside the building waited both Ellen and Atlas.

When I stepped out of the car and saw Atlas, I felt some sense of relief.

He was completely dressed down.

Jeans and a t-shirt.

I purposely acted as though I forgot something in the car so I could turn around and let out a slow breath. I bit my top lip, then my bottom lip, and then licked my lips because I was quite sure I had never seen someone look the way Atlas did.

He looked dangerous.

Mean. Dangerous.

And sexy.

Hannah was right about my *thing* for tall guys.

But a guy like Atlas?

I would never be caught dead with someone like him.

Except here I was, turning back around and walking toward him.

Ellen clapped her hands together. “I’m so happy this is happening. Let’s all get together and take a few pictures and then you’re off.”

“How do you know I won’t just let Hazel off at her house and call it a night?” Atlas asked.

His voice was bold and serious.

I almost - *keyword, almost* - felt let down for a second when he said that.

“Well, if I’m being honest,” Ellen said, “after we take these pictures, nothing really matters to me anymore. You two can do what you want. I just think this has been a great success and would love to see it all the way through.”

“I better get dinner out of this,” I said to Atlas.

“Dinner we can do,” he said.

I thought maybe he winked at me but I wasn’t sure.

Ellen clapped her hands and ordered Atlas and I into position next to one another.

The way I stood and the size of him, I felt like I was about to melt into him.

I smelled his clothes, skin, and his cologne.

He didn’t smell like sweaty cigarette smoke or anything dangerous.

He smelled clean, put together. The kind of smell that tickled your nose at the same time it tickled your toes. And it also tickled your-

“Say *hockey!*” the photography called out.

Just like that, the date had sort of begun.

Ellen started to give suggestions where to go eat and Atlas placed his hand to the small of my back and guided me away from her.

He led the way to an obnoxiously large vehicle.

A very expensive SUV that was all black, everywhere.



Now if I saw a guy driving something like that I would roll my eyes and assume his dick was smaller than my pinky finger.

But the size of Atlas... I understood.

He was even nice enough to open the passenger door for me and stand there to make sure I climbed up and into the vehicle.

I felt so tiny sitting there.

Atlas got behind the wheel and looked at me.

“Here’s the deal, love. I can take you home right now if you want. Our obligations have been met.”

I shook my head. *“I said I’m not done with this until I get dinner.”*



I LIKED that he chose some simple place to eat.

I liked that it was near the beach.

A calm and cool night, us basically hiding at a table, eating pasta like it was our last meal.

I felt zero pressure near Atlas, which was nice.

It wasn’t like we were actually on a real date.

He had no interest in me.

I was randomly chosen to be his date for some hockey promotion thing.

“Now what happens after tonight?” I asked him. “Do we need to do some kind of follow up?”

Atlas chuckled. “We’re the worst team in the league. Nobody gives a shit about us. Ellen did this to raise money for her charities. That’s it. I don’t even know if her and her husband care about the hockey team.”

“Then why own it?”

“Money. Gives them something cool in their portfolio.”

“That sounds like a horrible way to live,” I said.

“I agree, Hazel.”

When he said my name I felt jolts tear through my body.

My first drink had been whiskey.

A drink and toast, kind of like the night we met.

Then I switched to some mixed drink, needing a sugary buffer between me and the alcohol.

The food was great.

The setting perfect.

It began to turn into the kind of night I didn’t want to end.

“So what brought you to this team, Atlas?” I asked.

“Money,” he said boldly. “Needed a team. They needed me. That’s how I do it.”

“Nothing prestigious about it for you?”

“Look, love, I’m not out here to chase records and have a statue of me built somewhere. I know my place in this game and I’m okay with it. The money is still good.”

He smiled.

Maybe it was something common, I wasn’t sure. For me, it was the first time I really got to see Atlas smile.

*And... damn... what a smile on a bad boy's (man's) face does to a woman's panties...*

“Now what about you, love?” Atlas asked. “Are you going to tell me why your best friend had to drag you out of your house to an event like Ellen’s? And then set you up to win a date with me?”

“You’re thinking it’s a guy,” I said. “But you’re wrong. I don’t want to dampen the mood.”

“Try me.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Okay then. I’ve been living with my grandmother for a while now as she was dying from cancer. She was given six months to live but lived another six on top of that. Now she’s gone.”

Atlas leaned back and sighed. “Shit. I’m really sorry to hear that.”

He touched his chin.

*Is he showing a slight soft side?*

Before another word was spoken, someone called out, “*Sola sucks! You fucking suck! Go somewhere else, Atlas!*”

Atlas stood right up and turned.

Two guys at the bar were laughing.

Enjoying heckling a guy like Atlas.

I stood up too and touched Atlas’s massive left arm.

“Ignore them,” I said. “Two losers at a bar without women.”

“*Hey, Atlas!*” one guy yelled. “*Think you can defend this?*”

The guy grabbed a bowl of peanuts and threw it right at us.

The bowl hit the floor a few feet away and the peanuts kind of scattered around.

Atlas looked down at me.

His lip curled.

“He threw something at you.”

“Atlas...”

Atlas took one step and the two guys jumped up from the bar.

I covered my mouth in shock.

Atlas threw both of his large hands out and grabbed the guys by their shirts.

He picked them up off their feet and drove them back to the bar, sending them up and over the bar, landing behind it.

I had never seen anything like that before in my life.

Atlas was big, mean, dangerous, and really strong.

*And we were just seconds away from being kicked out of the restaurant.*

## Chapter Seven

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### ATLAS



I STOOD in front of Hazel, my blood still boiling.

“I won’t lie to you, love. I’ve had dates that were even shorter than this one.”

“So this date is over then? That’s it?”

“I just got us kicked out of the restaurant.”

“Those two guys were going to try and hurt you,” she said. “Or hurt me.”

“Oh hell no, Hazel. Don’t you dare twist this around into some kind of thing about honor. I did not defend you. I did not toss those assholes over the bar in the hopes of getting into your panties. Okay?”

“And that’s the kind of a thing assholes usually say to get into a woman’s panties.”

*Do you want me in your panties, Hazel? Don’t fucking tempt me. Don’t fucking flirt with me either. I don’t flirt. I don’t mess around. If you want to do this, we can fuck.*

“You got what you wanted out of this, right?” I asked.  
“You got to eat. That was your big demand. So this is all over now. We did it, Hazel. We survived it.”

“I guess we did.”

“I’m going to drive you home,” I said.

“I had a few drinks, Atlas. You’re not my type. Just so you know.”

“Oh, wow. That’s heartbreaking to hear.”

“I’m just being honest. And you’re not my type... and you’re not... if I go home right now, I’m going to have to call Hannah. She’s my best friend. She did this to me. She set this up. You would have had a ton of fun with her. She loves to get naked.”

I nodded. “So that’s what you think of me? You just assume I want everyone naked? That I’m some rich athlete and want to screw every woman in the world?”

“I didn’t mean it like that...”

Now I was the one with a bigger problem than getting kicked out of a restaurant.

I was the one touching Hazel’s face.

My thumb stroking her cheek.

She reached up and pulled my hand away.

*Okay, love. Boundaries are set. So what the fuck are we doing here?*

“You don’t want to go home,” I said. “You don’t want to be there alone. It’s because of what you told me.”

“And what if that were true, Atlas?”

I turned and opened the passenger door to my beast of a vehicle.

I shook my head.

I had no idea what the fuck I was thinking.

*I guess I was taking Hazel back to my place for a little bit.*



“WANT ME TO COOK YOU SOMETHING?” I offered as she began to walk through my apartment. “Make sure I meet the demands of this date for everyone involved.”

She looked back at me. She lifted her small left middle finger.

“This place is like a mansion,” she said. “It’s just... big. Open. Wow.”

“It’s an overpriced apartment, love,” I said. “I didn’t even get to pick it out. My agent did. I normally don’t really care where I live.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t stay long,” I said. “I bounce around.”

Alison spun around. “Wait a second. You don’t have a home? A house? You don’t actually live somewhere?”

“No,” I said.

“How...”

“Everyone is different. I don’t think you’re much different than me. You packed up and moved here.”

“For good reason.”

“Me getting paid millions isn’t a good enough reason?” I asked.

“So you’re the kind of guy who cares about money?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You move from team to team for money,” she said.

“Maybe I moved here to meet you, love.”

Hazel threw her head back and laughed.

When she did, I watched the way her mouth opened. The way her nose wrinkled up. I even noted the way she snorted at the end of her laugh. I wasn’t sure if that was because she was drunk or that’s how she always laughed.

“That was so fake,” she said.

“Of course it was,” I said. “I don’t believe in any of that stuff, Hazel. Fate and romance and all that.”

“Wow. You really have no desire to get into my panties.”

I smiled. “As though that’s an option?”

“I’m the one who wanted to see your place. Maybe I’ve been setting you up all night.”

“If I wanted it, I’d come get it, love.”

Alison turned and faced me.

A good distance between us.

“So who is the one talking now?” I asked. “Is this really you? Is this the grieving version of yourself? Or is this the version of yourself that has to do something to impress your slut of a best friend?”

“You’re such an asshole!” Hazel cried out.

She shook her head and sort of smiled.



I stepped toward her.

Whether she liked it or not, there was a fire in her eyes.

Her own fire.

Something deep and hidden behind everything.

It called to me.

I liked it.

She wasn't flirty and ditzy. She wasn't in shock and awe over who I was. She didn't ask dumb questions about hockey or try to treat me as though I was someone rich and famous.

And, yeah, maybe the drinks were the ones talking, but liquid courage never hurt anyone, right?

*What the fuck are you thinking right now, Atlas?*

Sometimes I had the voice of reason in the back of my head.

And I always ignored it.

I closed right in on Hazel and touched her hips.

My hands large enough to hold tight.

Covering her curvy hips in a way I knew she had never been touched before.

The look in her eyes told me that.

I dipped my mouth down to the right side of her neck.

I didn't kiss her.

I just brushed my lips against her neck.

Then I moved the tip of my nose to the other side of her neck.

Hazel put her head back and let out a soft groan.

I kissed her neck.

I shut my eyes and pulled my lips away.

I gritted my teeth for a second.

Hazel surprised me when she reached all the way up and pulled at my long hair.

Pulling me back to her neck.

It almost felt like we were in some cheap vampire novel.

I was trying to resist her blood. She wanted to know what it felt like.

Either way... this felt like trouble...

I kissed her neck again.

I stepped forward and swooped my right hand around her body and lifted her as though she were a feather.

It took two seconds before I had her seated on the back of the couch.

I kissed across her neck and up to her mouth.

There, I paused.

Our lips millimeters apart.

I didn't just hover over her.

I blanketed her.

My hands tugged at her hips.

She wrapped her legs around me, halfway up my body.

I curled my lip as I smiled.

"I'm in total control, love," I whispered. "That's how this works for tonight. Say the word and I can drive you back

home. We don't have to talk about this or talk to each other ever again."

"You're in control but I'm making the final decision?"

"I'm not that much of an asshole," I said.

Hazel forced her hands between us, grabbed my shirt and pulled.

I kissed her.

My hands moved up her body, over her chest. Over her shirt.

She kissed me harder, biting at my bottom lip.

I swept her off the back of the couch and carried her with one arm to my bedroom.

She started to claw at my shirt.

Her hands sliding under my shirt. Nails curling, digging at my skin.

"Oh, fuck," she groaned. "You're really built *that* hard?"

"And you really have this many curves?" I asked as I touched her sides.

"Forget me," she said. "Take this shirt off right now."

I used one hand to take my shirt off.

I used the same hand to open my jeans.

No need for boxers or briefs to get in the way of things either.

Hazel noticed that and her jaw dropped.

Muscle led to muscle and two lines directed all attention between my legs.

She quickly began to wiggle her shoulders, stripping herself of her flannel shirt.

I touched the bottom of her other shirt, then up and over her head it went.

A black bra that pushed her breasts together.

She arched her back a little, inviting me.

*No need to ask twice, love.*

I dipped my mouth to her chest and kissed her soft, warm skin.

The scruff on my face rubbed against her skin and she groaned again.

My hands snuck behind her back and unclasped her bra.

I touched her sides, holding her as I nuzzled my nose against her bra, moving it out of the way.

Her full breasts fell into their natural position.

Waiting for me to explore.

I touched the tip of my nose to her left nipple.

I growled as I lifted my head up a little.

My mouth hovered for a second before tasting her.

Engulfing her breast into my mouth.

Pulling away with force.

Letting that beautiful wet sound echo through the room as my mouth popped free.

I moved to her other breast.

Her knees began to melt.

She wanted to sink into my bed.

I wasn't ready for that just yet.

I pulled my mouth away from her chest for good, for now.

I looked down at her breasts.

They were beautiful.

*Full. Taut nipples, bright pink, wet from my mouth.*

I unbuttoned her jeans for her.

Her bra and panties didn't match.

I liked that about her too.

My right hand traced the line of her panties and slid down into them.

She jumped to her toes and gasped for breath.

Grabbing my wrist with both of her hands, staring at me in shock.

“Something wrong, love?” I asked.

“Your hands... your fingers... so long and big...”

“Just wait,” I grinned.

She released her hold on my wrist and my fingertips slipped between her legs.

Her slick warmth greeted me.

She melted some more, desperate to get into my bed.

Things sped up just a little as I tore her jeans and panties down to her knees.

I pushed my jeans down and stepped out of them.

When she saw my cock, she gasped again.

I watched as her body shivered. Her skin breaking out with goosebumps. Her nipples getting tighter, harder. Her hands

shaking as she reached for me.

Gently touching.

My hands grabbed her ass and I guided her down to my bed.

I settled between her legs with ease.

As I offered myself to her, I moved slow.

Giving her a chance to find her breath and get ready.

I'd take it slow to start. Let her realize just what she had gotten into.

She clawed at my face, demanding for me to kiss her.

I had no problem with that.

We kissed.

She pumped her hips at me, taking more with each thrust.

*I realized the whole 'Win a Date with a Hockey Player!' thing maybe wasn't so bad after all.*



MORNING CAME and we woke up naked in my bed.

Our eyes met.

Hazel blushed for a few seconds.

I didn't.

I didn't try any moves either.

There was no morning sex after a one-night hookup.

Last night was last night.

If the morning headed in a certain direction, that was one thing.

But Hazel clutched the covers up to her chin.

“This is the part where you tell me exactly what you want to have happen,” I whispered. “No cliché bullshit, okay?”

“You’re really this honest all the time, Atlas?”

“I’ve got nothing to hide here, love. I put it on the table. Why bother, right?”

“Okay. You should get out of bed and let me get dressed. Then I think I’ll get a ride home. Handshake and goodbye?”

“No coffee or breakfast?”

“I can get that on the ride home.”

“Sounds fair to me,” I said. “Naked handshake or a fully clothed handshake?”

“It’s not last night, Atlas. We’re different people now.”

I smiled. “Well, Hazel, last night was definitely the most unique date I ever went on.”

“Same.”

“So I guess we’ll always remember each other,” I said.

“Maybe.”

I got out of my bed, grabbed my jeans off the floor and left Hazel alone to get dressed.

For a second, I thought maybe I’d offer her some tickets to a game. If she wanted to see me again.

But that kind of felt like prostitution.

So I kept my mouth shut.

*There was probably no need to ever see Hazel again.*



## Chapter Eight

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HAZEL



(two months later)

"HOLY CRAP, I'M PREGNANT."

Those four words spilled from my mouth as I stared down at the pregnancy test as it balanced on the bathroom sink.

I still had my panties down around my ankles for some reason.

*Oh, yeah. I was going to take a shower.*

I turned my head.

The shower was already turned on.

I stepped out of my panties and took my shirt off.

I walked to the shower and stood under the water, just staring at the wall.

*I'm pregnant.*

That wasn't possible though.

*I can't be pregnant.*

*I'm not having sex with anyone...*

Except I did have sex with *someone*.

I put my face into the water and held my breath, trying to chase away my thoughts.

*I can't be pregnant. There's no way I'm pregnant. That test is wrong. Something went wrong. Maybe I had too much coffee this morning. The caffeine or something in the coffee made the test positive.*

*Yes! That's it!*

*It's a bad test!*

I shut the shower off and hurried to dry my body and get dressed.

I threw the pregnancy test out and went to get another one.

At the store, I did a casual pass through the aisle, grabbing a test.

Then I also grabbed a tube of toothpaste, a small bag of frozen chicken nuggets, a bottle of water, and a pack of gum.

Just to mix things up.

At the checkout, I was jumpy and sweaty.

Scared out of my mind.

Of course the cashier scanned the pregnancy test and looked at me.

I looked away.

I paid and ran to my car.

I opened the pregnancy test and realized I couldn't just take it right there in the parking lot.

So I drove up the street and parked to go into a convenience store.

I bought another bottle of water.

I realized then I could have just gotten the pregnancy test there too.

*My head was a mess.*

I asked if they had a bathroom and to my shock, it was very clean.

*This is my life now?*

I hovered over both the toilet and the pregnancy test.

I drank water as though it somehow flowed that quickly from my mouth to my *you-know-what*.

I managed to actually cover the pregnancy test.

*Go me!*

Then I cleaned everything up and set a timer on my phone.

There was no pacing in the small convenient store bathroom.

So I tapped my toes, one at a time.

My mind raced.

I tracked down dates that didn't even matter anymore.

*My last period was... when?*

*Well, to be honest, things have been a little hectic lately.*

*I always just blamed stress.*

*But this was way too far... it was never this late.*

*And I felt different.*

*I didn't know how to explain it.*

*I just did.*

*Something about my body...*

My phone vibrated.

The timer was done.

Behind me, the pregnancy test sat on the edge of the sink.

I told myself there had to be odds of two pregnancy tests being wrong, right?

Two different kinds, purchased from two different stores... it could absolutely happen.

*Right?*

Of course, that only mattered if the test I just took was...

I turned and looked down.

*Pregnant.*

I KNOCKED on Hannah's door.

My hand shook as I knocked.

I couldn't stop knocking either.

*"Oh, what the fuck is this about?"*

Hannah's voice boomed through the apartment.

She opened the door and looked instantly confused.

"Hazel?"

"I'm in trouble," I said.

“Trouble? Okay. Listen. I would never do this to you. *But*. I’ve got company...”

I looked beyond her and some random guy waved at me.

He was shirtless with his jeans open.

A beautiful, tanned guy. With white-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and an insanely toned body.

I could smell the ocean coming off him from here.

Hannah’s typical type.

She loved the surfer guys.

Guys that could ride a wave, let her ride them, but these guys couldn’t spell their own name even if someone wrote it for them.

“Is that our dessert?”

Hannah looked back. “Shut up. This is my best friend. She’s in trouble.”

“Oh, man. What kind of trouble? My friend’s cousin is a cop. In Seattle though. Not sure he can help here. Want me to call him?”

“Really, Hannah?” I whispered.

“What are you doing here?” she growled at me.

I showed her the pregnancy test.

She slapped it out of my hand and jumped back as though I had tried to stab her.

“No!” Hannah cried out. “That can’t be right!”

“I need to talk to you,” I said.

“Dammit,” Hannah groaned. “This guy has been going down on me for over an hour. He told me I’m wetter than a

wave.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Have you looked at him? He’s got rocks for brains. But his tongue is magic.”

“Hannah, I’m pregnant,” I said.

I bent down and picked up the pregnancy test.

Hannah led me into her apartment.

She pointed at the surfer guy. “You’re out. We’re done.”

“Oh, man, really?”

“Take that tongue somewhere else.”

“Can I get your number at least?”

“No. Pretend I’m some horny mermaid and I’m going back out to sea.”

“That’s so hot,” he said.

“Time to go,” Hannah said.

“Later,” he said.

He wandered out of her apartment.

I wasn’t going to get the chance to ask her about the guy. Not that it mattered.

I held up the pregnancy test again.

“What the hell, Hazel? How?”

“*How?* Really?”

“I mean... who have you been secretly fucking?”

“Nobody,” I said.

“So what is this then?”

“I mean, there was one person. A while back though. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Hold up. One person? Who? When?”

I tilted my head and swallowed hard.

Hannah’s eyes grew wider than I had ever seen them in my life.

She stepped back.

She grabbed the pregnancy test from my hand and stared at it.

“This... you...”

“Hannah.”

“Hockey... baby...”

“Try a full sentence,” I said.

“You had sex with Atlas that night? I knew it! I knew you seemed different! You fucking lied to me, Hazel!”

“I had to,” I said. “I didn’t want you to bother me to go back to him for more.”

“Looks like he filled you up enough already,” she said.

“Don’t say that. Focus for a second. What do I do?”

“You had sex with Atlas,” she said. “And nobody thought to use protection?”

“I mean...”

“Wow.”

“I’ve been a mess,” I said. “Things have been out of whack. Birth control. My period. You know...”

“Holy fuck, Hazel,” Hannah whispered. “This is real then. This is really real.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant.”

“*Pregnant.*”

Hannah turned and held her hands out and leaned back. “Like... huge belly... pregnant...”

“I don’t need to hear that right now. Or see it.”

“Hazel... this isn’t like you.”

“I don’t need to hear that either right now.”

“What do I do? What do you want me to do? I’m scared for you. My greatest fear is getting pregnant. I’m tempted to go eat three months’ worth of birth control right now.”

“And what’s that going to do?”

“Probably have me end up in a hospital.”

“Can we just focus on me?”

“And your womb?”

“On what I do next.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean... Atlas is the father of my baby.”

“That is kind of hot to say and think about,” Hannah said. “Can you just tell me what it was like. What he was like? I mean, his hands are huge. His body is massive. Does... everything match?”

“Let’s just say... yes.”



Hannah threw her head back and groaned. “And you get him all you want now.”

“What?”

“Hazel, he’s the father of your baby. He’s yours now. For a little while.”

“Hannah, this is serious to me. What do I do? Just call him and tell him? What if he denies it?”

“Then you tell him he’s an idiot and prove it,” she said. “You didn’t sleep with anyone else. Right?”

“No. Just him. It’s only been him.”

“You know what you have to do, Hazel. That’s why you’re here. You don’t need me to tell you what to do. You just want me here as your friend. And I’m here.”

I took a deep breath. “So I’m supposed to call this asshole hockey player and tell him I’m having his baby?”

Hannah slowly nodded.

I slowly shut my eyes.

*I started to wonder just how crazy my life was about to become.*

## Chapter Nine

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### ATLAS



COACH DENNY RAN TOUGH PRACTICES.

He beat the hell out of us.

And we practiced hard too.

I wasn't sure what to expect when showing up to the *Sola Empire* world.

Sadly, the practices didn't exactly translate into wins.

We played hard, fought hard, scored goals, but always found a way to come up short.

The season started with us losing four in a row.

For the fifth game, I exploded in the locker room and demanded a win.

We won.

Then we lost three more in a row.

Then we won another.

The pattern just seemed to go like that.

Last night we lost at home with three seconds left.

Joe and I had everything covered. Going into overtime meant we still got a point in the standings. Then came the luckiest shot I ever saw. A puck, that had no business getting by us, somehow got by Joe, me and by Jago too. With less than a second left. Another loss.

Which brought us to today's practice.

At one point, Joe and I started to square off, ready to throw some fists.

A big miserable asshole just like me.

Coach Denny blew his whistle and we ignored it.

Then Coach Denny came out onto the ice right after us.

He pushed between Joe and me.

“You two fucks can skate laps now. Hold hands. Pretend you're on a fucking date. There is no fighting at my practices.”

Joe nodded.

I skated away.

We skated laps.

Joe caught up to me.

“Don't worry about it,” he said, bumping into me.

“Touch me again and I will take you down.”

“I've got some whiskey in the locker room for us,” Joe said. “Finish out practice. We'll do some bonding.”

“Does it bother you that this team sucks?” I asked.

“Of course it does. But we don't suck. We're in a tough position all the way around. You being here will help. You and

I get to control the game. If you look at the stats, we're not bad."

"Don't count on me for shit, Joe. I'm here on a one year deal if that. Pay me and I fucking leave."

"Is that what you dreamed of as a kid, Atlas?"

"Actually, it is," I said. "When there was no food in the fridge. When I was home alone and the electricity was turned off. When I had nothing. All I cared about was money. Now quit fucking talking to me."

I skated away from him fast.

Ten minutes of laps, ten minutes of some violent defense, and Coach Denny not only ended practice, he seemed excited about the possibility of Joe and I working together.

A mutual hate for one another yet a respect for the game was what we needed.

And we had it.

Back in the locker room, I sat on an old metal chair and Joe stood in front of me.

"As promised, good sir," he growled.

He handed me a bottle of whiskey.

"Speech!" Rome called out. "New guy. Speech."

"Tradition." Sebastian said. "Someone always talks."

"Give us something," Jago said.

I looked at Henry.

He nodded in agreement.

I forced myself to stand. "I have nothing to say. I don't really care what the record for this team ends up as for this

season. The checks still clear the same. But if you give a fuck about winning, play hard. Like practice today. Joe and I will have your backs. Joe and I will protect Jago. Henry and Sebastian have chemistry on the front line. Rome... I don't fucking know what you are..."

"I'm jealous," Rome called out. "Henry and Sebastian have chemistry. Let's drink to them. When's the wedding? Who gets to be on top?"

"You couldn't have used a different word?" Henry asked.

I sat back down.

*These guys aren't my fucking friends.*

I opened the whiskey bottle and started to drink.

The guys all closed in on me, wanting their turn for a drink.

But I was far from done.

Whiskey went down like water.

*And then I'd probably look for someone to fight.*



MY PHONE VIBRATED in my bag.

Through a narrow slit where the zipper wasn't fully zipped up, I saw the glow of my screen.

And I swore I saw...

*Hazel.*

I ripped open my bag and swiped my phone up.

It was Hazel.

A text.

**Hey Atlas - it's Hazel. Can we talk?**

“What’s that look on your face for?” Rome called out.

I lifted my gaze. “What?”

“You almost looked happy for a second there.”

“Fuck off, it’s nothing,” I growled. “Just someone looking for something from me.”

“Like what?” Henry asked.

“Either tickets or my dick,” I said.

Rome whistled and cheered.

Jago grabbed a chair and sat next to me.

He had a pretty boy look and smile to himself.

“Who is this new friend of yours?” Jago asked.

“Is that your business?” I asked.

“Come on, Atlas, loosen up a little,” Henry said. “You don’t have to have a stick up your ass all the time.”

“We’ve all done it,” Sebastian said.

“What’s that?” I asked. “Stuck stuff up your ass?”

“Some people are into it,” Rome said with a shrug.

“Keep your ass away from me,” Joe growled at Rome.

“No, listen,” Sebastian said. “Women love hockey players. They know we’re rough and tough, and dirty. They also know we clean up real nice.”

“And they know we aren’t afraid of fights,” Jago said.

I looked at the goalie of the *Sola Empire*. “You do a lot of fighting?”

“Ejected from three games last season,” Jago said.

“He’s brutal,” Sebastian said. “Loves to fight. If he can’t get the other goalie to take him on, he goes after anyone on the ice.”

“Sounds like that makes my job harder,” I said.

“You’ll see what it’s like,” Jago said. “Now back to your *ice groupie*...”

I chuckled for a second. “*Ice groupie*. That’s a good one. Believe me, this is nothing.”

“Tickets or cock,” Sebastian said. “Why not both?”

“Text her back,” Rome said. “Have some fun.”

“Who is it?” Henry asked me.

“It’s the woman from the date,” I said.

“Oh, damn,” Joe said. “You’ve got a clinger, huh?”

“I guess so,” I said. “I never wanted to do this thing to begin with. Ellen though...”

“Hey,” Rome whispered. He looked around for a second. “About Ellen. You’d give it to her, right?”

Everyone stared at Rome.

“No?” he asked. “Really?”

Henry put an arm around Rome. “Yeah, I’d give it to her.”

“Same,” Jago confessed.

“Right?” Rome asked. “She’s a cougar. She’s filthy rich. You know she takes care of her body. And there’s no way a guy named Oscar is giving her what she wants.”

“Maybe she has a whole bunch of dudes nobody knows about,” I said. “You don’t know what her life is like.”

“True,” Sebastian said. “So why don’t we just text back the woman who text you?”

Sebastian smiled at me.

These guys were slightly buzzed and acting like horny college dudes.

I had more whiskey than all of them combined.

My head felt *nice*.

I almost felt like I was in a good mood.

I looked at Henry and he nodded.

I growled under my breath.

**Hey, love. Wasn’t expecting to hear from you. What can I do for you?**

Jago leaned over and read my text out loud for the rest of the guys.

“Man, you’re cold even in texts,” Rome said.

“Some women like that,” Sebastian said. “That’s his style.”

Hazel replied right back.

**Atlas, we REALLY need to talk.**

*Talk about what?*

“She wants you,” Jago said. “Play the game a little. Flirt back.”

“Ask her for a picture,” Joe said with a wink.

“A picture?” I asked. “Of what?”

“Her body,” Rome said. “Have you never received a topless picture of a woman before?”

I gritted my teeth. “You guys are bad influences.”



“Fuck yes, we are,” Sebastian said. “Come on, man. Have some fun in life. Have more whiskey. Let’s see her tits.”

I shook my head, smiling. Actually smiling.

The whiskey in my head suggested I listen to the guys.

*Why not?*

“Fuck it,” I whispered.

**Hey, love. How about a picture? I almost forget the way you look - and taste. And I don’t want just a picture of your face either, love.**

Jago whistled when I sent the text.

He didn’t read that one out loud.

“How’d that go?” Henry asked.

“Can’t believe I just did that,” I said. “You guys are all assholes.”

“Sure we are,” Rome said. He rubbed his hands together. “But in just a few seconds, we’re going to be looking at some boobies.”

“Boobies?” Joe asked. “How old are you?”

Rome smacked his lips together.

“Okay, I’m not showing any of you a picture of Hazel,” I said. “That’s not right to do.”

“Oh, you’re a man of honor now?” Jago asked.

My phone vibrated.

Rome lunged forward and grabbed my phone.

I jumped up and grabbed my chair, ready to swing it and take Rome’s head off.

“Holy shit,” Rome said.

He turned around, his face pale.

I held the chair in the air.

Rome handed me my phone back. “Guys, we need to give Atlas some space. For a second or two.”

I dropped the chair and looked at my phone.

Hazel did send me a picture.

But it wasn’t of her face.

It wasn’t of her breasts either.

*It was a picture of a positive pregnancy test.*

## Chapter Ten

---

HAZEL



*OKAY, so that part is done.*

*He knows now.*

*I texted him.*

*I told him.*

*He knows that I'm pregnant.*

“You okay?” Hannah asked.

She stood behind me.

I took a deep breath and turned around. “Okay, it’s done. I sent him a picture of the pregnancy test. So he knows.”

“Did he respond?”

“Well...”

“What?” Hannah asked. “What did he say? I swear on my life if this guy tries to screw you over, I’m going to shove a hockey stick so far up his ass his tongue could shoot pucks. Then again... what did his tongue do to you?”

“It wasn’t his tongue that got me pregnant,” I said.

“Wow, that’s panty-melting hot.”

“Hannah.”

“I know. Sorry. What did he say?”

“He’s on his way here.”

“Here? To my place? Right now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “He just finished practice. He asked where I was. I told him. So... any chance you want to leave? Give us some privacy?”

“You’re asking me to leave my own apartment so you can talk to the hockey player who knocked you up?”

“Yes?”

“I’m not leaving until he gets here,” Hannah said.

“Deal,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for a thing. This isn’t your pregnancy hangout spot. Okay? This is a one-time thing. And I really don’t want to leave either. What if he says something stupid? I need to be here to beat him up for you.”

“I can handle myself.”

Hannah pointed to my stomach. “Oh, I can see you know how to handle yourself.”

I showed her both of my middle fingers.

And then I told her to get out of my way so I could nervously pace until Atlas showed up.

I had no other choice but to do that.

When Atlas texted me he was here, I walked to the door.

I took a deep breath.

*Look, it's simple.*

*We were able to rip each other's clothes off and have amazing hot sex, right?*

*So we can handle this situation together.*

I reached for the doorknob and opened the door.

When I saw Atlas, I caught myself smiling at him.

It felt good to see him again.

I suddenly didn't feel so alone.

And speaking of not being alone, neither was Atlas.

I gasped and stepped back.

*Atlas entered Hannah's apartment... along with a bunch of other hockey players.*



"I TRIED," Atlas said to me.

"Holy shit," Hannah said.

*"Got anything to drink?"*

*"Got anything to eat?"*

*"Man, I don't think this place is big enough for a baby."*

"Um," Hannah called out. "Feel free to check the fridge."

The hockey players descended on Hannah's fridge.

"I didn't ask them to follow me," Atlas said. "They just kind of did."

"That's the rest of..."

Atlas nodded. “Hey, guys, get out of the fridge. Turn around for a second.”

They all spun around.

“This is Henry, Sebastian, Rome, Joe, and Jago,” Atlas said.

“And you’re the pregnant one,” Rome said to me.

“Do I look pregnant? Huh?” I asked.

“Whoa, no,” Rome said. “You look... glowing. And I know you put out on the first date.”

“I do too,” Hannah said.

Rome smiled at Hannah.

I cringed.

This felt like a big mistake already.

“There’s nothing in the fridge,” Jago said.

“Then leave,” Atlas said. “I didn’t want you guys here anyway.”

“But we wanted to support you,” Sebastian said. “Can’t believe you just got to town and got someone pregnant.”

“You know, your tone sucks,” I said. “Makes me feel a little bad about myself.” I looked at Atlas. “What the fuck?”

He touched my back and inched me away from the chaotic mess in Hannah’s apartment.

“I didn’t know they were going to follow me,” Atlas said.

“Whoa. Have you been drinking?”

“A little. After practice. Just to calm down.”

“You smell like whiskey.”

“Well, that’s what I was drinking.”

“And your team knows now?”

“Yeah, they were right there,” he said. “They thought you were... flirting.”

“Flirting? What?”

“I was asking you to send me a picture of your...”

Atlas nodded down to my chest.

I gasped and stepped back.

I covered my arms across my chest as though I were topless.

“You’re disgusting, Atlas,” I called out.

“Oh, here we go,” Rome said. “The drama begins.”

“You tell him, Hazel!” Jago cheered me on. “Don’t let that man get away with anything.”

“What’s he trying to get away with?” Joe asked. “He just found out she’s pregnant.”

I looked back. “Are you going to act like this is some reality show?”

“Probably,” Sebastian said.

“Hey, I have some crackers in the cabinet,” Hannah said. “You can eat those.”

“Are they soup crackers or good ones?” Rome asked.

“There’s a difference?” Hannah asked.

“Big difference,” Rome said. “You don’t want those flaky ones that make your mouth dry...”

“Will you guys just shut up for a second?” Atlas asked. “Doesn’t anyone have a beer they can share? Or some kind of alcohol?”

“I have a bottle of wine,” Hannah said.

“Wine date!” Jago called out. “I love it. Let’s pop that bottle the way Atlas popped Hazel’s cherry.”

“Excuse me?” I growled. For a second the entire room turned red. I ran after Jago. I stuck my finger up in his face. “Listen to me, you jock moron. I was not a virgin when I slept with Atlas. Okay? I get around. I enjoy myself. I enjoy my body. And you know what? You’ll never enjoy this body. Ever!”

The entire apartment was silent.

Jago stared down at me, blinking like normal.

I felt someone touch my right arm.

I turned and yelped.

It was just Hannah.

She made a cringe face that made my face turn bright red.

“Hormones,” Joe said.

I glanced at Joe.

He was as massively huge as Atlas.

Another huge chunk of good-looking muscle.

“It’s okay,” Joe said. “Happens with pregnancy. Sometimes you get a little goofy.”

“Goofy?” I asked.

“Why don’t we all take a five minute break here?” Hannah asked. “Emotions are running high.”



“What about that wine?” Jago asked.

Hannah got the bottle of wine for the hockey players.

Jago bit the cork out and spit it to the counter.

I kept my distance a little, feeling really embarrassed about my outburst.

“Hey, I know this is a lot,” Hannah said. “A real lot.”

“It’s feels like a disaster,” I said.

“Far from it, love,” Atlas’s deep voice said.

I looked at him and Hannah inched her way back.

“I’m going to go check on the... wine...”

She went to the kitchen.

Atlas stood in front of me.

“I’m sorry about the spectacle this is,” he said to me.

“I’m sorry that I made you think something completely different.”

“Well, if I’m being honest, you tell me you’re pregnant was the absolute last thing possible I would have thought of. I would have believed it more if you said you were dead and it was your ghost texting.”

“Wow,” I said. “You’re that excited about this?”

I touched my stomach.

“I’m always honest,” Atlas said.

“That you are. Now can I be honest about something?”

“Sure.”

“I’m terrified at the moment. I have no idea what to expect from you, Atlas. Do you believe me? Do you believe this baby

is yours? Am I...”

“Wait a second,” he said. “You’re having doubts about yourself right now? Is there anything I should know?”

“See? That right there.”

“You brought it up, love. I didn’t say a word about that. I’m not even sure if that thought would go through my head.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Hey,” he said. *His voice a little deeper. A little more stern. A whole lot more sexy.* “You texted me and what was the first thing I did? I told you I was coming over. To see you. To talk to you. Right?”

“Yeah, but to talk about what?”

“You haven’t given me the chance to do anything yet.”

“It’s not me,” I said.

I pointed across the apartment.

Atlas turned his head to see what I saw.

Which was Hannah sitting on the kitchen counter, her feet dangling, hands on the counter, her arms purposely pressing her chest together, adding just a little bit of extra cleavage. Not that she needed it.

The guys all looked at her like she was a meal.

They had finished off the bottle of wine already.

They were all monsters. Athletic, sexy monsters.

Big, beautiful hockey players.

“Fine,” Atlas said. “Then we’re out of here. We’re going somewhere else to talk. We’ll go to my place.”

“No,” I said. “Last time I was there you seduced me and got me pregnant.”

“I did... what?”

“Am I wrong?”

“Very wrong, love. I didn’t seduce anyone. You and I both wanted that to happen.”

“And you just stuck it in me without a care!”

“I figured if there was an issue, you’d tell me.”

“Right. My fault. Always the woman’s fault with these things.”

Atlas rubbed his jaw.

I was getting under his skin.

Hormones or not, I didn’t care.

“Nothing is your fault, Hazel,” he said. “But we need to get out of this apartment and be able to talk alone. Can we go to your place?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said.

Atlas turned and whistled. “Everyone out! Hazel and I are leaving so we can go talk someplace quiet and private.”

“Oh, I know what that means,” Rome said.

He wiggled his eyebrows.

Jago made an *O* with his thumb and pointer fingers on his right hand.

Rome then slammed his fist through it and Jago screamed and laughed.

“Get out,” Atlas said.

“Wait,” Hannah said. “They can stay. With me. We can talk... hockey stuff. Big sticks. Being sweaty... and wet. Scoring...”

“You’re pathetic,” I called out to Hannah.

“And you’re pregnant,” she said.

I had no idea why that comment made me laugh, but it did.

Atlas took advantage of the moment, put his right arm around me and pulled me close to him.

My first urge was to elbow him and put distance between us.

Then I smelled his shirt. Then I smelled his skin. Then I felt the sheer strength of his arm holding me. Protective.

*I feared getting pregnant by Atlas was the least of my worries.*

## Chapter Eleven

---

### ATLAS



I FOLLOWED HAZEL.

I thought about one thing the entire time.

*Pregnant.*

I wanted to see her stomach. I wanted to touch her stomach. I wanted to feel what I felt and make sense of everything.

Because nothing made all that much sense at all.

I then ran some options through my head.

*Can I sue Ellen and her billionaire family for this? Can I go after everyone involved in my trade to the Sola Empire? I bet I can find some sleazy lawyer who would love to take a case like this one just so he could see his own face plastered all over social media.*

*HOCKEY PLAYER SUES BILLIONAIRE HOCKEY OWNERS OVER UNEXPECTED PREGNANCY OF THE*

*WINNER OF A 'WIN A DATE WITH A HOCKEY PLAYER' CONTEST!*

The headlines had the chance to write themselves.

Then again, anyone who knew me knew I didn't like the spotlight. I didn't need cameras in my face. Questions asked. Of course, the same for Hazel too. She didn't deserve to be treated as though she did anything wrong.

*And even if I did it... I sue and win and turn this into a spectacle more than it already is... then what? Hazel will still be pregnant. Pregnant with my baby.*

That was really the only dose of reality that mattered at that point.

We drove from the busier parts of the city into a more rural area.

From there we drove to a much more quiet area.

That's when I saw the old house.

Almost as though it didn't belong among the modern updates to the beach city.

It had an instant cozy look to it.

Hazel led the way to the front door, then suddenly hesitated.

The key to the house was clutched tightly between her thumb and forefinger.

Her hand started to shake.

I listened as she took one deep breath.

Then she slowly turned her head and looked up at me.

*Without a word... she started to cry.*



*AH... shit...*

This was where I didn't need any signals to get crossed between Hazel and me.

But here was a pregnant woman crying.

I gently touched her back with my left hand.

"I'm here, love," I said in an attempted whisper.

It came out more like a groggy growl though.

Hazel nodded.

"Don't worry about the guys and everything else right now," I said. "Let's just focus on us. On what's happening."

"It just... there just feels like there's no happiness to it..."

I felt like Hazel managed to cut through all my stubborn, toughed-up, scarred skin and went right for my heart.

"Happiness isn't the same as the shit they show in movies," I said. "But if that's what you need right now, I'll leave. I'll go buy every fucking flower in this city and have it delivered to you. I'll pay someone to fly over your house and write something in the sky."

"Oh yeah?" Hazel challenged. "Like what?"

"Oh... maybe... *Sorry for knocking you up! The sex was really good though!*"

That made Hazel sputter out a quick laugh.

She stuck the key into the lock and opened the door.

It almost felt like I passed a test.

As soon as Hazel turned on the lights, she looked at me again. “Sorry about the place. It’s... complicated.”

“What’s wrong with the house?” I asked.

Hazel tilted her head.

*Yeah, I know, love. Fuck it. Fuck the house. We’re not here to talk about the house.*

“How about a drink, Atlas?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I can definitely use a drink.”

Hazel led the path to the kitchen.

A house with simple, defined rooms.

I was used to apartments and condos in cities.

Usually fancy and expensive ones.

This house had a very relaxed, *homey* feel.

Hazel opened the fridge door and balanced two bottles of water in one hand.

“Water?” I asked.

“You’re driving,” she said as she tossed me one of the bottles. “Not sure if you should have even driven here.”

“I’m fine, Hazel,” I said. “I wasn’t drinking that much to begin with. Then the sudden rush of shock absorbed the whiskey like a sponge.”

“Right,” she said. “I’m sure that’s exactly how it works.”

I nodded. “So, want to talk about the house? My drinking? The water? Anything more important to talk about?”

“I’m not sure what else there is to say, Atlas. I don’t know how to approach this. This has never happened to me before.”



“There’s something I didn’t know about you.”

“What?”

“I didn’t know this is the first time you’re pregnant. Congrats.”

“Congrats... wow.”

“What do I do here, love?” I asked. “To be fair it’s not like we really know much about each other. We were forced to go on a date, right?”

“But we weren’t forced to fuck.”

“Fair enough. But you’ve never fucked someone just for the sake of it?”

“*The sake of it...?*”

Now I got the chance to see what a pissed off Hazel looked like.

Her right nostril flared bigger than her left.

Her left eyebrow lifted high up in the air.

Her jaw moved a little.

She was actually kind of sexy when she was angry.

“Did you do all of that out of pity?”

“No,” I said.

“Then what did you just mean by what you said?”

“I meant enjoying the moment with someone,” I said. “We were having fun. It was a good time together, Hazel. We were flirting like crazy and we took advantage of a moment. It was awesome.”

“Oh, good. I’m upgraded from pity to awesome.” Hazel wiped her forehead. “That makes everything worth it right

now.”

My hands curled up into fists.

I put my water bottle down and walked toward her.

She slinked back a little, putting up her defensive wall even more.

“Am I able to ask a question now?”

“When did I say you can’t ask me anything?” Hazel threw back at me.

“Are you scared? Is this hormones? Or do you just hate my guts for getting you pregnant?”

“Maybe it’s all of the above,” she said.

“This is the house,” I whispered. “You mentioned your grandmother. You mentioned her house. This house. There’s a lot going on in here, Hazel. In yourself.”

“You’re suddenly sweet?”

“Not sweet at all. Just observing my surroundings.”

“Is that what you want me to do?”

“I’d prefer you not to assume things about me at the moment. Worrying about what I’ll say and do.”

“How can I not, Atlas? You’re a rich athlete. Who am I?”

“Is this about money? You want me to write you a big check?”

“Are you offering to pay me off?”

“Do you want me to pay you off?”

“That’s the kind of father you are?”

“We’re just going to go in circles here, love.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’re scared.”

Hazel pushed at my chest.

I playfully stumbled back.

She folded her arms.

I pointed to her stomach. “How did you know?”

“I just did.”

“Do you feel anything?”

“I’m not sure what I feel right now, to be honest. There are a lot of emotions. And hormones. It’s a jumbled mess. Obviously talking to you is a big thing right now.”

“Yeah, I believe it. I didn’t expect that.”

“You were expecting a topless picture of me. To show to all your hockey buddies.”

“Buddies? Not quite. Just the guys I play with.”

“Oh, right. You’re the tough loner?”

“Why can’t we just talk about the pregnancy? The baby? Our baby, Hazel.”

She lowered her hands to her sides.

I watched as she took a deep breath.

Easing a little.

Putting her guard down.

Maybe showing herself vulnerable to me.

My eyes moved along her body.

Her chest, *obviously*.

Down to her stomach.

The only mental reference I had when it came to thinking about a pregnant woman was picturing someone with a beachball size belly under their shirt.

Hazel didn't look pregnant at all.

*At least not yet.*

"Keep staring," she said. "Make me feel weirder than I already do."

"Weird? What's weird?"

"Everything!" Hazel yelled. "What the hell are we doing, Atlas? I don't know anything about you. You don't know anything about me. And now we're supposed to have a baby together? What is this?"

I moved closer to her again.

I gently touched her stomach. "*What is this?* This is you fucking up the rest of my life, love."

Now the problem I had in life was a *tone issue*. No matter when I spoke - serious or joking - my voice always sounded the same.

Like I was a mean, miserable asshole.

I didn't think about what I said to Hazel until I saw the look on her face.

Her eyes welled up with tears.

"I think that came out wrong," I said.

Hazel came at me with an uppercut to my jaw.

Her right hand connected with my jaw and my head snapped back.

“Get the fuck out of my house, Atlas,” Hazel growled.  
“We’re done talking tonight. Leave right now.”

I touched my jaw and flexed it.

I saw her clutching her fist.

That had been one heck of a punch.

“I can’t just leave-”

“Right now,” she said. “I’m calling Hannah to come over. I’d rather talk to her. Get out, Atlas. Sorry I fucked up your life.”

Hazel walked away.

I didn’t want to leave but she told me to leave.

I rubbed my jaw again.

I almost smiled.

*I really liked Hazel’s angry side.*

## Chapter Twelve

---

HAZEL



I OPENED the freezer and took out an old bag of frozen peas.

I walked into the sunroom that smelled like dust and lavender and sat down on an old chair.

Seated across from me on an old couch, Hannah pointed at the bag of peas.

“Veggies for the baby?”

“Ice for my hand,” I said.

I slapped the bag of frozen peas on my right hand and winced in pain.

“So let me get this right,” Hannah said. “You and Atlas came back here to talk. And instead of taking advantage of your circumstances, you ended up punching him in the face and telling him to leave?”

“Okay, first off, I am not some used up *thing*,” I said. “I’m also not some... *sex toy* either.”

“I never suggested that,” Hannah said. “I’m just making the point that you’re pregnant. I know this is all crazy to you. To him. It’s crazy to me. It’s shocking. You have to feel vulnerable. You have to feel scared.”

“Okay, that’s enough. I don’t need anyone to tell me how to feel. Not you. Not Atlas. Nobody.”

“Is that why you punched him?”

“You want to know why I punched him?”

“Obviously, yes. I’m picturing a ton of sexual tension.”

“Hannah...”

“Hey,” she said. “You screwed me twice so far.”

“I screwed you?”

“I had that surfer guy with the wiggly tongue,” she said. “You chased him away.”

“To tell you I was pregnant!”

“*And then...* you leave me alone with all those hockey players.” Her eyes lit up. “The things I kept picturing them doing to me. All at the same time.”

“Did anything even remotely close happen?”

“No,” Hannah said.

“Meaning?”

Hannah sat back and folded her arms. “Meaning anything I’m thinking is made up in my mind and that I’ll take care of my own stuff later.”

“Batteries and a vision,” I said.

Hannah rolled her eyes. “You managed to twist the conversation around to me and make me feel bad.”

I smirked.

“Bitch,” Hannah whispered.

I lifted the frozen bag of peas off my hand.

Nothing was bruised or swollen.

But hitting Atlas in the jaw was like punching the corner of a brick house.

I put the bag of frozen peas back on my hand.

I looked at Hannah. “He told me I fucked up his life.”

“He said that?”

“He said that. I’m not sure what the rules are for this kind of thing. Meeting someone random and getting pregnant by them. All things considered... with the date... how it happened...”

“So this is my fault,” Hannah said. “Wow. A side dish of intense guilt.”

“No. It’s my fault for messing things up the way I did. It’s my fault for jumping into bed with him. It’s his fault for not having half a brain to think about putting on a condom. It’s my fault for not telling him to put on a condom. The whole *it’s your fault* thing can go on for miles. The bottom line is that I’m pregnant. And the baby is his. And I don’t know. Maybe he was just messing around. Trying to joke around in a bad way. The guy has no real tone to his voice other than-”

“The *make your panties wet* tone?” Hannah asked with a grin.

“That’s the one,” I hated to admit.

“Go on.”

“So that tone. The way he talks is just...”



*“Panty melting.”*

“Enough with the panty talk, okay? I’m being serious. He said I was fucking up his life. Or I fucked up his life. I’m not sure of the exact wording. One second he was talking about Gram, then the next-”

“Wait a second,” Hannah said. “How does he know about Gram?”

“Well, I casually mentioned her on our date,” I said. “Nothing in detail or whatever.”

“Okay, this might change things then for me.”

“Change things? How?”

“Your date. It was a real date then. Like you two were connecting. You were talking about things in your lives. Not just some meet up and jump into bed thing.”

“He got into a fight.”

“Defending you.”

“Hardly. I think he was looking for a fight. Or an excuse to get out of there.”

“Yeah, to get out of there and get you into bed.”

“And it worked,” I said, nodding down to my stomach.

“Okay,” Hannah laughed, “go on with your story.”

“I just told it,” I said. “We were talking and then he said something stupid like that. So I hit him. I think I kind of wanted to hit him from the moment I saw the positive pregnancy test. But does that make me a bad... *mother?*”

The word rattled throughout my body.

*Mother.*

*I'm going to be a mother.*

*No. Wait.*

*I am a mother right now.*

*I'm pregnant.*

I stood up and dropped the bag of frozen peas to the floor.

I made a run for the door to get outside.

My body suddenly demanded fresh air.

Comfortable, cool air soothed my lungs but nothing else.

I sat down on the back steps and hugged myself.

It took Hannah only seconds to join me.

We sat in silence.

After a minute or so, Hannah rocked herself into me. "Too bad we can't smoke."

"You can," I said.

"Never. Not near the baby."

I glanced at Hannah. "Please, tell me you'll be there for me, no matter what."

"Don't even let that worry take up a second of your time," she said. "Or an inch of your mind. Got it?"

I nodded.

"I'm serious, Hazel. I'll be right by your side when you need me. No matter what. I gave up a great tongue to talk to you."

"And then you gave up five more."

Hannah groaned. "Don't remind me. I can't stop thinking about which of those hockey players would be the biggest. If

you know what I mean.”

“I think I can answer that,” I said with a devilish grin.

“Stop it.”

“Nope.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“So Atlas is...”

“Everything is big and thick and strong on that man.”

Hannah put her head down. “No wonder you got pregnant.”

“It was really good.”

“Just really good?”

“It feels cliché to say it was the best I ever had.”

“Unless it really was.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

Hannah bumped into me again. “I hate you so much right now for that. I should have placed the bids for myself.”

“Then you’d be pregnant.”

“Hell no,” Hannah said. “No chance of me getting pregnant. Trust me.”

“If you say so,” I said. “I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

I touched my stomach.

Hannah put her hand on mine. “You’ve got this, Hazel. No matter what happens with Atlas, I swear I’ll be by your side.”

“Thank you for saying that.”

“Now can I get real for a second?”

“This isn’t real?”

“This is honest. I’m going to talk about real. Real is what you have in front of you.”

“A long road.”

“Sex without worry. With Atlas.”

“I knew you were going to go there,” I said. “It’s not that simple.”

“How? You call him up, talk to him, set some boundaries, and then go for it.”

“What if he doesn’t want that? I’m not always going to look like this. And I am not going to share a man.”

“I don’t blame you there.”

“So why bother?”

“This is you predicting things and being open to get hurt.”

“You don’t mind getting hurt?”

“Hazel, getting hurt is part of life.”

“No shit,” I said. “Look at this house. It’s empty without Gram. I’m hurting, Hannah. I’m hurting every single day. Maybe I can’t handle more loss, okay? Maybe I want to be in control of the loss for once.”

“Which is why you punched Atlas in the jaw and kicked him out.”

I hung my head. “Yes.”

“That’s okay. He’s a hockey player. He knows how to take a punch. And you know what? Don’t give it to him easily then.

Screw my advice. I'm thinking with my clit instead of my brain. “

I shook my head. “You have a way with words, Hannah.”

“I'm just being honest. I think it's smart. Make Atlas show up. Make him want to be here. Drive him a little bit crazy for you.”

“I'm not sure I'll go that far.”

“Why not?”

“Because he's so fucking hot,” I said.

Hannah jumped up and off the steps. “I know! He's like this ten foot monster of muscle and... and... big, strong, hard cock...”

“Okay, that's enough out of you,” I said. “I'm going to go ice my hand some more and probably go to sleep. I'm tired and dazed.”

“Want me to spend the night?”

“You don't have to do that. I bet you have that surfer guy ready to come back, don't you?”

“What?” Hannah yelled. “Me? Do that? I would never do... that...”

“Just text him,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Hannah wiggled her hips. “*Oh, you have no idea how happy you just made my clit!*”



ONCE HANNAH - *and her happy clit* - left, I put the bag of frozen peas back in the freezer and got changed into pajamas.

Upstairs in my bedroom, I shut my eyes for a moment.

I swallowed hard.

I touched my stomach.

I tried so hard to hear the sound of the television in Gram's room.

She loved reality shows so much.

Every singing show, cooking show, right down to shows with wives fighting each other over husbands who were cheating. The crazier it got, the more she loved it.

She would write down each person on the show and pick her favorite.

Sometimes she talked about them as though she actually knew them.

I even once told her she was addicted to those shows.

She gently reminded me she was the one dying of cancer and she could do whatever the hell she felt like.

*I missed her so much.*

And now with me pregnant...

She would have been over the moon about it.

No shame, judgement, or ounce of disappointment.

I suddenly felt very alone.

Alone enough that I thought about calling Hannah.

If I interrupted Hannah and her surfer guy again...

I smiled.

Then I climbed into bed.

Alone.

I touched my stomach.

“Well, I guess I’m not alone at all...”

I would never be alone.

I was a mother now.

The thought of that was stressful enough.

*The last thing I needed was a guy like Atlas making things worse.*



MY WHOLE ALONENESS settled in easily since it was the same routine as always.

Except I was just pregnant.

I felt little changes here and there, mostly hormonal.

A week after I hit Atlas with that uppercut, my phone rang just before midnight.

I reached for the nightstand and saw it was a number I didn’t know.

My instinct was to ignore it.

My gut said to answer it.

I told myself if it was some telemarketer wanting to sell me a warranty for my car, I was going to scream at them as loud as I could.

So I answered the call.

It wasn’t a telemarketer.

It was Atlas.

*Calling me from jail.*



## Chapter Thirteen

---

### ATLAS



*HE FUCKING STARTED IT!*

*He threw the first fucking punch!*

*Why the fuck am I being arrested?*

*This is total bullshit!*

*Oink-oink to you... yeah, you hear that?*

I stood up from the cold bench and walked toward the sloppy drunk guy with the swollen left eye and bloody nose.

I had done a number on him without even really trying.

*But it had to be done.*

*I had no choice in the matter.*

I grabbed his left shoulder and spun him around.

“Shut the fuck up,” I growled. “Or else I’ll finish what I started.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you’ll be drinking from a straw for the next few months while doctors wait for you to keep shitting out pieces of your jaw. Got it?”

The guy swallowed hard.

I pushed him out of the way.

“Hey,” I called out. “I need to talk to someone.”

There was no answer.

I stood in the jail cell and listened to the drunk guy as the emotions of the night finally caught up to him.

He sat down and began to cry.

Crying like a kid who saved up money, bought a toy, then got the toy home and it broke in the first five minutes.

That was the booze catching up to all his terrible decisions.

What decisions did he make?

*When the cops showed up, there was zero reason to defend myself.*

*Why bother?*

*I had beat the shit out of the guy.*

*Did he deserve it?*

*It depended on what ‘deserve’ meant.*

*The guy had been looking at me.*

*The guy wanted to buy me a drink.*

*Then he wanted an autograph. Then he wanted to talk to me about hockey. Then he wanted to give me suggestions on the team and how to handle the season.*

*After telling him to leave me alone, he kept going.*

*Then he started grabbing me.*

*Pulling at my shirt. My arm. Telling me stories about the Sola Empire that I didn't give a fuck about.*

*I told him I wasn't in the mood to talk about hockey.*

*I had other things on my mind.*

*But he kept pushing at me.*

*I eyed the bartender for help.*

*Even the bartender couldn't get this guy to stop.*

*So I had no choice.*

*I had to hit him.*

*One punch to the nose and the guy fell and smacked his face off the bar.*

After that?

It turned into a blur that ended with both of us in handcuffs.

Lucky for me, the arresting officer knew who I was and followed the *Sola Empire* so he helped me to not be seen as best as he could.

I had a hunch that the bartender threw a few goodwill comments my way when the cops were trying to figure out what the hell was happening.

That didn't mean I got away scot-free from it all though.

My hands were cuffed in front of me and I got a ride to the police station.

Then they tossed me and the guy I beat up in the same cell.

When the officer told me to make my call, he figured I'd call my agent or lawyer.

I mean, why not, right?

I was a mostly famous athlete.

The perks of my job was to be able to get into trouble and then pay my way out of it.

And I probably should have called Tucker.

*But.*

*A big but.*

*A really big but.*

At the last second, I decided to call Hazel.

A split-second decision change in my mind.

It almost felt like it wasn't even my mind making the decision.

It just... happened.

On top of that, Hazel actually answered the call.

She had every chance to hang up on me.

To laugh at me before hanging up.

To take enjoyment in the fact that I was in jail and she was probably in bed.

Instead of all that, Hazel groaned and wanted to know the address.

So that's why I stood inside the jail cell with the guy I beat up crying his eyes out.

"Man, I didn't mean it," he sobbed. "I didn't mean a thing. I'm just... I just got so mad..."

I looked at him. "Pull yourself together. Nothing will happen. If you even think about pressing charges against me,

I'll bury you and I'll destroy your life."

The guy looked at me. "Can I get some hockey tickets?"

"No," I said.

The officer appeared again and opened the cell for me.

"I'm a free man?" I asked.

"You're something," he said. "How does this play out with the team and the league?"

"Depends on how things are filed," I said. "If it becomes a spectacle, then I'm in trouble. If it's just a night out, then oh well. I'm not famous enough to be worried about."

The officer looked at the other guy. "Shit. He's crying."

"Like a baby," I said. "I made it clear to him that nobody will be pressing charges."

"Less paperwork for me then," the officer said. "Plus, you're in deep shit as it is."

He then led the way toward a desk where I saw Hazel signing some papers.

She stood, turned and looked at me.

My eyes moved right down to her belly.

It had only been a week since I last saw her.

*But she now looked really pregnant.*



AS SOON AS we were outside the police station, she turned toward me again.

My eyes moved down to her stomach again.

I had a feeling she wanted to slap me.

Which I more than deserved.

My hands reached for her belly.

She slapped my hands away. “What is wrong with you?”

“You’re pregnant, Hazel,” I whispered.

“Yeah... and...?”

“You can tell.”

Hazel wore an unbuttoned flannel and she quickly pulled it shut to hide her stomach.

“That’s real nice to hear,” she said. “You wake me up in the middle of the night because you’re in jail. And then you stare at me and tell me I’m fat?”

“I never called you fat,” I growled. “I said you’re pregnant. You look pregnant.”

“And that’s different?”

I placed my right hand to her stomach.

It was hard.

With a gentle, small roundness to it.

“You’re pregnant with our baby, love,” I said. “I haven’t seen you in a week. You look different. In a good way. It’s like seeing... proof.”

“Proof? The pregnancy tests weren’t proof?”

“Hazel.”

“You know what? I’m not doing this. You needed to get bailed out. I bailed you out. We’re done here. You can pay me back in the morning. Deal?”

“No,” I said. “Don’t run off. Come home with me. Spend the night at my place.”

“Are you insane?”

“You can have my bed. My big, huge bed. All to yourself. I’ll sleep on the couch. Let me thank you for helping me tonight. I live closer to here than you do.”

“Are you begging me right now, Atlas?”

A small flirty flicker in her eyes...

“I’ll drop to my knees, love. Just for you.”

“You must be drunk,” she said.

“I can’t imagine you driving all the way back home by yourself. In the dark.”

“But it was okay for me to drive here by myself? In the dark?”

“I didn’t realize you were...”

“Fat?”

“Pregnant,” I said. “And, uh, showing.”

“That suddenly makes a difference?”

*Yeah, it does, love. It makes a huge fucking difference to me. Your belly is showing. It’s pushed out. It’s rounder. It’s somehow proof to me that there’s a baby in there.*

I didn’t know how to express what I felt.

I had this urge.

And it wasn’t even a sexual urge either.

It was a... *protective*... urge.

I wanted Hazel close to me.

“I must be drunk,” Hazel said.

“You better not be,” I whispered. “You’re pregnant.”

Hazel curled her lip. “*Thanks for the reminder.*”



THERE WAS a slight moment in my bedroom, when Hazel stood next to my bed, fully dressed.

I stood next to her, fully dressed.

We both looked at each other.

*Last time we were in this room...*

That was the first time it occurred to me that we had conceived our baby in this very bed.

“I guess I don’t have to give you the tour,” I said.

“That’s not funny,” she said. “And I guess I’m sleeping in these clothes?”

“Or nothing at all,” I said. “I won’t bother you.”

“Or maybe you can give me a shirt or something to wear? You know, be a gentleman?”

“Now why in the world would I change my ways now?”

As Hazel turned just a little and began to rub her stomach, I realized just how weak in the knees I suddenly felt. How the pregnancy thing made me feel...

I walked away from Hazel and tore open my closet and found a t-shirt for Hazel.

“Hope you don’t mind,” I said to her. “It’s an Arizona shirt.”



“Oh, the enemy, huh?”

“Sure,” I said. “But they did pay me for three years.”

“How much?”

“You really want me to tell you that, love?”

“No,” she said. “It’ll just make me hate you more.”

“Want me to stand here and watch you get changed?”

“No. You can leave now.”

“Goodnight, Hazel,” I said.

My eyes dipped down to her stomach again.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Say goodnight to the baby.”

I swallowed hard.

I was actually nervous.

Nervous to touch and talk to a woman’s stomach.

It felt weird.

Yet it felt right.

I crouched down and faced Hazel’s stomach.

*Last time I was down here...*

“Goodnight,” I whispered.

That was the best I had.

I stood back up.

“Wow,” Hazel said. “Riveting.”

“Get some sleep.”

I walked out of my bedroom and shut the door.

The thought of Hazel in my room, undressing...

My job was to crash on the couch.

I got what I wanted, which was Hazel here.

A full hour went by and I couldn't sleep.

I had the urge to check on Hazel.

I tried to sneak through my apartment.

I did the best I could not to wake Hazel up.

Once in the bedroom, I looked down at her.

*Asleep.*

I nodded.

I wandered back to my couch and sat down.

My eyes were heavy but my heart kind of jumped a little.

I told myself to get some sleep.

*I had to deal with a pregnant woman in the morning.*

## Chapter Fourteen

---

HAZEL



MY FIRST THOUGHT in the morning?

*At least I'm alone in his bed this time.*

Then?

*At least we didn't have sex.*

After that?

*Well, we should have had sex... I'm already pregnant...*

Then I closed my eyes and pulled the covers over my head.

I couldn't hide because the covers smelled like Atlas.

I threw the covers off my body and looked down.

Thanks to Atlas and the sudden shock to his system that my stomach looked different, that was the first thing I looked at.

I tried to make my peace with the fact that my stomach would only grow.

But to see the look on Atlas's face...

I slowly climbed out of the bed and went into the private bathroom.

“Oh, hello there rat’s nest,” I whispered as I caught sight of my reflection.

My hair was a mess, which meant I slept a little restless.

*Was it being pregnant?*

*Was it being in Atlas’s bed?*

*Was it... everything else in my life?*

I sat down on the toilet and chewed on my fingernails.

Being pregnant suddenly made my morning pee like a marathon session.

I finished, washed my hands, and attempted to fix my hair up a little.

I saw the reflection of the shirt in the mirror next.

The gigantic sized shirt.

I saw the faint outline of my nipples - a quick reminder that I had no bra on.

That I needed to fix before seeing Atlas.

*Then again... what if I flaunted myself a little, right?*

*Kind of like what Hannah suggested.*

*Atlas and I could now do whatever we pleased.*

*I was already pregnant.*

*Then again, if anything happened between us, there was no way he could go near another woman.*

I left the bathroom and took Atlas’s shirt off.

I hurried to put my bra on, then find the rest of my clothes from the night before.

Once dressed, I took a deep breath and stepped out of the bedroom.

The smell of coffee and breakfast hit my nose and made every urge and craving in my body go into overdrive.

I almost started to run to follow the smell into the kitchen.

That's where I found Atlas.

Making breakfast.

*Shirtless.*

The man stood there *shirtless*.

*Fucking shirtless.*

Every possible muscle a man could have - forearms, arms, shoulders, chest, stomach - on full display.

He stood there knowing the way he looked.

Knowing he was just naturally big to begin with but also knowing he looked perfectly chiseled from stone.

Not to mention the tattoos on his arms.

Everything about Atlas screamed *big, mean, tough, run away, don't go near him, but if you do go near him make sure you use protection so you don't get pregnant by him...*

All of that was way too late for me to think.

My jaw clenched tight as my brain attempted to process things called *words*.

“Morning,” he said in a rough voice that could have gotten me pregnant if I wasn't already. He inched closer to me and brushed his fingertips to my stomach. “How's our little one?”

*Our... little... one...*

Between that and being half naked *and* knowing how to cook, I stepped back and began to walk away.

“Where are you running off to?” Atlas called out.

I blurted out one word. “*Wind-chair!*”

“What was that?”

I froze in place.

My eyes looked at the window and a chair at the same time and had combined the two words together.

“I don’t know what I was trying to say,” I said.

“How about some coffee to make your brain a little less fuzzy?”

I turned my head and saw Atlas again.

Shirtless.

I blinked a few times.

*How about you put a shirt on? Because you have my brain scrambled. Along with the rest of my body.*

*Is it possible to have your toes even turned on?*

“Coffee,” I managed to say. “Yes. Coffee. That’s nice.”

Atlas raised his left eyebrow and disappeared into the kitchen again.

I took a deep breath.

I mentally yelled at myself to pull myself together.

On my stroll back to the kitchen, Atlas met me halfway, coffee cup in hand.

An old looking mug with some random logo on it.

“Chicago,” he said to me.

“Ah. You collect mugs from hockey teams you played for?”

“Not necessarily. But I have some junk from every team.”

“You get around a lot,” I said.

Atlas smirked. “Not so much right now.”

He looked down at my stomach.

Another killer *swoon* type moment.

I took the coffee mug from Atlas and looked down.

“Black coffee,” I whispered.

“No good?”

“Um, no.”

*Finally! He does something wrong!*

I pushed by Atlas and went into the kitchen.

I had no idea where anything was, which left me no choice but to tell him how I liked my coffee.

Then I felt trapped in the corner since he took up so much space as he cooked for us.

I watched the way he held a spatula, the way his wrist moved and the way muscles flexed *everywhere*.

I had no idea flipping a pancake made muscles in your shoulder and stomach move the way his did.

I reminded myself not to drool.

*I also reminded myself that I needed to find a private way to handle myself so I could get some personal relief and not act like this in front of Atlas.*

“So,” Atlas said, “do we have something to eat first before I tell you what’s happened since last night...?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You bailed me out of jail.”

“I’m aware. I was there.”

“The good news on my end is that nothing legal is happening to me,” he said.

“Wow, how nice to hear.”

“Look, this guy was just running his mouth...”

“Like the night of our date?”

“I was defending you, love.”

“You were looking for an excuse to fight someone,” I said.

“Apples to oranges, huh?”

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean.”

“Well, let me fill you in on everything,” Atlas said. “I got up early and had to deal with my agent and my lawyer. Smooth things over. Then I had to talk to Ellen. Oscar was too busy to care but I apologized to Ellen about what happened. As far as you and I go, our cover is blown. I never thought I’d be in a place where people cared to take my picture and all that, but there are pictures of us together outside the police station. You can tell you’re pregnant and you can tell you’re there for me. So we have to play our part for a little while.”

“What?” I asked. I swallowed hard. “Wait a second...”

“It’s not like tabloid stuff, love,” he said. “It’s just... you won the date with me. Then we’re seen again. It’s juicy, but not. And you’re pregnant.”



“Do you think I’m stupid, Atlas?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“You want me to be by your side to make things look okay,” I said. “You need me. If not, everyone will be talking about you getting drunk and beating up some guy at a bar. But if I’m next to you... the pregnant woman...”

Atlas scooped two pancakes onto a plate and handed it to me.

“Bribing me with food?” I asked.

“This works for both of us right now, Hazel,” he said. “Just show up with me today. Show up to practice. Let this crap blow over. Then we move on.”

“*We move on?*” I asked. “What does that mean exactly?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not going to lie to you.”

“I guess I appreciate that,” I said. “And I appreciate the comfortable bed. And I appreciate the coffee and the delicious breakfast.”

“*But...?*” Atlas asked.

I took a deep breath. “*But...* I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I’m going to pretend to be greedy. I’ll show up with you only for myself. So I’m not painted the wrong way in this whole thing. Can you do one thing for me, Atlas?”

“What, love?”

“No more bar fights.”

Atlas got closer to me. He reached for a bottle of maple syrup, flicked open the lid and poured some on my pancakes.

There was no reason for it to feel sexual, but it did.

“I won’t lie to you, Hazel,” he said. “And I won’t make promises I can’t keep.”

Now maybe that should have been ultra-sexy, but the reality?

*Atlas was nothing but serious trouble.*



WHEN WE GOT to the practice arena, Atlas quickly helped me get out of his gigantic vehicle.

Then he grabbed my hand.

Then he slid his fingers in between mine.

Our fingers interlocked.

Real handholding kind of thing.

Even his fingers were big and strong.

The parking lot was quiet.

Even when we entered the building, it was quiet.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure what the deal was and why he needed me next to him.

Then he made the turn toward the locker room and opened the door.

Inside waited a large group of reporters.

I gasped when I saw them all standing there.

As soon as they saw us, it felt like a swarm of pissed off bees looking to attack someone who knocked the nest down.

My entire body tensed up.

A little bit of claustrophobia hit me.

From the corner of my right eye I saw the other hockey players.

*Henry, Sebastian, Rome, Joe, and Jago.*

The voices of everyone came and went in waves.

Questions on top of one another.

Everyone starting to yell over each other.

I heard the words *pregnancy, arrested, bar fight, baby, bailed out, date...* and even the word *marriage*.

That snapped me out of my trance.

Someone had their phone inches from my face.

Someone else bumped into that person and the phone hit my cheek.

I clung tighter to Atlas.

With one swipe of his hand, he stole the person's phone and squeezed it.

"I don't know who you think you're dealing with right now," Atlas's voice bellowed. "I'm not some celebrity. So step back out of my face right now. Step back from my pregnant... from Hazel."

He squeezed his fingers against the screen of the phone and it cracked with ease.

He tossed it to the floor.

"I had a minor altercation last night," Atlas said. "The police felt it best to get me out of the situation, which they did. Hazel then came to pick me up and we went home together. That's all you need to know. There's no charges. Nothing comes of this. I've personally apologized to Ellen Verwert, her husband, her family, and to the entire *Sola Empire*

organization. As far as my personal business with Hazel...” Atlas put his left hand on my stomach. “She’s pregnant with my child. And it’s our life together. Not yours. So unless you want to talk about hockey now, get out of the locker room and get out of my face. And don’t even think about talking to Hazel or else a broken phone will be the least of your worries.”

And with that said, everyone casually worked their way out of the locker room.

“Feel free to print or share anything I just said!” Atlas called out.

The rest of the guys all began to applaud Atlas for the way he handled the situation.

He looked at me.

He squeezed his hand a little tighter to mine.

I swallowed hard.

My toes tingled in my shoes.

*I never felt so protected and safe in my entire life.*

## Chapter Fifteen

### ATLAS



BOSTON FLEW across the country just to show up and kick our ass.

That kind of thinking never occurred and never mattered to me.

Except tonight...

Maybe it was because Hazel and Hannah were watching the game.

Even that didn't make sense.

I never had the need to show off to anyone. Ever.

Or maybe it was a Boston thing.

A few seasons ago they were in the mix to make a big trade and I was used as an extra piece to make something happen. The GM at the time had the balls to say that I wasn't worth shit in a trade.

Exact words?

*A bag of hockey pucks was worth more than me.*

I never got the chance to go face to face with that GM and knock his teeth out.

The memory stuck with me.

It was probably why the first chance I had at a good check on their best defenseman, I took it.

I put Collins into the boards with a thundering hit.

The crowd absolutely loved that.

My right shoulder wasn't a fan.

Collins went to the ice in a heap of pain.

"Oh, come the fuck on," I yelled to him. "Sack the fuck up and come hit me back."

From behind I felt something hit me right between my shoulders.

I stumbled forward and had to jump over Collins's body.

Jumping over someone with ice skates was extremely dangerous.

I tossed my stick to the ice and ended up skating into the boards.

I turned and there were refs everywhere, blowing whistles, calling a penalty.

Not on me.

But I didn't want the refs involved.

I wanted to fight.

Collins slowly got to his skates.

"Come on," I called to him. "Don't be a pussy."

“Fuck you, Atlas,” Collins said.

He skated toward the bench.

The guy who cross-checked me from behind - Hein - was sent to the penalty box for two minutes.

I nodded to him. “You’re next.”

“I’ll fucking kill you,” he yelled to me.

Now I had something to look forward to.

The game got back to the action.

We were on a power play.

A chance to get some of the goals back that had been given up way too quickly in the game.

Facing a two-nothing deficit.

Boston cleared the puck down the ice in seconds.

Jago made an easy stop and passed it to me.

I took the puck up on my own, letting Henry and Rome get set up.

Sebastian lingered behind the opposing net, waiting for a chance to make a move.

I had a clear path to Henry.

But I looked right at Sebastian.

I flicked my wrist and sent the puck to the boards.

Sebastian grabbed the puck and spun around, taking a shot.

Boston’s goalie was too damn smart though.

He kicked his left foot out at the last second and made the save.

“Rome!” I bellowed as I saw the puck rebound, waiting for a shot.

Rome should have been there.

The play died as fast as it started.

The power play came and went.

Hein came out of the penalty box and dropped his gloves and stick to the ice.

He was ready for me.

I was ready for him.

The play instantly died on the ice.

The fans began to rise to their feet to watch the fight.

This was part of the reason the *Sola Empire* brought me in.

To add a spark to the game when it needed it. To show the opposing team that we didn't give up, no matter the score.

*That we always had something to fight for.*

I went right for Hein and he went right for me.

We skipped any notion of pleasantries when it came to the hockey fight.

No taking our time to grab jerseys and get set up.

We just went for it.

He threw the first punch.

His middle knuckle on his right hand hitting my top lip.

My mouth filled with blood.

I returned his punch with a left punch of my own.

Not my best punch, but I did hit him in the jaw.



Then I managed to grab his jersey.

He grabbed mine.

We both nodded and all hell broke loose from there.

The fight turned into a punch-for-punch brawl.

No matter how hard he hit me or where he hit me, I refused to back off.

Punch after punch... after punch...

The crowd screaming and cheering.

The refs letting us actually do it like this.

When I got his left eye, he stuttered his next punch.

I didn't.

I smashed my fist down onto the bridge of his nose and that ended the fight.

Hein's knees buckled and he started to fall, pulling me with him.

I kept swinging as he went down.

Right up until one of the ref's hooked his arm into mine.

"That's enough, Atlas!" he screamed into my ear.

I backed up from Hein and looked at the crowd.

My right hand was covered in blood and shook.

I waved my hands and that got the crowd going even crazier.

My face throbbed with pain.

Nothing some ice couldn't fix.

I was escorted right off the ice to serve my major penalty in the locker room.

As I walked down the tunnel, I looked up and saw Hazel staring down at me.

The look on her face was priceless.

She looked terrified... yet a little turned on.

I threw a half smirk at her.

I almost blew her a kiss.

Totally uncharacteristic of me.

But the truth was I didn't know how to act when I was near Hazel.

*After all, she was pregnant with my baby.*



THE GAME ENDED with us losing three-two.

Henry had the two goals and almost had a chance at a game-tying hat trick.

A hard-fought game but still another *L* for our record.

I fought Collins and took him down in five seconds.

He really didn't want to fight me but I kept hitting him and pushing at him until he finally snapped.

Hein never returned to the game.

He ended up needing some stitches above his left eye and it swelled up so much he couldn't see.

As for me, I was fine.

Just bloody and sweaty.

Which was what Hazel got to experience as she waited for me outside the locker room.

The team piled into the locker room and I walked toward her.

I towered over her even more than usual because of my ice skates.

She stared up at me. *Scared.*

“First hockey game, love?” I asked.

“Not my first, but my first like this,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

“Look at your face,” she said. “Are you okay, Atlas?”

I grinned. “Oh, this?” I pointed to my face. “This is nothing. You saw the other guys, right?”

“Yeah, I saw. I just...”

“What? Didn’t think it could get that violent?”

“It’s dangerous, Atlas.”

Hazel touched her stomach.

I swallowed hard.

*Dangerous. She’s worried about me getting hurt and not being around for our baby?*

“Listen to me, love,” I said. “This is what I get paid to do. I’m big, mean, and I’m a total asshole on the ice.”

“Just on the ice?” Hazel lifted her left eyebrow.

*Okay, now that little move was sexy.*

“Wait here for me?” I asked.

“I guess so.”

“I need to answer some questions and take a shower. Unless you want to sneak in there and shower with me. You

can wash my wounds.”

“I’ll pass,” Hazel said. “I am thirsty though.”

I turned my head and spotted a security worker.

I told him Hazel was with me, pregnant with my child, and she needed something to drink. *Right now.*

Hazel wouldn’t say that it impressed her, but I knew it did.

I went into the locker room.

Rome stood half naked already.

“So fucking close,” he called out. “*This* close.”

“That’s on me, guys,” Henry said. “I had the shot and I second guessed myself. I’m fucking pissed right now.”

“It was a good call on your part,” Sebastian said. “Left side of the net had been locked up all night.”

“He played me into taking that shot,” Henry said. “I know better.”

“A loss is a loss,” Joe said. “But what a physical game. That’ll send a message to the rest of the teams.”

Everyone looked at me.

“I think you’re the star tonight, Atlas,” Jago said.

“Just doing what I do best,” I said.

“You don’t need any medical attention for that?” Rome asked me.

He walked toward me.

I put my hands out and stepped back. “Keep your cock tucked away in four layers before you get that close to me.”

The rest of the guy laughed.

Coach Denny appeared and announced it was media time.

We all did our part.

Henry had the most attention because of his goals.

Jago was next because he had the best speaking voice and was always calm and cool as a goalie.

Sebastian just wanted to win.

Rome said stupid stuff and loved being on camera shirtless.

Joe didn't answer any questions.

The attention shifted to me because of my physicality throughout the game.

I played it simple.

*Just trying to keep the spark in the game going. This is a great team. The record doesn't show that. We're putting everyone on notice that we're here.*

The media loved that shit.

I walked away and went to take a shower.

I washed my face with soap.

That part hurt worse than getting hit.

Rubbing sudsy soap into a cut... *hello, burn.*

By the time I got back to the locker room, most everyone had cleared out.

I got dressed and gave my head nods as goodbyes.

The guys stared at me, all smiling, knowing I was going to meet up with the woman I got pregnant.

Hazel waited for me.

She looked ready to say something to me about how long it took to get cleaned up, but when her mouth opened it just stayed open.

I knew that look.

The look of complete shock.

The look of being turned on.

“I clean up nice, right?” I asked.

“I... uh... whatever, Atlas,” she said.

Scrambling to find the part of her brain that hated me.

I knew other parts of her body didn't hate me quite as much.

“Ready to get out of here?” I asked her.

“Where are we going? It's kind of late, isn't it?”

“Well, we can't go bar hopping due to your current condition...”

“First off, fuck you,” she said. “My condition? You mean me being pregnant? The pregnancy you caused?”

“That's the one,” I said. “So I had another idea in mind.”

“Which is?”

“Come back to my place with me. Meet up with Hannah and tell her-”

“She already left,” Hazel said. “We were texting and I told her to leave.”

“Good. So it's just us. Come back to my place. You can have my bed. All to yourself.”

Hazel took a deep breath and thought about it for a second.

“Okay,” she said. She pointed up to me. “*But I’m only doing this because your bed is more comfortable than mine.*”

## Chapter Sixteen

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HAZEL



I TRULY HAD no idea what I was thinking when I agreed to go back to Atlas's place with him.

On top of that, Hannah had been the one who drove us to the hockey game.

Which meant when I told her to leave, I basically hinted to her what my intentions were with Atlas.

That didn't even occur to me right away either.

I definitely had what people called *pregnancy brain* going on.

Or maybe it was a combination of being pregnant and being near someone like Atlas.

I never met a guy who could scramble my brain like Atlas did.

Like I knew in my heart this guy was no good. I knew he was big, mean and angry, and loved to fight. He was not someone I could ever picture being with.



Yet when he looked at me, it was like I forgot my own name for a few seconds.

*That explains why I'm pregnant, right?*

I glanced over at Atlas as he drove.

His right hand completely swollen from the insane fighting all night.

But something kind of cool happened from all that.

As we were leaving the arena, there were some fans of the team lingering around near the back gates.

When they saw Atlas, they cheered for him.

*Nice fight!*

*Welcome to the team!*

*You're a badass, man!*

Even once we got into the monstrosity of his truck and started to drive, there were fans just outside the parking lot gates.

Waving and cheering.

Atlas reassured me those fans were waiting for guys like Sebastian to pull out.

“Can I ask you something?”

I had to break up the silence.

“Is it about fighting?”

“How'd you guess?”

“You've been staring at my right hand, love,” he said. “You're not really good at looking subtly at things or people, are you?”

“Right now? No. I’m tired. I feel... I just feel how I feel.”

Atlas turned his head for a moment. “Are you feeling okay? The baby?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. I touched my stomach. “It’s nothing like that. If I’m being honest? I feel pregnant. I know that may sound silly but I’m starting to feel a lot of things. Inside myself. If that makes sense.”

“Doesn’t make an ounce of sense to me,” Atlas said. “But I’m not the one with the womb.”

His honesty was a little annoying yet a lot refreshing.

He wasn’t afraid to say what he wanted.

Which actually made me worry for a second or two about what he’d say about me when I was nine months pregnant and could barely walk, when everything was bloated and swollen...

“Hazel?”

“Um, yeah,” I said. “Sorry. The fighting. Doesn’t it hurt?”

Atlas laughed.

Not sure I ever heard him laugh like that before.

It surprised me and made me gasp.

“Getting punched in the face by some guy?” Atlas asked. “Yes. It does hurt. I’m not immune to pain, love.”

“Yet you still do it? You fight?”

“Part of the game,” he said. “It’s not just about skating down the ice and scoring goals. Even though that’s the main point of it. Think of me as the guy who sets the tone. I make it known you’re not going to fuck around with my team.”

“Okay, that’s kind of cool when you say it that way,” I said.

Atlas laughed again.

I had to look away.

I started to blush.

*That’s kind of cool when you say it that way...*

That’s what I said but not what I meant.

What I meant?

*The thought and sight of you fighting other men and kicking their ass... is really hot.*



I WALKED out of the bathroom wearing another huge shirt over my body.

I didn’t expect to see Atlas standing in the room.

A sense of vulnerability shot through me.

I wore nothing but a t-shirt and panties.

*No bra. No hiding if anything were to happen here...*

“Just wanted to know if you needed anything else,” he said. “Glass of water? Shot of whiskey?”

I touched my stomach. “That’s not funny to say to me.”

“Trying to keep the mood light.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Thanks for the shirt.”

“I’ve got a ton of them.”

I pulled the shirt forward and looked down.

“What one is this? Nashville?”

“That’s right. Only played there for one season. I didn’t jive with the team.”

“That’s surprising,” I said. “You don’t seem like the kind of guy who doesn’t get along with everyone.”

I released my hold on the shirt.

A little bit of room temperature air moved up my shirt and slid over my breasts.

They were sensitive and very tender to begin with.

The air swirled around my nipples and made them instantly hard.

Even though the shirt was very large on me, there wasn’t much hiding certain things.

*Like my nipples.*

Atlas looked right away.

He even gave a quick nod.

As though he approved.

I crossed my right arm over my body. “Show’s over. Goodnight, Atlas.”

“Goodnight, love.”

That’s when I saw him slightly hesitate.

“Hey,” he said. “Mind if I say goodnight to my baby?”

Now that made my toes curl.

“Of course,” I blurted out without thinking first.

Atlas moved toward me with confidence.

Too much confidence.

The kind of confidence I wasn't used to from a man.

*No, this isn't good... is it?*

My mind suddenly decided to re-read every text Hannah had sent to me so far tonight.

Pushing me toward Atlas.

Telling me it was okay to get what I needed and what I wanted from him.

That being pregnant didn't mean I couldn't explore and feel pleasure ever again.

And now, here was Atlas standing in front of me, his right hand touching my stomach.

Standing tall, hovering over me.

"You didn't say goodnight yet," I whispered.

"I know," he said.

His fingers began to pull at the bottom of the t-shirt.

Inching it up little by little.

Taking forever to find the bottom of the shirt.

Probably on purpose because this strategy worked very well.

My inner thighs trembled.

Once I felt Atlas's bare fingers touch my leg, I sucked in a breath.

"Is this okay, love?"

His big, mean voice suddenly acting... *nice?*

Giving a man like Atlas consent sort of felt like jumping out of an airplane without a parachute.

His right hand moved up my leg.

He touched my panties.

But he kept going right away.

Up to my belly.

His huge hand touching my belly.

I wasn't *beachball* pregnant.

But my belly had gotten harder. It had pushed out just a little.

“Fuck, love,” Atlas whispered. “You’re...”

He held back whatever else he had to say.

In place of words, he offered his mouth to mine.

His left hand touched the back of my head and his lips touched my lips.

My knees bent.

His right hand moved up the t-shirt even more.

I groaned into his mouth.

A desperate groan.

I didn't care what it sounded like.

It had been weeks.

*It had actually been months.*

Atlas was the last man who touched me.

And now... here he was again...

His right hand moved over my left breast.

I thrust my chest against his hand with more force.

His big, strong, *tough* hand.

My entire body shivered.

He moved his hand, using his thumb to tease my nipple.

His tongue swept through my mouth with perfection.

That's where the kiss ended.

His right hand moved to my back and he pulled me against him.

The two of us staring at each other.

"We really can't be doing this, love," Atlas whispered.  
"You can't look at me with those eyes with this happening."

"Then I won't," I said.

I turned around.

Even I surprised myself with that move.

When I turned, it placed Atlas's right hand now to my right breast.

I pressed the back of my body to the front of his.

His hand cupped my breast as he let out a growl.

He cupped harder... *and harder... and just a little harder...*

I whimpered, which was my cue to stop right there.

He held me like that.

Wild pulses surging throughout my body.

Strong, rough, yet he listened to me when I needed him to stop where I wanted him to.

I took deep breaths and felt my hips rocking left to right.

With my left hand shaking I reached down and grabbed his left hand.

I knew what I wanted to do.

I looked down and marveled at the passing few seconds as I placed his hand and mine between my legs.

We were together.

My small hand on top of his gigantic hand.

My fingers curling against his curled fingers.

Touching between my legs, over my panties.

I pressed back against him and bent my knees.

“Atlas...”

He grunted.

His version of talking right now.

That’s when he started to move.

Taking me with him.

We walked back to the bed where Atlas sat down and I sat on his lap.

The first thing I felt?

*You know exactly what I felt.*

*A huge thickness... pressing against me...*

I pressed down against him. Against *it*.

*Against Atlas’s hard cock.*

His fingers curled tighter between my legs, hitting a sweet spot even through my panties.

My fingers curled, my nails scratching against his fingers and hands.

An unexpected rush of pleasure attacked me.



An orgasm cresting so quick that it sent shocks throughout my entire body.

I put my head back and let out a cry of relief as I started to come.

Atlas squeezed my right breast just a little bit harder.

His fingers pressing against my panties pressed just a little bit harder too.

The perfect combination of pleasure and control over me.

His lips brushed against my ear.

I turned my head.

Our mouths met.

Sloppy for a second.

Then he pulled away.

“I’m not the man for you, love,” he whispered. “I’m not sticking around here.”

I groaned and let the words float around in my head.

Everything just felt too good to ask the most logical question.

He didn’t want to stick around?

*Then what about the baby?*

## Chapter Seventeen

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### ATLAS



I COULDN'T FALL asleep for a variety of reasons.

First off, the couch wasn't meant for a guy like me to be sleeping on.

I had a say in the kind of bed I wanted when I got the place, but as far as the rest of the furniture went, what the hell did I care?

Sleeping on the couch one time had been enough.

Now a second time?

Knowing Hazel was in my bed?

After everything I had felt on her...

Her body and pleasure in my hands. Literally.

The moment came and went, then she stood up and walked away from me.

I pictured her standing at the dresser, hands flat, slightly hunched forward.

Her beautiful, curved hips rocking left to right.

I knew in that moment how much more I wanted.

But I knew...

Anything else would have been too much.

We didn't speak another word when I left my own bedroom to face the uncomfortable couch.

At some point, I turned on the television and saw highlights of the hockey game.

It was weird seeing myself.

"Check out this brawl later in the game," a voice said. "This was like a heavyweight fight. Someone ring the bell! Look at these two going at it!"

"Hey, Chuck, I think they forgot this was hockey and not a real fight!"

I curled my lip.

"Not that it did the *Sola Empire* much good. They still lost the game. Which brings me to a question. What is the ownership group doing with that team? Is this just for fun for them? Billionaires with money to throw around? They have the guy out on a date with a woman..."

"Who he got pregnant!"

The screeching voice of the second guy made me want to put my fist through the screen.

"Yeah, that's a whole other issue in itself," the first guy said. "But I'm asking a serious question. Signing a guy like Atlas... what's the point? The guy bounces around the league."

“He’s a utility guy. You know what he’s there for. What he did tonight. He’s there to throw punches and get the crowd excited.”

“So to distract everyone from the fact that the *Sola Empire* can’t win a game?”

“Fuck off,” I growled and I turned the television off.

Now I was pissed.

And I was turned on.

The thought of Hazel...

The feel of her body against mine.

The way she moved, grabbed my hand and then dug her nails into my hand.

Her breasts.

*I mean... come on...*

They were heavier. Fuller.

Her nipples very tender and even tighter.

I closed my eyes and begged for sleep.

From that moment until morning it felt like a series of naps rather than some actual sleep.

I called it quits on the sleep thing once sunlight flooded the room.

Climbing off the couch, I went to the kitchen to get some breakfast going for myself and Hazel.

A little spark glowed in the back of my head.

Teasing me into wondering what the morning would bring between us.

*You know, Atlas, it's really simple on what to do here.*

*Make her some coffee.*

*You know the way she likes it now, right?*

*Make some coffee and walk into your bedroom - shirtless, of course.*

*Walk up to the bed and offer the coffee.*

*Of course she's going to sip it and that's it.*

*You take the coffee cup from her and place it on the nightstand.*

*She's going to look at you with 'those eyes' and you're going to climb onto the bed and take full control again.*

*She loves it when you take control.*

*You're going to kiss her.*

*Your right hand is going to touch the shirt again and you're going to smoothly ask for permission just like you did last night.*

*You and her both know you don't need permission but she likes that you ask.*

*Then you're going to slide your fingers down the front of her panties and really feel her.*

*Then she's going to grab between your legs and make sure she-*

*"Cream cheese," I said.*

*The first words that came to mind for some reason.*

*I told myself it was because of coffee. Coffee meant breakfast and breakfast meant bagels and bagels meant cream cheese.*

I ran a hand through my hair and growled deep in my throat.

I replayed last night in my mind too.

I shouldn't have let Hazel stand up after she came.

I should have held her close against me.

I should have guided her back to the bed.

I should have lifted up that long t-shirt, pulled down her panties and let my tongue start to-

“Cream cheese,” I growled.

“Cream cheese?”

I turned my head and saw Hazel standing behind me.

Her hair messy from sleep.

Wearing my t-shirt.

Her nipples were rock hard, poking through the shirt.

Her sleepy eyes.

Just goddamn sexy at its finest.

I wasn't about to fully turn around either.

*Unless Hazel wanted to get knocked over by the hardness between my legs.*



MY PITCHED TENT came to a gentle rest finally.

Hazel had her morning coffee, made the way she preferred it.

I focused on making us breakfast.

Some scrambled eggs and toast with butter and jelly.

I even cooked with a shirt on this time, which I regretted at first.

I noticed Hazel acting quiet.

Almost shy.

Almost afraid of me.

I put a plate of breakfast in front of her and leaned against the counter.

“No need to be shy, love,” I said. “I’ve seen it, touched it, kissed it before.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re quiet this morning. Thinking about last night?”

“Actually, I am thinking about last night, Atlas.”

“Me too.”

“Probably not the same thing though.”

“Why’s that?”

“You don’t remember what you said to me?”

“What I said to you...? I was more focused on what I was doing to you. What you were doing to yourself. Guiding yourself to my touch.”

“You know what? Fuck you, Atlas.”

I stepped back. “What the hell, love? Do I have morning breath?”

“More like you have *nighttime talking voice*.”

“What?”

“I don’t know what I just said. Just forget it. Okay? I just want to eat and then leave.”

“Eat and leave? That’s it? How are you getting out of here?”

“With my feet, then my phone.”

“I can’t give you a ride?”

“I don’t want anything from you right now, Atlas.”

“I must have missed something. Did I say something while you were coming into my hand?”

“Yeah, take pride in that,” she said. “Big deal. You made me orgasm. Guess what? My showerhead does the same thing too.”

“Wow.”

“Wow is right.” Hazel stood up. “You don’t remember what you said to me?”

“About what? About me not being the right guy for you? That was the truth, love. I’m not going to lead you on here. I’m being honest.”

“Honest. Right. Like when you said you won’t be around for long? So you’re just going to take off and leave me alone? Leave me alone and pregnant? Or alone with a baby?”

“That’s what this is about? I never said...”

“You’ve got nothing,” she said. “You prick. You fucking... just... you... fuck...”

Hazel grabbed the plate of eggs and toast and threw it at me.

With such anger and precision.



The plate hit me in the chest and fell to the floor, shattering.

Eggs and purple jelly clinging to my shirt as Hazel made her way toward the door.

“You’re leaving like that?” I called out. “Take that walk of shame wearing my shirt with your nipples showing?”

She froze and turned to face me. “Really? You’re worried about my nipples? They’re nipples, Atlas. I have nipples. You have nipples. Everyone has nipples. Here...”

She lifted her shirt all the way up.

Her tits were suddenly free and bouncing as she wiggled her chest.

It was just a second or two but it sure as hell felt longer than that.

She lowered her shirt, her face bright red.

“There? Happy?”

“Hazel...”

“Fuck you,” she said again.

She spun around and hurried to my bedroom.

I looked down at myself and ran the middle finger of my right hand into the jelly on my shirt and licked it off.

The mix of the jelly and the butter was perfection.

And Hazel wasted it.

Over something I said.

When she emerged from my bedroom dressed in last night’s clothes, she had the t-shirt she wore balled up.

She threw that at me next.

I caught it midair.

“I’m out of here, Atlas,” she said. “I’ve seen and heard enough.”

“Enough of what, love?”

“Enough of you! Think about what you said to me last night. How fucking horrible can you be to someone who feels so vulnerable right now?”

I clenched my teeth hard for a moment. “What do you want from me? Want me to drop to one knee and ask you to marry me? Want me to demand you live with me? Want me to force myself to fall in love with you? That’s not real life, Hazel. That’s not what this is.”

“But it’s okay for you to invite me over and then finger me?”

“Technically I didn’t finger you. I kind of just rubbed between your legs. And I didn’t see you jumping up and pushing me away. In fact, if I remember correctly, I asked your permission.”

“This conversation is pointless,” she said. “It doesn’t even matter, Atlas. You’re not going to be around anymore, remember?”

She opened my door and left.

The door slammed behind her.

I ran to the door and thought about chasing her down.

Instead, I punched the door.

That sent a fresh surge of pain through my already sore right hand.

I grabbed a coffee mug and poured a cup of coffee.

Then I added some whiskey.

*As though caffeine mixed with alcohol was going to help what just happened and how I was really starting to feel about Hazel.*

## Chapter Eighteen

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HAZEL



I GRABBED the heavy duty trash bag and began to pull.

The bag didn't want to move.

I gritted my teeth and pulled hard.

This stupid damn trash bag was not going to win this fight.

Not even close.

The bag moved an inch or two and then stopped.

So I pulled even harder.

I let out a groaning cry as though I were a warrior on a battlefield...

*Or a woman in labor giving that last push before birth.*

I released my hold on the trash bag and stumbled back.

“Holy crap, Hazel, take it easy,” a voice said behind me.

Hands touched my back to make sure I didn't fall.

I gasped for a breath.

The hands touching me were small. Way too small.

They were Hannah's hands.

*Not the hands I wanted to touch me.*

"I'm fine," I said. "I've got to get this trash bag out of here right now."

"What's it full of? Toxic waste?"

I turned around. "I'm cleaning the fucking house, Hannah. Okay?"

"Oh, wow, you're going to chew my head off now? Hormones? Or that other thing annoying you?"

I scoffed. "*That other thing?* That was a month ago. Okay?"

"An entire month without even texting him?"

"That's right."

"Do you feel proud of that?"

"Proud of what?"

"He's the father of your baby."

"And I told you what he said to me," I said.

"And you're taking one comment to heart?"

"It was a big fucking comment," I snapped.

I spun around, grabbed the trash bag and pulled.

It wouldn't move again.

"I'm not going to watch this," Hannah said. "You're going to pop your womb."

"Don't even say that," I said. "Of all the things I'm thinking about, I don't need that too."

“What exactly are you thinking about right now?” Hannah asked.

She moved to the other side of the trash bag and began to push.

The bag finally moved.

Together we dragged the trash bag out of the spare bedroom and then carefully down the stairs, letting it bounce one step at a time.

“I’m thinking about having this baby,” I finally said. “I have no clue what I’m going to do. Where do I want to live? Here? Somewhere else? This state? My career is stuck in a rut but if they’re willing to work with me like they did when Gram was alive, then I need to shut up and deal.”

“And none of this revolves around Atlas at all?”

“Why would it?”

“Hazel.”

“Are you going to stick up for me or for him?”

We dragged the trash bag out to the front porch.

That’s where we left it.

There was a nice stack of trash bags out on the porch.

I had someone coming in the morning to pick it all up.

“What’s in all these?” Hannah asked.

“Just old stuff,” I said. “You know Gram. She saved a lot of newspapers and magazines and pieces of cloth.”

“Preparing for the end of the world, huh?”

“Something like that. I went through everything to make sure nothing important got thrown out. She had it all organized

though. Major historical events put in one place, then the junk in another.”

“Even messy she was organized,” Hannah smiled. “That’s so her.”

“I miss her a lot, Hannah.”

“I know you do. I miss her too. You probably miss her even more now. You know how happy she’d be right now?”

“Yeah, right. Her granddaughter pregnant by a hockey player?”

“That’s how you see it. You know what she would say, right?”

“What would she say?” I asked.

“She would be happy for you. Thrilled for you. She would sit you down with a cup of hot tea like she was going to get serious about things. Then she’d ask you about Atlas. She’d want to know how big he was. *How big... everywhere...*”

I smiled. “Stop it.”

“She’d do anything to make you laugh and then she’d remind you that you’re never alone.”

“Except she’s not here.”

“But I am,” Hannah said. “And you should get in touch with Atlas.”

“He can get in touch with me.”

“You know what? You’re right. He can. He’s an idiot. A total jock fool.”

“*But...?*”

Hannah shook her head. "I'm not saying anything else."  
She looked at my stomach and smiled. "Can I?"

"Don't even," I said.

I turned and walked back into the house.

I felt Hannah right behind me.

Making silly giggling noises.

I walked to the kitchen, pretending I didn't hear her.

Until I finally stopped and she hurried around me and crouched down.

"This is so weird," I said.

"What's weird? I can't talk to my baby?"

"Your baby?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm claiming this baby as mine," she said. "No way I'm going to suffer through pregnancy. I won't look right with stretch marks."

"Wow. Thanks."

"You look beautiful, Hazel. You know you do. And look at this belly."

Hannah put her hands to my stomach and nuzzled her nose.

I looked up to the ceiling.

Yeah, a month without Atlas in my life and a month longer into the pregnancy and I finally did the thing women called... *popping*.

I literally woke up one morning with a pregnant belly.

Not a baby bump either.



*A belly.*

A belly that Hannah loved to touch, snuggle, and talk to.

“We’re going to have so much fun,” she said to my stomach. “I’m going to spoil you. I’m going to teach you how to get into trouble and not get caught. It’s going to be awesome. Anything your mother says no to, you find me.”

“Done yet?” I asked.

“Yup,” Hannah said.

She kissed my stomach and stood up.

“Thanks for your help with that trash bag.”

“Want me to spend the night?”

“No. I’m fine. I promise. I’m going to take a shower and get some sleep. I have to go see the doctor in the morning.”

“Just a regular checkup thing?”

I nodded.

“Want me to come?” Hannah offered.

“Thank you. But I’m good.”

“Okay. I mean I shouldn’t be there. But you shouldn’t be alone. Know what I’m saying?”

“Goodbye, Hannah,” I said. “Thanks again.”

She laughed and shook her head.

As she walked from the kitchen to the front door, she called out, “As stubborn as when I met her and demanded I give her the unicorn pencil.”

“Hey, I saw that pencil first!” I yelled. “You were the one looking at the zebra pencil!”

Hannah shut the door.

I made sure to lock up, then I went upstairs.

I turned on the television in my room.

Of all things to see...

*Hockey.*

*The Sola Empire.*

Right there on my screen, perfectly centered, Atlas.

Sitting in the penalty box (*shocker*), chewing on his mouthguard, looking as pissed off as ever.

“Looking as sexy as ever too,” I muttered.

I quickly turned the television off.

I groaned as I walked to the bathroom to take a hot shower.

I told myself to take a cold shower. An ice cold shower.

*Just so my fingers and thoughts didn't get too playful when it came to thinking about Atlas.*



I SAT in the waiting room and looked around.

There were two other pregnant women.

Very pregnant women.

One woman sat alone.

Another sat next to a guy and they held hands.

I sat with my phone in my right hand, chewing on my bottom lip like there was gold waiting to be found.

I glanced at my phone again.

The text message already typed out.

Ready to go.

I just needed to hit...

I looked to my left and touched the screen.

Without looking I managed to send the text to Atlas.

*There. I did it. He knows I'm at the doctor. He knows where I am.*

*I mean, sure, it's super last second. I'm going to get called in any minute now.*

*But at least I reached out, right?*

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

“Hazel?”

I stood up and a nurse with a super high-top blonde bun and white scrubs with pink pandas on them waved to me, then escorted me into the back.

I had to do the whole *stand on the dreaded scale* routine.

This was one time in life where gaining weight was a good thing.

“So how are you feeling?” the nurse asked.

“Bigger,” I said with a smile.

“Feeling any flutters and kicks?”

“A little,” I said. “No uppercuts yet.”

“That’s good,” the nurse said. “Any concerns?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Perfect,” she said. “We’re going to get some pictures of the baby and then Dr. Riley will be in to chat. Sound good?”

I nodded and smiled.

A few minutes later the ultrasound tech came into the room.

She was tall, skinny, jumpy and cheery.

Wearing expensive running shoes and a fancy watch that probably tracked everything from her breathing to her poop cycle.

*My hormones had me very judgmental today...*

She introduced herself as Lynne and had me lay back and lift my shirt.

Getting the ultrasound on my stomach was much more comfortable than the other way.

*The wand.*

*And you know where that thing went...*

“How’s the weather out there today?” Lynne asked.

*Oh, great, someone who makes small talk...*

“Sunny,” I said.

“Same as yesterday, right?”

Lynne smiled at me.

I smiled back. “Right.”

“I always ask that,” she said. “Get the nonsense small talk crap out of the way so we can get to work. Let’s see what this baby looks like...”

Just as Lynne was about to start the ultrasound, there was a knock at the door.

It opened before Lynne could say a word.

“Excuse me!” Lynne called out.

I blinked fast at the sight of Atlas entering the room.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, his voice shaking everything in the room. “I’m the father of the baby.”

Lynne looked at me.

Her eyes wondering if this situation was okay or not.

It occurred to me right then just how this looked.

Just like the night I had to bail Atlas out of jail.

And now Atlas just walking into the room.

“It’s okay,” I said to Lynne. “I texted him at the last second. I should have texted earlier.”

“That would have been smart,” Atlas said.

I looked at Atlas. “Really? Haven’t seen you in a month and you want to start up again?”

“You randomly text me after a month about this appointment? What was that about?”

“You could have checked in with me,” I said. “I’m the pregnant one.”

“You’re the one who threw eggs and toast at me, then stormed out of my apartment.”

“Could you blame me, Atlas?”

“You didn’t mind me the night before that happened,” he said.

He wiggled his fingers.

“Okay, whatever,” I said.

“Well then,” Lynne said. She cleared her throat. “Now that we got that out in the open, how about we take a look at your baby?”

My face blushed.

Atlas’s didn’t.

He walked up to me and we both looked at the screen as Lynne began the ultrasound.

The tension in the room felt like a thick fog.

Then the baby appeared on the screen.

Black and white, fuzzy, just a shape... but the head...

I blinked fast.

Atlas touched my left hand with his right hand.

I refused to look at him.

*I was not going to fall for any of his emotional and hormonal traps ever again.*

## Chapter Nineteen

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### ATLAS



“WE HAVE a game we like to play,” Jago said. “Rome invented it.”

“So I should assume it’s something sexual?” I asked.

“We’re a bunch of guys sitting in a bar,” Rome said. “Nothing sexual between us.”

“You don’t know that,” Henry said as he threw his arm around Rome and planted a kiss on Rome’s cheek.

“Dude,” Rome said. “I know I’m good looking, but you must have a vagina to ride this ride.”

“I regret this already,” I said.

“Don’t,” Sebastian said. “This is us bonding as a team. Now we can sit here and talk about hockey. Talk about what’s good and bad with the team.”

“We have a good fucking team,” Joe bellowed. “We just have to get smarter together.”

“It’s not even that,” I said.

“Then enlighten us,” Henry said.

He winked and nodded at me.

I appreciated his desire to pull me closer to the guys.

I respected him for that.

But at some point I figured I’d have no choice but to break out my contract and show them that it clearly stated *ONE FUCKING SEASON*.

That was it.

I was here to collect my seven figures, set the record for most fights and penalty minutes by one player in the history of the team, help them find their balls to get better, then move on.

“Come on, Atlas, talk to us,” Sebastian said.

“Look, this team is good,” I said. “You’re all smart enough. You all know how to play the game. I think the problem is taking everything all at once and trying too much. Trying too hard. Probably sounds fucking stupid, right? Worst team in the league trying too hard? But if you slow it down a little. Dumb it down. These intensely designed plays right off the puck drop aren’t going to get us anywhere.”

“Are you challenging the coaching staff?” Joe asked.

“No. They’re doing what they think is best for us. What I’m saying is we should take the ice and take the ice from the ice level first. When we win a face off we attack the net. Desperate. If you play desperate, you’re going to fucking lose.”

“I’m going with *B*,” Rome said.

I watched as he put a fifty dollar bill into an empty glass at the middle of the table.



“What?” I asked.

“Game’s starting,” Henry said.

“What fucking game?” I asked.

Rome smiled at Jago. “Go for it. Tell him the rules.”

Jago inched closer to me.

This guy smelled like the cologne counter in a shopping mall.

And he dressed like he was going to some fucking movie awards show.

Maybe that was just a goalie thing.

I looked at him. “What are you doing?”

“We play a game,” he said. “It’s called *The Cup Game*.”

“Or *Size Squeeze*,” Rome said.

“Nobody calls it that but you,” Sebastian said. “Nobody is squeezing a thing without consent. At best, you get a look.”

“A look at what?” I asked.

“Boobs,” Jago said.

I rolled my eyes. “What the fuck?”

“Listen, Atlas,” Rome said.

“We pick out a woman and guess her size,” Jago said.

“Her size?”

“Boobs,” Jago repeated with a smile as though he just saw his first pair of breasts ever.

“Really?” I asked.

“It’s a playful game,” Sebastian said. “We take a guess and throw money into the glass. Then someone goes up to the

woman and asks her.”

“Then what?” I asked. “You wait for some woman to beat the shit out of you?”

“Or she plays into it,” Jago said.

“Then we ask to see,” Rome added with a wink.

“You ask women to flash you,” I said.

“That’s right,” Joe said. “Problem with that, Atlas?”

I shook my head. “Who are we looking at?”

“And he’s in!” Jago called out.

He smacked his hand on the table and all of our drinks shook and almost spilled.

I grabbed my glass of beer and curled my lip.

“Green shirt,” Rome said. “Right behind Henry. Standing at the bar with two friends. She’s sideways. It’s tough gauging from the side.”

“I’m going with C,” Sebastian said.

One by one they all took a guess and tossed money into the empty glass.

Then it was my turn.

It felt really stupid to do.

Then again, it was a pleasant distraction from what was going through my mind.

Which was the fact that Hazel and I weren’t together.

Not in that romantic bullshit way.

But just in general.

The way it felt walking into that doctor's office and into the room.

Like I was some kind of bad man or something.

Like I had hurt Hazel and I didn't belong there.

"What's your pick?" Jago asked me.

I dropped money into the empty glass. "Size *G*."

"What?" Rome called out. "Those are not that big. Come on, Atlas. Don't ruin the sanctity of the game here!"

I shrugged my shoulders and everyone started to laugh.

"Who's going to talk to her?" I asked.

"I'll go," Rome said. "I'll teach the new guy how this is done."

Rome jumped up and strutted toward the bar.

He nestled his way right in front of the woman with the green shirt.

"Sometimes it's nice to be famous," Jago whispered to me. "We may not be rock stars but to some of these people... we kind of are."

"Good for you guys," I said.

"Here we go," Sebastian said.

I watched as Rome pointed to all of us.

The woman looked and smiled.

Then Rome whispered something to her.

The woman stepped away from him and covered her arms over her chest.

"Ut-oh," I said.

“Give him a second,” Jago said.

More words were exchanged.

Then Rome put his hands together. Begging.

Then he grabbed the bottom of his shirt and lifted it a little.

“Does this actually work?” I asked.

“Sometimes it does,” Henry said. “You get a big enough hockey fan...”

The woman pointed at Rome and started yelling.

“He’s in deep shit now,” Joe said.

Rome then made a gesture with his hands.

It was more than obvious he was now just simply requesting her bra cup size.

It all felt so dumb.

Yet I kind of enjoyed myself a little.

I enjoyed myself even more when I saw movement from the corner of my right eye.

“We’ve got company,” I said. “Fuck. I think she’s got a boyfriend.”

Jago turned his head.

He jumped up.

I jumped up.

Soon there were three guys making a straight line for Rome.

We cleared our table and hurried to the bar.

The woman called out, “This sick fuck wants me to flash him and hold my breasts in his hand to guess the size!”

“That’s not part of the rules,” Jago said to Rome.

“I’m improvising,” Rome said.

“You’re about to die, man,” someone said.

I glanced at Henry and he shrugged his shoulders.

I sighed.

*Well, here’s to another bar fight.*



A BUNCH of hockey players versus a few guys with beer muscles?

It really wasn’t a fight at all.

More or less some pushing and shoving and containing the situation.

One of the guys took a cheap shot at Rome, hitting him in the ear.

Joe hit the guy in the stomach and the guy fell right down to his ass and sat there, groaning and whining.

I then got between everyone, barking orders for my guys to get out of there.

I apologized to the woman and told her it was just a game.

I had no idea what came over me after that because when she thanked me for being nice, I blurted out wanting to know what her bra size was.

That only made Rome and Jago even more excited.

The woman slapped me across the face and stormed off.

At the last second, she turned back around, smiling.

She playfully lifted her shirt and called out, “C!”

“And I win it again!” Sebastian called out.

Joe and I corralled the guys and got the hell out of the beachside bar.

We hadn’t been out long enough to get buzzed.

“To the next bar!” Rome announced. “I want to win one.”

“Oh, shit,” Sebastian said. “I forgot to get the money. My winnings.”

“Leave it,” Joe said.

“I’m going to call it a night here,” I said. “Going to take a walk and go home or something.”

“Atlas,” Jago said.

“Leave it,” I ordered.

“Hey, let him do his thing,” Henry said. “He’s got a lot going on.”

“I bet I know what this is,” Rome said. “You’re going to meet up with the pregnant one. Good for you. I’ve always wanted to sleep with a pregnant woman.”

“Joe,” Henry said and gave a nod.

Joe moved everyone away from me.

Henry got closer. “Hey, I’m sorry about tonight. I’m not sure if you want us to talk about what’s going on with you. Don’t think we’re ignoring it or anything. I know you have a way of handling yourself. Just don’t think for a second you’re alone.”

“I get that,” I said. “It’s a good game. Just need to work on the rules a little.”

“Hockey?”

“No. The boob game.”

Henry laughed.

I turned and walked away.

A ended up on the beach.

I had lived in so many different cities throughout my career.

Warm weather, cold weather, rainy weather, snowy weather.

In giant cities and just outside towns.

I had been on the beaches of each coast.

I did enjoy the ocean though.

Something about it...

*This is why I should have ordered something stronger to drink and chugged it. Now my mind is all philosophical over the fucking ocean.*

Or maybe it was something else.

I kept my eyes forward and just as I decided to get off the beach, I saw someone walking toward me.

Even more of a reason to get off the beach.

I was not in the mood for people.

Not in the mood for anyone.

As I turned, I heard my name called out.

“Atlas?”

I gritted my teeth.

Last thing I needed was to have some hockey fan harassing me for an autograph and a picture.

But as the person got closer to me...

I saw the shape of her body.

A full-figured shape.

Something a little extra in the front too.

A few seconds later I realized who it was.

Not that I believed in fate... but...

I watched as the nighttime beach breeze blew against Hazel's hair.

*For a moment, I forgot how to breathe.*



## Chapter Twenty

---

HAZEL



*NOBODY WOULD BELIEVE this story if I told it to them.*

*I end up on the beach. Alone. At night.*

*In the dark, yes.*

*I go for a walk.*

*Why am I walking alone on the beach in the dark?*

*That doesn't matter all that much right now, does it?*

*The point is, I'm walking alone on the beach in the dark  
and guess who I see?*

*Of all the people in the world, I see the man who got me  
pregnant.*

*Honestly, I would have been less surprised to see Santa  
Claus himself on the beach. In his red suit with his long white  
beard and his jolly belly bouncing as he screamed out ho-ho-  
fucking-ho to anyone who cared to listen.*

*But, nope, that's not real. He's not real.*

*What's real?*

“Atlas,” I whisper.

He walked toward me as I walked toward him.

This undeniable connection between us.

I blamed it solely on the pregnancy.

Of course we had a connection.

We made a baby together.

The life in my womb was created by both of us.

“What are you doing out here alone in the dark?”

His voice wrapped itself around me and pulled at me.

I resisted.

“Nice tone,” I said. “Hello to you too, Atlas. Anything else you want to yell at me about right off the bat here?”

He gritted his teeth and his eyes grew wide.

It was so obvious, Atlas had no idea how to deal with a woman. Especially a woman pregnant and hormonal. Or a woman who hung around past the orgasmic climax of whatever bullshit attempt at a date and night out he had to offer.

Not that I was clinging to him.

We ran into each other like this.

Solely an act of fate.

*Fate.*

*Was it fate that had me cave, go out with Hannah and end up on a date with Atlas?*

*Was it fate that made my panties disappear when I ended up in Atlas's bed?*

It made me think of something Gram told me a few times.

*"Fate is the blank page and pencil. Reality is the words you write."*

I wasn't sure if that made sense but it sounded nice.

"No apology for that?" I asked.

"Apology for what?" Atlas growled. "For caring?"

"Now you care?"

"Who said I didn't care?"

"Atlas..."

"Hey, hold on a second here, love," he said.

He put his massive left hand out. I hated myself at how much I wanted to touch that huge, strong hand. Clasp it to my breast. Make him squeeze my aching breast until I whimpered.

"Think about this from my point of view," he said.

That snapped all sexual fantasy out of my head.

"You have a point of view in this?" I asked.

"I didn't hear from you for a month, Hazel. You stormed out of my place, pissed about a comment that you took out of context."

"Oh, you're a real asshole, Atlas."

"Hold on, dammit," he growled. "I didn't know what you wanted me to do. I'm not going to chase you around with flowers, begging for your forgiveness. I'm not ever going to be that guy. But the second you texted me about that appointment, what happened? I hurried over. And why did you

wait until the last second, huh? No warning? But I showed up. I walked into that room and the tension..."

"Yeah, I felt it."

"No, love. You didn't feel what I did. That ultrasound tech looked at me like I was some abusive guy. She was ready to call the police on me. That fucking sucked."

*Oh... wow...*

I touched Atlas's hand.

I took a deep breath and sighed.

"Any chance we can both own that and move on?" I asked. "That was horrible for you, Atlas. And it was horrible for me. She looked at me like I was..." I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. Do you still have the ultrasound pictures?"

"Of course I do," he said as he stepped closer to me. "In my gym bag. I look at them every single day."

"Really?"

"When have I ever lied to you, Hazel?"

I nodded. "Right."

He reached with his right hand and tried to tuck some of my hair behind my ear.

The breeze coming off the ocean said *no thanks* and messed my hair up in a second again.

"What are you doing out here, love?" Atlas whispered.

"Thinking," I said. "Hannah and I had something to eat. Tacos and tequila. Well, no tequila for me. Just some badass water with lime in it. The bartender was someone she sort of knew. So..."

“A guy?”

“Yeah.”

“Your best friend bailed on you to get laid?”

“Nope. I told her to go get laid. I told her I was going for a walk and then I was going to head home. I’ve been walking for ten minutes and she texted me five times already. She’s afraid a shark is going to swim in to shore and eat me.”

“Does she really think that?”

“It’s Hannah,” I said. “Who knows what she really believes or not.”

“You know, I don’t like you walking alone,” Atlas said.

“So then do something about it.”

Atlas turned and faced the way I was walking.

His right hand grabbed my left hand.

He started to walk.

I went with him.

And there we were, walking along the beach, holding hands.

A moment that should have been pure magic and romance, but it felt anything but.

“Now I get to ask why you’re walking alone on the beach in the dark,” I said.

“Oh, that’s easy. There was a bar fight and I had to get away from it.”

I stopped. “What the hell? Are you being serious?”

Atlas looked down at me. “Yeah. Why?”

“A bar fight? Didn’t I just bail you out of jail not too long ago for that same thing?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“And you think that’s okay? Just a normal thing for you?”

“I didn’t start any fights. I didn’t even finish any fights. I actually kind of broke things up and then got out of there.”

“Oh, wow. So you’re all high and mighty now? Above the conflict?”

Atlas half smiled. “Want to know what caused the *almost-fight*?”

“Let me guess. A woman.”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of a woman?”

Atlas fully smiled. “They were all guessing on the size of the woman’s chest. Rome went to find out. She slapped him. Then some guys wanted to defend her.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to slap you right now, Atlas.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“What a disgusting game to play. You guess the size of a woman’s chest?”

“It’s not my game, love.”

“But you played it.”

“Team bonding.”

“You don’t seem like the bonding type.”

“And why is that?”

I laughed. “You and I both know I don’t have to explain a thing to you about yourself, Atlas. You know exactly who you are. It’s slightly charming and extremely annoying.”

“So now I’m slightly charming to you,” he said.

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“If I was very charming, I’d sweep you up off your feet and run into the ocean with you in my arms. Right?”

“Don’t even think about it.”

Atlas suddenly stopped.

I gasped.

I opened my mouth to yell at Atlas.

Instead, I gasped.

I touched my stomach.

“Hazel, what is it?” Atlas asked.

I grabbed for his hand.

I smiled ear to ear.

*“The baby is kicking!”*



ATLAS DROPPED to one knee without hesitation.

His hands cupped my stomach.

I gasped again.

A wave of heat flooded my body.

I looked down at him.

“Can you feel it?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he said. “What should I do here?”

“I don’t know. Talk to the baby. See what happens.”

“Uh, yeah,” Atlas said. “Hey... baby... my baby. I mean, uh, you know, it’s me. It’s your father. Atlas.” He looked up at me. “This is weird. Talking to noth-”

Atlas stopped talking.

He looked at my stomach again.

“I feel it! I feel the baby! The baby moved!”

I laughed so hard I covered my mouth.

My entire body jumped as I laughed.

“What’s so funny up there?” Atlas asked.

“You. Look at you. You’re like... you’re happy.”

“Of course I’m happy. My baby is kicking at me.”

Atlas slowly looked up at me again.

Then he slowly stood up.

Both of his hands still touching my stomach.

My hands fell to my sides.

Towering over me, this mean looking man who had so many layers to himself...

“Our baby,” he whispered.

“Yes,” I said. “Our baby. He or she knows your voice, Atlas. It’s all connected.”

“Thank you for giving me this moment, love,” he said.

*Okay... that’s as much as I can take.*



“Atlas, I’m only going to say this once. So hear me very clearly.”

“What?”

I took a deep breath. *“I am so turned on right now, this is your chance to hurry up and take me home with you...”*

## Chapter Twenty-One

---

### ATLAS



I TOOK Hazel back to my place.

We left her car wherever the hell it had been parked.

I wanted her by my side.

And I had her by my side.

Now I had her all to myself.

As soon as I shut the door and locked it, she looked over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, love, you can unlock it yourself if you want,” I said.

She shook her head. “It’s not that, Atlas. It’s not that at all.”

I approached her and touched her arms, pressing the front of my body to her back.

“Can I give you some advice?”

“Why would I take advice from you?” Hazel whispered.

“Whatever you’re thinking right now, just forget it,” I offered. “Just be here in this moment. Between us.”

“That’s something a guy would say knowing he was *this close* to getting laid.”

“It’s not about that. I can prove it if you want.”

“You have a lot to prove, Atlas,” she said with a smile as she looked back at me.

That’s when I made my move.

I stepped to the side and swept her off her feet.

She let out a playful yell as I picked her up, cradling her in my arms.

And there was no way in hell Hazel (*or any other woman*) wasn’t instantly turned on by that move.

Hazel grabbed at my neck with her right hand.

Her left hand touched her stomach.

She took a deep breath. “Let’s be very clear here, Atlas. I’m the one who wants this.”

“I know, love.”

“I mean, I know you do too. You’re a guy. Of course you want this. Or maybe you don’t. It’s not the same. As before. Things are different now.”

“Are you trying to convince me not to fuck you right now, Hazel?”

“Oh, wow. There’s that gross dirty talk I’ve been waiting for all my life.”

“It’s called honesty,” I said. “Stop talking.”

“Make me stop talking.”

Her flirty challenge was not much of a challenge at all.

I lowered my mouth down to hers.

She seemed surprised for a second, really that unsure of what my intentions were.

Her lips and tongue were a sense of familiarity when everything felt so different and so changed.

Once in my bedroom, I took her to my bed and placed her down.

Hovering over her, kissing her.

She clawed at my arms, her nails digging at my muscles.

She secretly loved it. She'd never admit it though.

Her hands clawed their way up and to the back of my shirt.

As she began to pull, I broke our kiss and stepped from the bed.

I took my shirt off and tossed it across the room.

When I moved back to the bed, her hands reached up, fingers wiggling, wanting to touch my chest and my stomach.

“Don't make a thing of this,” she whispered. “I'm treating you like a piece of meat and nothing else. You're just some booty call to me right now, Atlas.”

“Did I say a word, love?”

“No. And that pisses me off. I'm not like this. But with you...”

I kissed her again to shut her up.

Her hands moved up to my face, scratching at the scruff on my face.

I dipped my mouth down to her neck, tongue flicking at her skin.

A mix of pleasure plus being ticklish made her groan, giggle, and squirm.

She quickly covered her mouth and arched her back.

Thrusting her chest up toward me.

My right hand made a quick move, pushing her shirt up.

My lips desired bare skin. Soft, warm skin. The tenderness of her nipple.

Before her shirt was halfway up, Hazel let out a gasp and pushed me away.

I moved off the bed again and watched as she pushed her shirt down.

She stared at me, gasping, her cheeks now turning a dark shade of red.

“It’s... different...” She exhaled a long breath. She sat up. “I’m sorry, Atlas.”

I offered my hands to her and she took them.

I helped her to her feet.

I towered over her and nodded.

“Don’t hate me,” she whispered.

“I don’t hate you, Hazel. But I’m going to show you something right now.”

“Show me what, Atlas?”

*“I’m going to show you how beautiful I think you are.”*



THAT KIND of stuff never poured from my mouth.

And if I was being honest with myself, it wasn't my cock talking.

I meant it.

I touched the bottom of Hazel's shirt and she sucked in a breath.

As I lifted her shirt I crouched down.

Face to face with her pregnant belly.

I held her shirt up and I gently kissed her belly.

It wasn't my job to tell Hazel a thing about her body. What she thought and what she felt were her feelings and her feelings had merit.

All I could do was just exist in the same moment with her.

I kissed her stomach and then slowly began to kiss up her body.

Yes, her stomach was rounder.

Yes, her stomach stuck out.

Yes, her stomach had a new shape and a different feel.

And, yes, her stomach held the life of a baby that she and I created.

I kept kissing her body.

I kept lifting her shirt up.

Without a word, Hazel lifted her arms up, allowing me to take her shirt off.

She kept her head back, taking deep breaths.

Her chest lifting and lowering.

My lips crested over her bra and up to her supple cleavage.

“Relax, love,” I whispered. “Relax...”

My hands touched her sides for a moment.

Then my right hand quickly moved to unsnap her bra.

Just like the way my left hand moved down to slide into the front of her pants.

There was no more wasting time here.

Her bra fell forward, pushed by her heavy breasts.

It eased down her arms and fell to the floor.

My mouth moved down to her bare chest now.

As I took her left breast into my mouth, suckling hard, force and command my only love language, Hazel groaned loudly and grabbed at the back of my head. Digging at me. Pulling my hair, but not pulling me away. Not even close.

Still using just my left hand, I moved my hand side to side, from hip to hip, inching her pants and panties down.

The two of us moved down to my bed again.

I was careful not to put too much of my weight onto Hazel’s pregnant stomach.

This certainly was different for me too.

A new experience for me.

I moved to her right, balancing on my left elbow.

I reached down and helped Hazel take her pants and panties completely off.

Then my fingers rested between her legs.

Her warmth and wetness greedily welcoming me as her hips drove down and rocked.

Sliding herself against my touch without me making a move.

Her eyes then met mine and that wild fire of hers burned once again.

That same look as the night of our arranged date.

At least this time I couldn't get her pregnant.

My fingertips curled against her clit.

She turned a little and thrust at me, groaning.

She shut her eyes and bit at my sheets on the bed.

“Are you okay, love?” I asked.

“Just don't fucking stop,” she whimpered. “And don't make a big deal of this. I'm so fucking close already, Atlas. So... close...”

She bit at the sheets again.

I lowered my lips down to her left shoulder.

My fingers dug and twisted.

Hazel let out a cry of pleasure.

She smiled as she bit at the sheets on my bed.

She drove her hips harder against me.

Wanting more.

I had never experienced this before...

Her breasts pressing against me.

Her pregnant stomach pressing against me.



A wave of desire hitting me so hard.

The moment felt tender yet it felt really hot too.

Hazel reached with her left hand and grabbed for my hair.

Then my face.

Scratching down to my shoulder.

My fingers danced against her clit with more speed.

“Right there!” Hazel called out.

She moved even closer to me, trading my sheets for my chest as something to bite at.

She bit hard. Really damn hard.

A noise escaped from her throat that made my eyes go wide.

She came with beautiful force.

Driving herself against me hard, rocking with speed, knowing exactly what she wanted me to do to her.

It was a sudden rush.

A massive wave of pleasure that came and went all in a few seconds.

Hazel’s entire body relaxed all at once.

A warm rush between her legs soaked my fingertips.

She looked into my eyes and her face turned bright red.

“No way, love,” I whispered. “Own this moment.”

“Don’t make it weird, Atlas,” she said, still trying to catch her breath. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why the fuck are you still wearing jeans? Why are you not inside me?”

I curled my lip.

If I had set a timer, it would have been only a handful of seconds before I had my jeans off and I was happily nestled between Hazel’s legs.

I had to position myself a certain way.

It was different.

Very different.

Not a bad different either.

A great different.

I felt... powerful...

As I eased myself into her, she was swollen.

Gently throbbing.

She grabbed for the sheets and her eyes opened wide.

Her back began to arch.

I smiled.

*She was coming again.*



SHE ROLLED to the edge of the bed, taking the covers with her.

I touched her left hip.

The two of us hesitated in that moment.

*Fuck hesitation.*

I pulled her closer to me.

My hand moved over her stomach.

*Protection. Powerful.*

My heart thumped damn hard.

Well beyond the enjoyment of sex and the way Hazel's body clenched against me as I came...

"Atlas," Hazel whispered.

"Shh," I said. "I'm not moving."

She moved her left foot back a little, hooking it over my left knee.

My left hand moved up her body, exploring her breasts.

Gently touching them, one at a time.

Then I moved my hand back down.

Back to her stomach.

Then to her hip.

I held there. Tight. Firm.

*You're safe here. Safe with me. Just sleep, love. Just... fall asleep...*

Hazel put a hand to mine.

If she told me to leave, I would.

If she told me to fuck her again, I would.

"Atlas," she said. "This changes nothing between us."

I gritted my teeth.

I didn't respond.

She could protect herself from me all she wanted.

*I told myself maybe I should start to protect myself from her.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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HAZEL



HANNAH POURED water into a wineglass for me.

“Oh, I better not have too much,” I said.

“Worried about getting *wasted*?”

“No. I’ll be up all night going pee.” I touched my stomach. “You can’t imagine how much you have to pee when you’re pregnant. It’s like the baby just sits on your bladder and presses on it all day and night. I can look at a bottle of water and have to go pee.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to cut you off after this glass of water,” Hannah said. She sat down across from me and lifted her wineglass. Full of real wine. “Now, back to the sex stuff.”

“You can’t let this go?”

“You’re banging a hockey player. I can’t let this go.”

“I’m not banging anyone. It was a month ago.”

“Another month? What is this? Is this some kind of denial sex thing?”

“No. It’s just what happened. I’m protecting myself and my unborn baby. I have to decide what I want to do with this house. With my career. I have a lot going on.”

“And you etch out one night a month to get wild with the father of your unborn baby?”

“Maybe that’s what works for me,” I said. “Okay?”

“I just think it’s crazy. Nobody is saying you two need to rush out and get married.”

“Hannah.”

“Okay. Fine. I’ll let it go. I just feel bad for your vagina right now. Something so good and you’re not taking advantage of it.”

“Hey, I did something different,” I said. “I have my checkup appointment tomorrow. I already texted him about it.”

“Oh, wow. You’re *so* in love now.”

“Yeah, right,” I said. “I’ll be honest. I kind of screwed up last time. I was in the waiting room and I texted him and it became awkward.”

“He showed up though. He moved quick to get to that appointment.”

“And now this time he can move slowly.”

“Any plans after the appointment?” Hannah asked. She wiggled her eyebrows. “You know what I mean?”

“No,” I said. I touched my stomach. “The baby was just moving.”

“That’s because you’re talking about his or her father.”

“Can you just for a second realize what is happening here? Atlas made it clear he’s not going to be around forever. He

goes from team to team. That's his thing. He signs one year contracts. He's okay with it. He makes his money and moves on."

"Right," Hannah said. "And you're bound to this town?"

"Oh, so I'm supposed to uproot my life and follow him around the country? Begging him to be a father?"

"Nobody said that, Hazel. I'm just... do you want to live here? In this house? I know it's hard to think about, but you can sell this place and have some money to set yourself up. You can go anywhere, do anything..."

"What about you?" I asked. "I don't want to miss you."

"Yeah that part is a bitch. You need me in your life. And I need to be near my niece or nephew at all times."

I smiled. "So I'm screwed."

"You got screwed," Hannah said, pointing to my pregnant stomach.

I rolled my eyes and fake laughed.

I took a sip of my water from the wineglass.

*Great - now I had to pee.*



ATLAS SHOWED up while I sat in the waiting room.

The gigantic, towering man catching the attention of everyone there.

The receptionists behind the desk all stood up.

Two looking a little worried.

The other three instantly dreamy. Tilting their heads to the side, a second away from drooling.

There were three other women waiting.

All of them alone.

All three pregnant.

Each woman touched their pregnant bellies and stared at Atlas.

I never saw so many horny women in my entire life.

I wished I had a spray bottle of water to go one by one and calm them down with a spray to the face.

Atlas walked right toward me.

I stared up at him.

My lasting image of him was either him thrusting into me with perfect force as he came. Or maybe it was him holding me all night - *cuddling*. Or maybe it was the morning after when he made breakfast. Shirtless.

Hannah was right.

This whole *waiting a month* thing felt stupid.

“Hey, love,” he said.

“Atlas,” I said.

I noticed something about his left eye.

“Are those stitches, Atlas?”

“Yes, they are,” he said.

“What... how?”

“Hockey,” he said. “I assume this means you don’t watch the games. We’re on a four game winning streak. Longest in



five years. I had a little dust up two nights ago.”

“What does that mean?”

“A fight, love. A good one too. Biggest guy in the league. Six-nine, long reach.”

“Looks like he got you pretty good.”

“It was the ice that did it,” Atlas grinned. “I clocked him in his jaw so hard he went down and pulled me with him. I was at a bad angle and hit my face off the ice. The stitches were easy to get. But they kept me out just in case of a concussion. Which I don’t have. I’m fine.”

“Yeah, you look it,” I said.

Before he had a chance to say anything else, the door opened to the actual exam rooms.

A nurse stepped out and looked at Atlas.

Her eyes grew wide.

Then she looked at me.

“Uh, Hazel?”

“That’s me,” I said.

I put my hand out and Atlas helped me up.

I didn’t exactly need the help, but if I had to admit it, the last week or so I began to feel some new things when it came to my body. Every day it seemed my stomach got bigger. Then came the boobs part of it all. They were bigger, for sure. Thicker and fuller. And they hurt a lot. It came in gentle waves and sometimes it came in punching waves. I had to buy new bras too. A whole cup size bigger.

*Wonder if you bet on that with your asshole hockey buddies, Atlas.*

My lower back hurt.

My middle back hurt.

My upper back hurt.

So, yeah, pregnancy was just rolling right along.

I held hands with Atlas all the way to the ultrasound room.

When I realized we were actually holding hands, I pulled away.

I had to get on the scale, which meant giving Atlas evil eyes, warning him to get out of sight.

Of course I weighed more than I did last time.

I was supposed to.

Even still, as a woman, seeing the number going up made me cringe.

Once in the ultrasound room, I climbed up on the table, Atlas at my side, ready to help if I asked.

I didn't ask.

He stood there.

We waited in silence.

This all seemed so fitting.

My dream pregnancy, right?

Pregnant by a guy on a first date that wasn't supposed to be a date.

Then him offending me by what he said.

Then me offending him by what I said.

Months went by...

“Did I offend you?” I blurted out. “With what I said last time?”

Atlas looked down at me.

The door opened.

Lynne - the same ultrasound person as before - walked into the room.

She pointed at Atlas. “You’re here on time.”

“Got a much earlier text,” Atlas said.

“Wasn’t sure what you wanted,” I said.

“Okay, let’s get right to the fun stuff,” Lynne said.

I could tell she was nervous.

The tension in the room began to build.

“Now this is my favorite one,” she said. “You’ll get to see hands and feet. Maybe some little toes and fingers. And...” Lynne grabbed the jelly as I lifted my shirt up. “... I can tell if it’s a boy or girl.”

For the next little bit, Lynne did all the talking.

First off, seeing the baby made me smile.

Hearing the heartbeat made me feel relieved.

A normal heartbeat. A strong heartbeat.

Then came the images of the baby.

*Of our baby.*

The big head. The arms and legs. We could even see the bones.

Hands and fingers.

Feet and toes.

I held myself together pretty good until I saw the feet and toes.

That's what did me in and made me tear up.

Without pointing it out at all, Atlas reached for a tissue and handed it to me.

I looked at him and even though he wasn't crying, the smile on his face told me exactly how he felt.

"Now comes the million-dollar question," Lynne said. "Do you want to know the sex of the baby?"

She looked at me with a big smile.

Without hesitation, Atlas said, "Yes."

A split second later, I said, "No."

Then Atlas and I looked at each other.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"Seriously, what? Why not let it be a surprise?"

"Because this whole thing isn't a surprise enough?"

"What the hell?" I snapped. "You really want to say that right now? While we're out in public. Making me sound like some kind of whore?"

"Who called you a whore?"

"That's right. I'm just some cliché woman who met a guy like you and opened my legs and let you in, then got pregnant. Right? Is that what you think of me?"

"I just want to know if I'm having a son or a daughter."

"Why? Does it matter to you? Will you love him or her differently?"

“I never would. Just thought we could have a lighthearted moment here, Hazel. All things considered.”

“Considered? What?”

“We haven’t talked in a month,” Atlas said. “Seems like we meet up every month and have amazing sex and then don’t talk again.”

“Isn’t that what guys like you enjoy?”

“Normally, yes. But you’re pregnant with my son or daughter. I’d like to see you more than once a month.”

“You can call. You can text.”

“Can I though? I have no idea what to expect with you. No offense, but if these are hormones talking, then maybe you should see a doctor about it.”

I sat up, pushing Lynne’s hand away.

Squishing the ultrasound jelly all over my body and shirt.

“What did you just say?” I snapped.

“Okay then,” Lynne said. “Um... wow. I’m still in the room.”

I looked at Lynne and my cheeks burned hot.

“I’m so sorry about this,” I whispered.

“Hey, there’s no right or wrong way to do this thing,” Lynne said. “Let’s just stick to the good news. The baby is very healthy. Everything looks good to me. I’m going to send these images over to the doctor and that’s really about it. As far as the other thing... I have no idea. I’ll put it in an envelope. Believe it or not, this happens all the time. One person wants to know, one person doesn’t. It’s a big moment. So I’ll print the ultrasound picture and write it down. Stick it

in an envelope. If you decide to change your mind, you'll know. If you decide to wait, then just wait.”

I watched as Lynne finished up.

Her hands sort of shaking.

I could sense all she wanted to do was get out of the room. Away from Atlas and me.

And I knew for sure this was going to be the story of the day around the break room at the office.

*The crazy hormonal pregnant woman and her super big hot hockey player fling that got her pregnant... arguing over everything and nothing.*

I looked up at Atlas again.

He stared down at me.

And in spite of everything that just happened...

*I couldn't help but secretly want him to just lean down and kiss me.*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### ATLAS



I STOOD in the receptionist area next to Hazel as she made her next appointment.

In my right hand I held the envelope that told me - *told us* - if we were having a boy or a girl.

Behind the counter, two women stared at me.

I wasn't sure why they stared.

Did they think I was some big, mean, abusive guy with Hazel?

Or did they recognize me from hockey?

Maybe it was the stitches.

*Fucking stitches.*

I hated the idea of getting stitches.

I argued against getting them as much as I could.

In the end, I needed the stitches and I got them.

One of the women stared intently.

Way too intently.

Hazel took notice.

Then the hormones kicked in.

“Do you need something?” she called out to the woman. “Huh? Are you just staring for fun or what? Do you want to give him your number? You can do that. He’s single. Be careful though, he’s got a tendency to get women pregnant on the first date.”

Hazel’s face turned red.

But not mine.

I just shrugged my shoulders.

The woman staring... well, her face turned the same shade of red as Hazel’s.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “It might sound weird, but my boyfriend is a huge fan. Of you, Atlas. He loves the guys who fight. He was really excited when you got signed here. He’s actually been waiting for the team to get your jersey available online.”

“I am so sorry about what I just said,” Hazel said.

She turned and moved as fast as she could to leave.

“Hey, tell your boyfriend I said thanks,” I said to the woman. “I can’t answer any questions about jerseys.”

I didn’t know what else to say.

I wasn’t used to actual fans.

Or the fact that the woman I got pregnant had just stormed off.

I caught up with Hazel out in the hallway.



Sitting on a bench, her face buried in her hands.

I sat down next to her.

I touched her back.

She threw her elbow at me but I kept touching her back.

My fingers working their way up and down. Then stopping at her lower back.

Digging into muscle that needed a break.

She turned her head and looked at me.

“Just give this one, love,” I said.

“You’re going to have to give that woman a jersey now,” Hazel said. “That’s the only way to make this right.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, Hazel. If you allow me to come back here.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“We seem to be good at making a spectacle of our situation when we’re there.”

“That’s because all we do is meet up, have sex, not talk for a while, and then go get an ultrasound of our baby.”

“If that’s what works for you.”

Hazel stood up and walked toward the door.

I followed.

Outside, she paused again.

This time she looked up, letting the warm sun climb across her face.

From my angle, I’d never seen a woman’s shape look so beautiful before in my life.

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to tell her that or not.

I kept it to myself, locking it away in my memory.

The shape of Hazel.

Yes, that image included her obviously larger breasts. The curve of her ass. Her legs. But it also included her belly. Far bigger than the last time I saw her.

“Do you have that envelope, Atlas?”

“In my back pocket.”

“You should open it.”

“Right now?”

“Whenever you want,” Hazel said as she looked at me. “You wanted to know. You should know. It's not fair of me to say you can't know something like that. The baby is yours too. All I ask is not to ruin it for me.”

“Hazel, I want to do it together,” I said. “I want us to have that moment together. Doing that alone... no. I'm not going to open the envelope. We can wait until the baby is born. Have that moment then together.”

“Is this you being genuinely nice? Or are you placating me because I just screamed at a woman in a jealous fit?”

“Fifty-fifty,” I grinned.

“But look at us, Atlas. We argue over everything.”

“That's what people do when they're opposites.”

“I thought opposites attracted.”

“We're attracted to each other,” I said. I pointed to her pregnant stomach. “Sometimes it works and sometimes it

doesn't. If you failed to forget, love, we skipped a whole bunch of steps in a normal relationship."

"Now we're in a relationship?"

"We're going to be parents."

"That's it? We're just parents?"

"You tell me."

"It's up to me to decide, huh? Like I don't have enough going on in my life?"

Hazel pointed to her stomach and shook her head.

"Are you going to take everything I say and twist it around?" I asked.

"Are you going to say horrible mean things?"

"Hazel..."

"Just forget it," she said. "Thank you for being here, Atlas. I will text you the next appointment. I'll make sure you're included, okay? And I meant what I said about the envelope. You should open it if you want to know."

Hazel walked to her car.

I stood there almost shocked.

Really trying to figure this woman out.

Definitely scared. Completely defensive.

Doing anything to give me the opportunity to walk away and stay away and say that I at least showed up and tried.

I'd never abandon my child though.

Hazel got into her car and I heard an odd clicking noise and then nothing.

Panic swept across her face.

She looked down and I assumed she was turning the key again.

Nothing happened.

Her hands gripped the top of the steering wheel.

She placed her head to her hands, but only for a second.

She lifted her head and it was like she became someone else.

She began to smack and punch the steering wheel.

Thrashing her fists all over the inside of the car.

Screaming, ready to cry for sure.

Then she looked forward, right at me, realizing I still stood there, watching.

She tried to start her car again and nothing happened.

As soon as I saw tears streaming down her cheeks, I approached her car.

She opened the door and climbed out.

“It’s fine,” she called out to me. “I can take care of this. I can fix this.”

“You have extensive training as a mechanic, Hazel?”

She walked by me with her middle left finger in the air.

She stood at the hood of the car.

“You don’t even know how to pop the hood, do you?” I asked.

“I know how to pop the fucking hood!” Hazel yelled. “I’ll pop the hood and then rip the hood off and throw it at you!”

I shut the car door and moved closer to Hazel.

She tried to turn away from me but I wrapped my right arm around her and pulled her toward me.

Her entire body tensed up for a moment.

Then she turned and collapsed into me.

Letting it all out.

My right hand touched the back of her head, my fingers stroking her hair.

After a few seconds, she stepped back.

She put her hands to my chest. "I'm okay. I'll deal with this. I can handle this on my own."

"You don't have to handle things on your own."

"I don't need to be saved by you, Atlas."

"You can still let me help you out," I said. "I'll call someone to come get your car and they'll fix it."

"That simple?"

"Yeah. That simple. It's probably the starter or something random. So I'm going to take you back to my place."

"Why?"

"I don't want you alone without a vehicle."

"I can call Hannah," Hazel said.

"Is that what you want to do, love?"

Hazel looked up at me.

She blinked a few times.

She shook her head.

Then she finally admitted something truthful.

*“I’d rather go home with you, Atlas.”*



IT WAS VERY rare I called Tucker and demanded my agent do something not hockey related for me.

And after what he had done with the ownership of the *Sola Empire* and roping me into that whole *Win a Date With a Hockey Player* thing, he owed me one.

All I had to do was tell him where Hazel’s car waited and that was it.

He was going to take care of the rest of it.

I found Hazel standing at one of the windows in the living room, hugging herself, looking out to the ocean.

I hadn’t really had a chance to take in the view yet.

I wasn’t sure if I even cared to do so.

Everything in my life had always been temporary.

*Until I got Hazel pregnant.*

I stepped up behind her and touched her shoulders.

“Tucker is taking care of it,” I whispered. “Nothing to worry about. I know that’s easier said than done. I know you hate the idea of me showing up and helping you. I know you think somewhere in your head and heart that I’m the kind of guy who will think I’m a hero and use that against you. That’s not who I am, Hazel. I think we have to live in a sense of reality here, love. Of who we are. At what we’re doing. And just because it’s not all figured out doesn’t mean it won’t work. I also want you to know I’m not going to abandon you. Or our baby.”

“I’m not so sure that’s what you meant before...”

“I think everyone is entitled to say something stupid, Hazel. And do something stupid. It’s just human nature.”

“Something stupid...” She slowly turned around to face me. Her pregnant belly pushing up against me. “Doesn’t this feel like something stupid? Us standing here like this?”

“Not if nothing happens,” I smirked.

“Like that’s even possible...”

Hazel jumped up to her toes as I lowered my mouth down to hers.

She could hate it all she wanted, but we had a connection.

And it wasn’t just the pregnancy either.

The connection we had led to Hazel getting pregnant.

It kept us meeting up like this.

My lips touching hers.

Our tongues greeting one another.

Her hands grabbing at my shirt, pulling me closer.

My hands grabbing at her hips, pulling her closer.

That wild connection. That instant connection.

*Then again, we just had some time to kill while we waited for her car to get towed and fixed.*

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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HAZEL



*HOW CAN I resist this man?*

*In one way he's my only option for true pleasure. Yet he's the best I've ever had.*

*I want him in a way that scares the hell out of me.*

*I want him in a way that makes me want to sell everything I own and follow him to the next city he plays for... and then the next...*

*But we're going to have to talk and settle somewhere.*

*Our son or daughter needs a home.*

*Our son or daughter needs a stable place to live.*

I shut my eyes and put my head back, letting out a groan in the hope of scrambling all those thoughts.

They didn't matter right now.

What mattered was the feel of Atlas's lips sliding down the left side of my neck.



Slightly tickling me, but I ignored it.

His tongue flicked against my skin.

Then he kissed me. *Hard.*

I shivered, wondering if he was going to leave a mark for the world to see.

I really didn't care.

My fingers had curled around his shirt, inching it up little by little.

My eyes craved to see his muscular body.

The man built like a monster.

I had to see it all.

I had to touch it all.

While still kissing my neck, Atlas grabbed the bottom of his shirt and ripped it up, over his head. He did it in a way where I didn't even feel the split second his mouth moved away from my neck.

That sent fresh chills down my spine.

His nose pressed against my throat as he moved to the other side of my neck.

His hands moved up my shirt, along my sides.

Leaving invisible lines against curves that I never had before.

I lifted my arms into the air.

Atlas took my shirt off.

As I lowered my arms down, his fingers were already twisting the clasp of my bra.

I turned my head and looked out the window.

We weren't in the heart of a big city on the first floor.

There wasn't an audience behind us watching.

But I still felt so exposed.

Atlas's thumbs grazed my ultra-tender nipples at the same time.

I whimpered, groaned and set all my attention on him and the way he touched me.

His big hands cupped under my newly heavier breasts.

He lifted them and I sucked in a breath.

A sense of relief and pleasure soared throughout my body.

His mouth moved down to my chest.

I caught myself groaning again, this time with anticipation of the attention my body so greatly needed.

I became mad at myself when I felt Atlas's tongue swirl around my left nipple.

*Why do we wait for this? Why is it once a month? Why are we playing these dumb games?*

He took my breast into his mouth and suckled with force.

Warmth crept down my body, between my legs.

Every muscle in my body felt relaxed.

I let out a quiet groan as my knees began to bend a little.

Atlas pulled his mouth away from my breast with an echoing wet kiss sound.

Then he moved to the other one.

That kiss was way too quick for me...

His lips touched below my breasts.

His hands came together at my hips, suddenly guiding my pants down my legs, inching down until he was on one knee.

Nuzzling his nose to my pregnant stomach.

Kissing softly just above my belly button.

I touched his shoulders. "Atlas..."

He looked up at me. "I have to taste you, love. You're going to come on my tongue. Do you understand me? Let it all go, Hazel. I'm going to write you a dirty letter with the tip of my tongue to your clit. Are you ready for that?"

My face burned red hot.

I managed to nod.

Atlas helped me step out of my shoes and my pants.

When it came to my panties, he tore them.

He literally tore them off my body.

Hearing them rip made my jaw drop.

Seeing my panties on the floor, tattered... *oh, fuck...*

Atlas's hands touched the backs of my legs and moved up to my ass.

His strong fingers kneaded into forgiving flesh.

His lips kissed my left hip bone.

I almost burst out laughing because it tickled.

But then the tip of his tongue flickered between my legs.

I clawed at his shoulders, harder.

"Oh, Atlas," I yelled.

I didn't care.

His tongue moved in such a way...

He thrust his tongue forward, curling it just a little. Pulling back, gliding himself against my soft, wet folds. Following my body to my clit. That's when he growled from the depths of his throat.

The vibration of his growl pulsed through his tongue and against my clit.

I gasped for a breath and wanted to scream his name, but I'd lost my breath.

Atlas then did as promised.

He wrote a dirty story with the tip of his tongue against my clit.

I had no idea what the story said, but I knew how it felt.

I melted against his mouth, bending my knees, rocking my hips forward and back.

His hands moved up to my lower back, holding me, making sure I had balance.

My toes curled as the pleasure grew like the waves behind me, crashing to the shore.

At some point I moved my hands from his shoulders to his hair.

Clawing, digging, twisting, pulling him closer between my legs.

Giving him everything.

Trusting him with my body.

He wanted me to come on his tongue.

*So that's what I did.*



WE ENDED up in his bedroom.

I sat on the edge of the bed.

In a very vulnerable position too.

The whole sitting up thing wasn't all that enjoyable at the moment for me.

But there I was, waiting for Atlas to open his jeans.

When he did, I reached for his body.

Fingertips sliding down the rock hard muscle of his lower stomach, digging into his jeans for what I really needed next.

I wrestled his thick cock free, stroking him with both hands.

Sucking in a breath and sighing as I studied him.

"Oh, fuck, Hazel," he whispered. "I love when you touch me like this."

"What about this, Atlas?" I purred as I inched closer to him.

I opened my mouth and eased over the full tip of his cock.

Taking him into my mouth.

Listening to him hiss made me shiver again.

I slid my hands down his cock and then placed my hands flat to his stomach.

My tongue was pinned down to the bottom of my mouth. He left no room in my mouth with his amazing size.

I closed my eyes and groaned as I eased my lips down. Allowing more of him into my mouth. Offering a tight sheath and groans that were more for me than him. When I pulled back, I did it slowly. I popped my lips off his body and took a deep breath as I looked up at him.

He stared down at me with eyes that I'd never seen before in a man.

My right hand moved to the heavy root of his cock.

I curled my fingers and I gently pumped him.

My mouth returned to his engorged tip.

I grazed my teeth over the well-defined ridge at the head of his cock.

Enough to make him grunt and hiss.

My teeth moved along his steel-like length.

I tested myself using him.

How far could I go?

My body aching for more of everything Atlas had to offer.

I heard him grunt again and he whispered something.

*Oh. Fuck.*

*She's going to fucking make me come too quick.*

Atlas pushed at my shoulders and stepped back.

Taking himself from me.

I chased him for a second, not wanting to give him up.

But I did, after another loud, wet kissing sound.

Then I leaned back on the bed.

Taking deep breaths, licking my lips.

Atlas stepped forward.

His hands grabbed the backs of my legs with force and he pulled me to the edge of the bed.

He bent his legs and made a motion with the lower half of his body that instantly put me on the edge of another orgasm.

Watching his stomach muscles ripple and twist at the exact moment I felt his slick cock pressing against my body...

I placed my right hand over my mouth.

My eyes grew wide.

Today there was no gentle forgiveness with Atlas.

He took what he wanted and I gave what I needed.

He thrust with force, burying himself.

Leaving my hips bucking up.

He leaned forward, his hands sliding up the bed.

Hovering over me.

Taking deep breaths.

Grunting. Thrusting.

Never once blinking.

I never blinked either.

*This... was the hottest sex of my entire life...*



AT SOME POINT I ended up on top of him.

His hands guiding me.

Lifting and lowering me.

For a few seconds I felt way too vulnerable to him.

The shape of my body and the angle...

Atlas didn't at all.

He took me. He had me.

I loved every second of it.

I managed to somehow climax one more time, meeting his release.

That thick, throbbing sensation deep inside my body.

My body clenching to his as his body released into mine.

Time stood still.

I had no idea how long I was actually on top of him.

My hips moving slower and slower with each passing second.

Until I finally managed one more deep breath and I lowered myself down to him.

Collapsing onto his chest.

Turning my body a little.

Feeling him exit between my legs.

Me biting at his shoulder at the intense rush of his exit.

His strong arms holding me tight.

My head on his chest.

Taking more deep breaths.

Feeling calm, relaxed, and pleased.

The smell of his skin.

The smell of sex lingering in the air.



A very tender and dangerous moment for two people like us.

Because that's when the baby started to move.

I felt it.

I knew he felt it.

Without saying a word, Atlas placed his right hand to my stomach.

I shut my eyes and begged myself not to think it.

But I did think it.

*This was the kind of moment where I could see myself falling in love with Atlas.*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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### ATLAS



I COULDN'T BELIEVE we slept the way we did.

Barely moving. Skipping dinner.

Anytime Hazel moved it was to check and make sure I was still in bed with her.

My response to that was the same.

A kiss.

Kiss after kiss.

Little naps after little naps.

Hours of sleep after hours of sleep.

When we finally woke up, we were facing each other.

This beautiful, pregnant woman in my bed.

My right hand touching her swollen belly.

My eyes unable to not look at her wonderful, full breasts.

She knew I was looking and I didn't care one bit.

“Are you going to say good morning to me or just eye hump me?” Hazel asked.

“The eye humping thing is my favorite,” I said.

She rolled to her back.

For a second I thought she was being frisky but she pulled the covers up to her chin.

I watched as she swallowed hard.

“Want me to cook us some breakfast?” I asked. “I’ll skip putting on a shirt.”

Hazel smiled for a second. “Can you just take me home?”

“Right now?”

“Yes, Atlas. Right now.”

“Everything okay, love?” I asked.

“Atlas. Just do what I say. Or I’ll call Hannah. Or I’ll call someone else.”

Her voice crackled a little when she talked.

Something was definitely *off* about her.

And knowing Hazel the way I did - even if it wasn’t that much - I knew this was my cue to get my clothes and give her a little space.

I moved out of my bed and grabbed my stuff off the floor.

When I got to the door, she called my name.

I looked back.

She sat up a little, holding the covers to her chest.

Her pregnant stomach pushing against the covers.

She looked ready to cry.

“Hazel,” I said. “You look beautiful right now. You always look beautiful. But right now. In bed. In the morning. The sheets against your body. I just want you to know that. And you don’t have to say anything else. I’ll be waiting, love. I’ll take you home.”

I exited my bedroom, took a few steps and froze in place.

I ran a hand through my messy, *good-morning* hair.

I looked back at my bedroom door.

“Wait a second,” I whispered.

*Was I just romantic?*



I DROVE HAZEL HOME.

We were mostly silent.

Other than the occasional random comment or her telling me where to turn for a shortcut.

I had the most intense urge to reach over and hold her hand.

Something about our day and night together had her bothered.

I wasn’t the kind of guy who felt shy when it came to uncomfortable conversation.

I waited until I was pulling up to Hazel’s house.

“Do you think we’re not going to talk for a month?” I asked.

“What?”

“There’s something going on here, love. What is it? Is it because we argued? Because we ended up in bed? Because the sex was hot? What is it? Are you rushing home because of... what, Hazel?”

“I just want to be home,” she said. “Why would I worry about us, Atlas? You made your stance clear.”

“I said one thing, one time.”

“Tell me that’s not the truth.”

“I don’t know what the truth is right now, love. I know that you’re pregnant with my child. And I told you I will not abandon you or my child.”

“Okay. Then we have nothing to worry about.”

She opened the passenger door.

I reached for her. “Hey. What is it, love? You didn’t want to have morning sex? You didn’t want to spend the day with me? Tell me something.”

Hazel took a deep breath. “You know, I could go for some breakfast.”

“Name the place.”

“Right here.”

“Here,” I said. “Your place.”

“Yeah.”

“So I drove you all the way home for me to come inside and cook you breakfast? Do you really think you’re that good in bed, Hazel?”

“That’s not even the entire thing.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Hazel slowly grinned. “You’re going to go inside and cook me breakfast. *Shirtless.*”

She wiggled and slid her way out of my reach.

She walked to the house while I sat behind the wheel of my truck.

I never had a woman even think about talking to me the way Hazel did.

And if a woman ever did?

*I’ll start this fucking truck right back up and back out of here.*

*I’ll fucking peel out, leaving a cloud of dust.*

*I’m the fucking hockey player here. I’m the one with the seven-figure paycheck.*

*I’m the one...*

I climbed out of my truck and realized the truth.

Hazel was the one carrying my unborn baby.

Hazel was the one going through a hell of a lot more than I could ever imagine.

More than that - I actually wanted to be near her.

So I followed her into the house.

She called from upstairs down to me. “It’s not a mansion! I’m sure you can find the kitchen and everything else! Don’t leave a pregnant woman hungry!”

I found the kitchen in the small but cozy house.

I thought about everything Hazel had told me. About her grandmother.

This was her grandmother’s house.

I looked around.

Then I got to work.

Coffee was made.

I found eggs and bacon and got them working in separate pans.

I spotted the toaster on the counter and started making toast.

There was just one thing missing.

*My shirt.*

I actually smiled as I took my shirt off.

I waited for Hazel to show up.

When she did, she wore different clothes and her hair was cleaned and fixed up.

*She made me take her home so she could get changed and fix her hair?*

Her eyes lit up when she saw me shirtless.

Then her face fell.

She looked ready to cry.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She ran toward me.

Then past me.

“You used her favorite pan,” she whispered. “What the fuck, Atlas?”

“What did I do now?” I asked.

“This pan,” she said. She pointed. “This was Gram’s favorite pan. She made everything in this pan. Breakfast,

lunch, dinner. Snacks. She made the best grilled cheese in the world. Nobody touched this pan but her.”

Hazel looked at me, ready to cry.

I moved closer to her. “I’m sorry, love. I didn’t know.”

“She…”

Hazel closed her eyes.

I reached for her and pulled her toward me.

I hugged her.

“I sound like a psycho right now.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.” She backed away from me, wiped the corners of her eyes, then smiled. “And you’re putting up with it.”

“Hazel, you mentioned your grandmother the night we went out. You lost someone you loved. You’re living in her house. That’s a lot.”

“And I’m crying over a frying pan.”

“Yeah. You kind of are.”

I smiled back at her.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fuck.”

“If it means anything, she took good care of the pan. There’s a certain way to clean those and I bet everything is going to taste amazing.”

“Atlas, just stop. It’s okay. Let’s just eat, okay?”

We ended up at the dining room table.

I wasn’t too sure where to sit.



I feared picking the wrong seat would have Hazel wanting to throw me through a window.

We ended up sitting next to each other.

“Oh, this is unfair,” she whispered. “This is so good. How can you be you and have surprises like this?”

“What? That I can cook a good breakfast? Maybe it’s because I’m used to cooking breakfasts. Maybe that’s my parting gift after a fun night.”

“That’s disgusting,” Hazel said. “I’m over here thinking this is maybe romantic. But this is just what you do for women you fuck.”

“To be fair, love, I did fuck you yesterday.”

Hazel cringed. “I don’t know what it is about you, Atlas. I want to cringe. I want to punch you. But I want to... I want to kiss you.”

“Then kiss me,” I said.

We leaned toward each other and shared a kiss.

Her lips and tongue tasted like sweet grape jelly.

She blushed when we kissed, which I started to appreciate.

I liked it.

Her reaction to me.

I refused to think about my reaction to her.

*Driving her home. Cooking her breakfast. Taking off my shirt. Caring about her. Asking questions. Wanting to know more.*

“For the record, Gram would have really liked you,” Hazel said.

“You sure about that?”

“Oh, big time. Your attitude. Your size. She would have cuddled up against you and flirted in a way that would make you uncomfortable.”

“She has a type?”

“Not sure if she had a type or not, but you? Yeah. She would have wanted you.”

“Wow.”

Hazel shrugged her shoulders. “That was Gram. No filter. No worry. I really miss her.”

“I bet you do. I bet you wish she was here more than ever with you being pregnant.”

“Yeah. It’s hard to think about.”

“Is that why you wanted to come home this morning? You really wanted to get out of my place.”

“Atlas...”

“I’m just asking. I just want to make sure you’re okay. If it’s something between us, okay then. If you’re not ready to spend too much time together, I get it. Just tell me.”

Hazel dropped her fork and looked at me. “I had gas. Okay?”

“What?”

“I had gas. Morning gas. I had to go to the bathroom really bad. Okay? I can’t hold things in like I used to because of the baby. So my stomach started to hurt. I needed to let out a fart and I didn’t want to do it in your bed.”

“All of this over a fart?” I asked.

Hazel jumped up.

I touched her arm. “Don’t run.”

“I’m not running. I’m going to casually walk away.”

“Do you have to fart again, Hazel?” I asked.

Her face turned bright red. “*I hate you so much, Atlas.*”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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HAZEL



"YOU KNOW, WOMEN DO FART, RIGHT?"

I looked at Hannah and shook my head. "You're missing the point."

"I think I get the point. You were too scared to pass gas in front of the guy you had no problem opening your legs for. You really made him drive you all the way home just to hurry upstairs and let out a *toot*?"

"This wasn't a *toot*, Hannah," I said. "Pregnancy changes everything."

"Well, I can't say anything to that. But it's kind of sweet. In a weird way. You two have a moment now."

"Oh, yeah, a great moment. Atlas is shirtless. Looking sexy. He cooked breakfast for me. And what did I do? First off, I freaked out over the pan he used."

Hannah cringed. "He used Gram's good pan?"

I nodded.

“You didn’t kill him?”

“No,” I said. “I explained what the pan meant. He hugged me. The moment passed.”

“Hey, that’s good. See? He’s not that much of an asshole. And you ripped one in front of him and he didn’t run away.”

I sighed. “I didn’t mean to let one sneak out like that. I have gas. It has nowhere to go because of the baby.”

I pointed to my belly.

Yeah, it was bigger.

I felt like it doubled in size each night.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “You’re pregnant. You’re allowed to handle things any way you want. You have to do anything you need to. So guess what? You stood up and...”

“Go ahead. Say it.”

“You farted in front of the hottest guy you’ve ever met,” Hannah said.

She held it together for another second - *longer than I thought she would*.

Then she started to laugh.

“Oh, come on, Hannah,” I snapped. “You never had a *toot* in front of a guy?”

She waved her hands. “Okay, I’ve got one for you. Something I never told you before. This was a while ago. Years ago.” She wiped the corners of her eyes. “Do you remember Jake?”

“Surfer Jake,” I said. “He was beautiful.”

“You always asked why it didn’t work out. It’s because he insisted on some restaurant that drove my stomach nuts. I waited until he was asleep before going to the bathroom. I should have found a public bathroom. I didn’t. I did my business. I had it all planned out. Windows out. Use the toilet. Clean the toilet. Take a shower. Nothing would be known. Then, the toilet wouldn’t flush.”

Now I smiled.

“Yeah, go ahead and smile. The toilet refused to flush. Then it started to creep up. The water? I had to turn the water off to the toilet and I wrote Jake a note. I literally wrote *‘I’m sorry for the toilet. Last night was fun. Don’t ever call me again.’* Then I left.”

“Hannah.”

She put her left hand near my face. “I don’t want to hear it. It was years ago. But there’s my story. Okay?”

“Now, with that said, do you understand why I wanted to get home to my toilet?” I asked.

“Fine. I’ll give you that much.”

It felt like a good time to change the subject from *backdoor exit stories*.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the game with me?” I asked Hannah.

“I’m sure,” she said. “Atlas invited you. He’s picking you up. This is your thing. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Seems like things are... progressing forward?”

“Just because we peacefully slept together and I farted in front of him doesn’t mean we’re getting married.”

Hannah laughed again.

Atlas texted me.

*He was going to be picking me up in thirty minutes.*



I SAT in a special section of the arena and got escorted down to the locker room after the game.

In a surprising twist of events, the *Sola Empire* won the game.

It had actually been a really entertaining hockey game.

Little bits and pieces of the game made more sense to me.

I understood why they *dumped the puck behind the net*, as I heard so many times. And why they hit each other into the boards so hard. I even understood why Atlas got paid what he did.

He was so big and so mean on the ice.

He didn’t have a single fight in the game but he got on the nerves of the entire opposing team. They knew where he was on the ice at all times. Guys were afraid to skate too close to him. They didn’t want to get beside him.

At one point Atlas checked the star of the other team and all hell almost broke loose.

Three players went after Atlas.

He faced off with them all.

Not an ounce of fear in his eyes.

I couldn't believe how much it all turned me on.

Honestly, the thought of some guy fighting never did that before. Violence and all that brute-force macho stuff made me cringe.

Not with Atlas though.

He knew when to turn it up and when to turn it down a little.

Which is what won the game for the *Sola Empire*.

Atlas had been driving number twenty-four on the other team crazy.

To the point where the guy wanted to fight Atlas.

At that exact moment, Joe got his stick on the puck and passed it up to Rome.

Rome made a move toward the opposing goalie and quickly passed the puck to Sebastian.

I started cheering before Sebastian even took the shot.

I knew it was going to go into the net.

That became the game-winning goal.

Once in the locker room, I was showered with sweaty hockey players.

The smell of rubber and body odor mixing with cold ice and hot sweat... it was very unique.

"Hey, there's the real star of the night," Rome said when he saw me. "Look at you, girlfriend. You look amazing."

Rome was quickly joined by Sebastian.

"Congrats on that goal," I said to him.

"That was a thing of beauty," Sebastian said with a wink.



He had a clean-cut *good-boy* smile but his eyes were anything but.

Very dangerous to a woman.

In fact, they all were dangerous.

Big, sweaty, all of them sexy in their own way.

“How are you feeling?”

I turned my head and saw Jago next to me.

Still half in his goalie pads.

“I feel big,” I said to him. “How do you feel?”

“You look radiant,” he said to me. “Shapely. It works on you. Pregnancy, I mean. It fits you.”

“I think that’s enough out of you for now,” Henry said as he put an arm around Jago and turned him around.

I heard Henry whisper, *‘That’s Atlas’s woman. Are you fucking insane? He’ll kill you for saying that.’*

Joe and Atlas were the last to join this gathering around me.

“Hey, love,” Atlas said.

He inched down and brushed his lips to my left cheek.

His left hand touched my stomach.

My body tensed and tingled.

“Want me to kiss you too?” Joe offered.

“I think I’ll pass,” I said.

“We got tied up with interviews,” Joe said. “Apparently this was a defensive game.”

“Definitely was, brothers,” Sebastian said. “You two set the tone and held it all night.”

“Making us look good,” Rome said.

“The quiet heroes, huh?” Joe asked.

“That’s how I like it,” Atlas said.

“Tell me, Hazel, is he quiet in bed?” Rome asked.

That made me laugh.

Atlas didn’t seem impressed by the question at all.

“Hey, I need to shower and then I’m out of here,” Atlas whispered to me. “There’s tons of food if you’re hungry.”

“Do I look hungry?”

“You’re feeding my baby. I know you’re hungry.”

Atlas winked at me.

I wasn’t sure he’d ever winked at me before.

He left me standing there, blushing.

His little flirty moves were so sexy. Not to mention the fact that I couldn’t help myself but think about him in the shower. Totally naked. Rubbing soap on himself.

And, yeah, it was really hot to think about the other guys in the shower too.

A bunch of big, muscular hockey players all naked together...

I ended up looking down at my feet - or at least trying to.

I had to lean forward a little to see my feet now.

My brain was turning into Hannah’s.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Atlas.

*Naked.*

*On top of me.*

*Between my legs.*

*Just...*

I finally decided to make my way out of the locker room.

My stomach rumbled and the baby kicked.

*I needed to find that free food, right now.*



“CAN you reach that box for me, Atlas?”

He stood in the doorway to one of the spare bedrooms.

A burst of energy hit me on the ride home and I had the urge to clean out some more boxes of stuff.

I think a part of me was still embarrassed over the *fart situation*.

So I kept busy.

Atlas walked into the bedroom, to the closet.

“What are you looking for, love?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “There’s just a lot to clean out in this house.”

“Planning on moving?”

“I don’t know, Atlas. I do know that Gram collected a lot of stuff throughout the years. She didn’t really like to get rid of things. I have no clue what my next move is. But I’ve been slowly going through things. Now can you get me that box?”

Atlas reached up with ease and grabbed the box.

As he pulled it off the shelf, something else fell off it too.

A leather-bound folder.

Tied up neatly.

It hit the floor at my feet.

As Atlas took the box to the bed, I picked up the folder.

When I turned around, he had the lid to the box off and held a picture in his hands.

“Hey,” I called out. “That’s not yours.”

“Is this you?”

Sure enough it was a picture of me.

“Are you dressed as a horse?”

“That was for a school thing,” I said.

“Were you the horse’s ass?” Atlas asked.

“I think you take that title,” I said to him.

“Jeez, look at the braces on your teeth,” he said. “That’s a lot of metal.”

“Will you stop it?” I snapped.

I slapped the picture out of his hand.

“I think it’s great you have all these memories,” he said.

“What’s in that leather thing?”

“No clue,” I said. “Probably some paperwork. Go ahead. Open it. Since you’re in a snooping mood.”

Atlas grinned.

He twisted and turned the leather laces to open the folder.

I went through some of the pictures in the box.

When I heard Atlas whistle, I froze.

“What?” I asked.

He looked at me.

His eyes were wide.

“Atlas,” I said. “Are you... blushing?”

“Nope,” he said. “I’m a little flustered. And a little surprised.”

“Why? What is in that folder?”

He placed the folder on the bed.

There were pictures in the folder.

“Is that your grandmother?” Atlas asked.

I gasped when I saw the pictures.

*There were very naughty pictures of Gram staring back at me!*

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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### ATLAS



I HAD no idea if this was considered a date or just a normal night between two people having a baby together.

But finding some very provocative pictures of Hazel's grandmother in a secret leather folder...

"This is a new one for me," I said.

Hazel closed the folder and took a deep breath.

"It's not real," she said. "There's no way that's real." She looked at me. "Right?"

"Looks real to me. Your Gram was in a see-through top and no panties."

"Stop!" Hazel cried out. "I can't..."

"I don't see the problem here."

"What? You don't see a problem with this? How?"

"I know she's your grandmother, but she's also a woman," I said. "Plus, you never know what else you'll find when you

clean out this house. Right?”

Hazel moved her hands from the folder.

She turned her head and opened it.

“Go ahead, Atlas. You want to look that bad. Go for it.”

It wasn't that I wanted to look at *almost* naked pictures of Hazel's grandmother.

The entire thing was a little intriguing.

I moved the first picture out of the way.

There was Hazel's Gram again.

This time in a green thong with a picture taken from behind.

“Wow,” I said.

“What now?”

“There's... a lot here...”

I sifted through the pictures, chose a picture and picked it up.

I held it out.

“Hey, love, look at me,” I said.

Hazel looked at me. “What are you doing right now?”

“Comparing.”

“Comparing what?”

“Well, I would guess your Gram is maybe about sixty in this picture?”

“And?”

“I'm just getting a vibe. An idea of what you're going to look like in the future.”

Hazel gasped and took the picture out of my hand.

She looked at it and let out a crying yell.

“Gram! What were you thinking?”

“She was capturing herself,” I said.

“Stop it.”

“I’m not being perverted here. She wanted to take pictures of herself. For her own keeping. I mean, for all you know there are more in the closet. Or somewhere in the house. Of her... you know...”

“I don’t want to think about this right now,” Hazel said.

She returned her gaze to the folder.

She moved a few pictures around.

“There’s... a lot. Look at this. Different outfits. And poses. She’s... she’s got a rose tattoo on her right hip! I didn’t know that! Why didn’t I know that?”

“Maybe it was a temporary one,” I said.

“Maybe.” Hazel took a deep breath. “Okay. I mean, Gram looks good. Right?”

Hazel looked at me.

“Am I allowed to say what I want?”

“No. Just don’t say a word.”

I grinned. “You got it.”

“I don’t get why she... wait a second.” Hazel set her sights on me again. “What did you say?”

“When?”



“A minute ago. When you were holding up the picture of my topless grandmother.”

“Comparing you and her?” I smiled.

“Yeah. You said... about me in the future.”

“Yeah. I was getting an idea of what you’re going to look like. And I must say, I give it two thumbs up.”

“Stop. Wait. You’re thinking about when I’m in my sixties. You think we’re going to be together that long?”

“Oh, love,” I said. I reached out and touched her left cheek. “We’re having a baby together. We’re already together. Forever. That’s how this works.”

Hazel blinked a few times.

Then she swallowed hard.

I realized what I had just said and done.

It even shocked me. Almost as much as the topless picture of Hazel’s grandmother.

I was just romantic.

I was just sweet.

*And I didn’t mind it.*



“OKAY, what do we do with this?” Hazel asked.

“It’s your grandmother. I mean, either burn them or save them. If you save them, get a safe and hide them there.”

“I just don’t get it. Or maybe I do. I don’t know.”

I scooped up the handful of pictures and flipped them over.

That's when I saw something written on the back of one of the pictures.

*Remember this one?*

With a heart. And a handwritten wink face.

I looked at the picture.

Hazel's grandmother in a long t-shirt, pulling it tight against her body.

*This picture was meant for someone. Or given to someone and given back?*

I found a flap inside the folder and opened it to find pieces of paper.

"Hazel," I said. "I think..."

I took the papers out and opened one.

*DEAREST EVELYN,*

*YOUR BEAUTY MAKES my heart race.*

*As promised, I looked, smiled, and am returning these pictures.*

*You're a tease. A beautiful tease.*

*You've given me a reason to live.*

*There aren't words to tell you how much I love you.*

*Please never forget that.*

*My love grows stronger with each breath.*

*And thanks to these pictures, my breathing has been a little erratic.*

*WITH ALL MY love and every ounce of my soul, I am yours.*

CHARLES

"HAZEL," I said. "What was your grandfather's name? Was it Charles by any chance?"

"Charles?" Hazel shook her head. "No. I don't know any Charles. Why do you ask?"

I sucked in a deep breath. "Um, I think I figured out the pictures. I think your grandmother had herself a lover."

"A what?!"

"There are letters here," I said.

"Letters? From who?"

"Charles."

"Who the hell is Charles?"

"I have no idea, Hazel."

"Of course you don't," she said. "I just... this is just..."

"I think they were having an affair."

"An affair? Gram was single. Was this guy married? Is Gram..."

"*Slutty?*"

Hazel punched me in the arm. “Don’t say that about my grandmother!”

“I’m just looking at the evidence here, love. There are some really racy pictures in here. And then these letters... look at this one...”

“I don’t want to look right now,” she said.

“I’m going to read it out loud then.”

“Fine,” Hazel said. “Read it.”

I cleared my throat. *“My dearest Evelyn... your passion is fire. It’s unstoppable. The feel of your body against mine is heaven. You whispered into my ear to check under my pillow after you left. I found a picture of you. Wearing my favorite t-shirt. Then another. You holding that same t-shirt. With nothing else on. You wrote me a note to be dirty. So here it is, my Evelyn. Your picture made me hard. It made me throb. It made me feel fifty years younger. I rushed into the shower to try and cool down but I ended up holding myself. Thinking of you. Stroking myself with sultry force. You make me-”*

“Oh, fuck, just stop!” Hazel cried out. “That’s real?”

“Right here,” I said.

Hazel looked at the letter.

She gasped.

“This is like... old people... porn!”

“Hazel,” I said as I started to laugh.”

“This is not funny! Gram had a man in her life! She had a lover!”

“Yes, she did,” I said. “Looks like she had a very active love life too.”

“She never said a word though.”

“It was her secret. Let me ask you something, love. Was she happy all the time?”

Hazel narrowed her gaze. “Why would you ask that.”

“You know why I’m asking that.”

“Atlas...”

“She was getting it good. So good it made her happy all the time.”

“Stop it! That’s so gross! That’s my grandmother you’re talking about!”

“They obviously didn’t do it here in this house,” I said.

“Obviously. Unless they snuck around.”

“Maybe on the dining room table. When you were sleeping.”

Hazel punched my arm again. “I don’t know what to do right now! This is all too much. I’m afraid to open any other boxes.”

“Just hope you don’t find any videotapes to watch.”

Hazel swung again.

I caught her hand and pulled her toward me.

“Listen to me, love. Your grandmother was obviously a spitfire. From the little I know of her, this doesn’t surprise me. And if you need to look at it a different way, try this... she lived a fun life. A good life. An active life. Is it weird to think about your grandmother getting between the sheets? Probably. But think about how happy she was.”

“I know,” Hazel said. “But still. It’s Gram.”

“Now tell me what you want me to do here. I can clean this stuff up and get you a safe. I can go through anything else you want.”

“I know what I want to do.”

“Tell me.”

“Charles.”

“Your grandmother’s lover.”

Hazel cringed. “Yes. Her... yeah...”

“What do you want to call him? *Midnight knight? Fuck buddy?*”

“Stop. Let me finish. I want to find him.”

“You want to find Charles?”

“Yes. I want to find the man that made Gram act like this. I want to know what it was between them. If it was real or just...”

“Humping?”

“I hate you, Atlas.”

I grinned. “I know you do.”

“I want to know if he knows she’s... gone. I mean, if they were just casual, maybe he thinks she just stopped talking to him or whatever. I don’t know what kind of arrangement they had. Maybe they had a spot to meet up at. A certain time. Imagine if he’s been waiting and doesn’t know Gram is gone.”

“Wow, you turned this around.”

“How?”

“This went from dirty pictures and letters to your grandmother into something more romantic.”

“I’m trying to save my sanity at the moment, okay?”

“Well, love, I’m in. Let’s do this.”

“What?”

“I’m going to help you find this guy.”

“You don’t have to do that, Atlas. It’s just... crazy.”

I stepped back and placed my hands to her pregnant stomach.

“We’ve already done crazy, Hazel. Why stop now?”

She smiled. She looked ready to cry.

She turned her head and looked down.

“There’s naked pictures of my grandmother staring up at me.”

“Yes, there is,” I said. “*Yes... there really is...*”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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HAZEL



MY NAKED BODY nestled so perfectly against Atlas's.

I felt safe in his arms.

It didn't hurt matters that his body was built *so fucking hard* either.

Or the fact that even when he wasn't *aroused* the size of him was a lot.

I felt *it* slithering and resting against my back.

Like he had nowhere to hide it.

It was just *there*. Always *there*.

*Just finish the thought, Hazel.*

*You love Atlas's cock.*

*There. You thought it.*

*No big deal, right?*

Atlas used his left hand to touch from my shoulder down my arm to my wrist. Then he moved his fingertips to my left



hip and down my leg. Once he got too close to my knee, it tickled more than I could ignore. He knew the exact spot to stop and retreat back up. Touching my hip again and then up my back into my hair. Those fingers of his digging into my hair and then moving back to my shoulder.

That move, over and over, was enough to make me feel like I was going to slip into an orgasmic coma.

All that touching of spots that weren't sexual but everything about Atlas made me think about sex.

Then he moved his hand from my shoulder to my left breast.

Gently cupping for a moment before moving down to my stomach, following what felt like the biggest curve of my body – which it may have been.

His hand over my stomach.

The first thing that happened then?

The baby kicked.

“You asleep, love?” Atlas whispered.

“No,” I said. “I can't sleep when you're touching me like this.”

“Too much?”

“It's perfect, Atlas. I can stay awake all night feeling this.”

“You should get some sleep though. I was just thinking about something.”

“Thinking about what?” I asked.

For some reason I envisioned something romantic happening.

*What if he tells me he... loves me?*

“I’m thinking about your grandmother in those pictures,” Atlas said.

“You are a sick person,” I said. “Get away from me. Do not touch me for the rest of the night, Atlas. In fact, go home. Get out of here.”

He wrapped his arm tighter around me.

He kissed my shoulder and up to my neck.

Growling as he kissed me.

*Was this him being playful?*

My toes curled.

Talk about being instantly turned on.

“We’re going to figure this out, love,” he whispered.

“It’s a lot to think about,” I said. “I really never knew.”

It amazed me that Atlas seemed so invested in this discovery of a secret about my grandmother.

“Get some sleep, love,” he whispered.

One more kiss to my neck and he held me tight against his body.

I shut my eyes for one second.

*I felt so safe and comfortable I didn’t open them again until morning.*



THE NEXT MORNING Atlas was nowhere to be found.

I hurried out of bed, wondering if he ditched me in the middle of the night.

Which just proved I didn't really know what his intentions were when it came to me and the baby.

Which wasn't a good thing.

I hurried downstairs, needing to pee, needing to find Atlas even more.

What I found was Atlas in the kitchen wearing nothing but gym shorts with the *Sola Empire* logo on the right leg.

I only noticed the logo because the outline of his cock was so big and defined, it cut between the words *Sola* and *Empire*.

He stood with his cellphone to his ear.

He pointed to the coffeemaker.

Then to the stove.

Once again, he woke up and made me breakfast.

I swallowed hard, feeling spoiled. I wasn't sure if I liked being spoiled.

When Atlas got off the phone, he came right to me.

He cupped my stomach and put his forehead down to mine.

Then he ran his hands up my body until he touched my face.

“Want to hear something, love?”

“Sure.”

“I found him.”

“Found who?”

“Your grandmother’s secret lover.”

“You did what? How?”

“I made a call or two,” Atlas said. “Don’t worry about it.”

I stepped back. “Why? Why are you doing this, Atlas?”

“I really don’t have an answer, Hazel. I just feel like I need to do this for you. How about some breakfast?”

I opened my mouth to say something else but I noticed the stitches above his eye looked a little weird.

I reached up and brushed my finger over them and cringed.

“Atlas, there’s something wrong with your stitches.”

“Oh, fuck, yeah,” he said. “I was supposed to get them out. I forgot. I’ll do it myself.”

“Do it yourself?”

“Yeah. I can cut and wiggle them out.”

I put my hand to my mouth. “That’s disgusting! Doesn’t your team have doctors or something?”

“Well... yeah...”

“Can’t you just let a professional do it? Please?”

“You want to come for a ride with me then, love?”

“If it means you not standing in my bathroom with a pair of scissors to your face? Yes. I will come for a ride with you. After breakfast.”

“Of course. *After breakfast.*”

Watching Atlas walk around the kitchen while cooking as I sat in a chair and was just... *pregnant*... felt nice.

After we finished eating, we got changed and got ready to leave.

Moving around my bedroom and bathroom together as though we had been living together for years. A quiet sense of comfort settling in that felt unexpected but welcomed.

I stood in front of my mirror and wrestled with a hair clip and my messy hair.

I felt like since getting pregnant my hair got thicker, a little bit curly, and impossible to tame.

I ended up staring at Atlas in the reflection of the mirror instead of myself.

I watched as he stared intensely back at me.

Then he approached me.

When he took the hair clip from my hand, my knees turned into goo.

When he put the hair clip into my hair, *everything became flooded.*

When he kissed my neck and whispered, *'You look beautiful'* I thought I was going to pass out.

*I felt like I was the one who suddenly needed medical attention.*



ATLAS SAT ON A METAL TABLE.

The trainer in front of him was a woman and she needed a step stool to reach his face.

Wearing baby blue rubber gloves she shook her head at him.

She looked back at me. “He doesn’t listen, does he?”

I touched my stomach. “No, he doesn’t.”

We both laughed.

Atlas curled his lip. “Just cut the stitches out.”

“Yeah, it’s not that simple now,” the trainer said to Atlas. “We’ve never met before, have we? I know who you are. You have a reputation, Atlas. I’m Andrea. I usually work on the fun stuff like broken bones and ripped up ligaments. I drew the short straw and had to come in today to deal with you.”

“Is he going to be okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” Atlas said.

“He’ll be fine,” Andrea said. “He’s just foolish for waiting this long. I’ll get them out.”

I smiled at Atlas.

It was nice to hear someone else call him out for his stupidity.

Andrea hummed as she wrestled the stitches out of Atlas’s face.

I could tell he hated that she hummed. I could also tell he wasn’t very comfortable as she took the stitches out. My guess was that she wasn’t as gentle as she could have been.

“Okay,” Andrea finally said. “Well, Atlas, you’ve earned yourself a possible infection. That’s always nice. Whether you like it or not you’re going to need to put some antibacterial ointment on there so it doesn’t get really infected and mess up your hockey season.”

“Are you really worried about my hockey season?” Atlas asked.

“I get paid to keep athletes like you functioning,” Andrea said. She looked back at me again. “Is he always combative?”

“You have no idea,” I said.

Atlas slid off the table and towered over Andrea. “Are we done here?”

“I guess so,” Andrea said. “I’ll get that ointment for you and type up some paperwork. Make sure I cover my ass in case you decide not to listen.”

“So you’re going to throw me under the bus without giving me a chance?”

“Exactly,” Andrea said. She looked at me once again. “On top of something happier here. Congrats on the pregnancy. Do you know what you’re having?”

“Yeah,” Atlas cut in. “A baby.”

“Actually, she’s having a baby,” Andrea said to Atlas. “You just put it there. Typical man to have all the fun and then take credit for any of the work that came with it.”

“Have you been dumped recently?” Atlas asked. “Do you need to get out and get laid?”

“Atlas!” I cried out.

“It’s a valid question,” he said. “There are plenty of guys on the team who would love-”

“I don’t screw hockey players,” Andrea said. “Or anyone athletic. As far as my sex life goes, it’s all good. Thanks for worrying. Now, is anyone going to answer my question? Boy or girl?”

Andrea pointed to my stomach.

“We don’t know,” I said.

“I want to know,” Atlas said. “She doesn’t.”

“I would like it to be a surprise,” I said.

“Well then,” Andrea said. “*Open mouth, insert foot...* I should have just stayed quiet. Atlas, put the ointment on your face.” She looked at me. “As for you, congrats again.”

We left the room and the building.

“That was weird,” I said to Atlas.

“That was very weird, love,” he said.

I stopped walking.

I touched my stomach with my left hand.

I reached for Atlas with my right hand.

“Wait,” I said.

“Are you okay?”

“Let’s do it.”

“Do what?”

“Do you still have the envelope?”

“What envelope?”

“Atlas. The envelope... boy or girl.”

“Oh. Of course I have it. I have it back at my place.”

“Let’s do it. We should know. I mean, I want to know.”

I nodded. “*Let’s find out if we’re having a boy or girl!*”



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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### ATLAS



HAZEL WANTED to stop back at her house to take a shower.

She told me she wanted to shower alone.

That gave me time to plan a little bit of a surprise.

Of all the favors I had ever asked for in my life, this one was the wildest.

Henry laughed at me on the phone.

“You’re in way too deep now,” he said.

“Just... just fucking help me,” I said and hung up.

There was no booze in Hazel’s grandmother’s house except some wine.

Then again, I had to drive.

No drinking.

That meant patiently waiting for Hazel to get ready.

Another first for me.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs waiting for a woman to get ready.

*Who am I becoming right now?*

I rubbed my jaw and ran my hand through my hair.

Just as I felt my irritation start to cling to me, Hazel appeared at the top of the stairs.

Her hair wet.

Her belly pregnant.

A smile on her face.

I went to touch my chin again but ended up touching my chest.

My heart actually raced a little.

She wore pregnancy jeans that had a few holes in them.

She looked beautiful.

She looked more than beautiful.

I wasn't sure what came after beautiful.

I wasn't sure if there was a term that described how she looked compared to how she made me feel.

*Maybe it's love?*

I clenched my jaw tightly.

I offered my right hand when she was close enough.

That's when I smelled her hair and skin.

A honey, lavender smell.

Soothing. Comforting.

Yet her eyes were pure sexual desire.

She rendered me speechless.

So I led the way outside the house and to my truck.

When I got into the truck, I started it.

I put it into drive.

Then I stopped.

Shifted it back into park.

I turned and looked at Hazel.

She looked at me.

*I'm going to blurt something out...*

I leaned across the seat and kissed her.

Just a simple kiss. A quick kiss. Nothing too crazy.

*But far from enough...*

I put the truck back into drive.

Once we arrived at my place, I held Hazel's hand.

Just to help her. Just so she didn't feel alone.

When I heard noises from my apartment, I cringed.

*Assholes can't listen to directions...*

"Who's in there?" Hazel asked.

"A nightmare," I said.

I approached the door and opened it.

"Surprise!" Jago called out as he sat on the kitchen counter with a shot glass in his right hand.

"What the hell is this?" I asked.

Sebastian appeared with a balloon in his mouth.

He started to blow it up.

There was text on the balloon that read *IT'S A BABY!*

I felt Hazel staring at me.

“Sorry about this,” Henry said. “I tried to play it cool. You kind of called in front of Rome. And he called everyone else.”

“Atlas?” Hazel whispered.

I sighed. “This was supposed to be a surprise. Thought I would decorate a little in here. Make it fun to find out what we’re having.”

“I took care of it,” Rome said. He had a large balloon in his hand. “This has either pink or blue in it. And when you pop it...”

I reached for a pair of scissors on the counter and stabbed the balloon.

It exploded, making everyone jump.

“No!” I roared.

I did not want to share this moment with-

*There was nothing in the balloon.*

“Oh, shit,” Rome said. He looked around. “I grabbed the wrong balloon.”

“You did what?” I asked.

“Um, one of these balloons on the floor has pink or blue in it.”

“Wait a second,” Hazel said. “Did you tell someone what we’re having?”

That’s when it hit me...

“No,” I said. “I never said a word. Rome, what are you doing?”

“I kind of guessed,” he said. “Based on the shape of Hazel’s stomach.”

“Wait,” Joe said. “You don’t know what they’re having? And you chose a balloon anyway?”

“She’s kind of carrying full and low,” Rome said. “That’s a boy. Right? Or maybe it’s a girl.”

“Oh, wow,” Jago said as he jumped off the counter. “This is a disaster.”

“Okay, I need everyone out of here,” I said. “I thought maybe Henry would have put some roses on the counter or something like that. I didn’t know it would be this.”

“I’m not an interior decorator,” Henry said.

“They told me there was going to be beer,” Joe growled.

“I came for the whiskey,” Jago said. He threw his shot glass back.

“Well, let’s find out then,” Rome said. “Let’s hear if I’m right or wrong.”

“Do you really think I want you here for this?” I asked.

“He’s right,” Henry said. “We better get out of here.”

“Wait, why can’t we hear this?” Sebastian asked.

“Can I just have a private moment with my Hazel?” I blurted out.

Everyone but Joe let out an *aww* sound.

Hazel smiled and blushed. “*My Hazel?*”

I growled. “I didn’t mean it to sound like that.”

“Come on, we have to get out of here,” Henry said.

Hazel and I broke apart as the guys all started to leave.

Henry shrugged his shoulders.

Joe wanted to know where he could get some beer.

Jago winked at me, then at Hazel.

She blushed.

I didn't like that one bit.

Sebastian said I needed to text him as soon I knew.

Rome paused between us. "Sorry about the balloon thing. But I know I have this right."

"Thanks for judging my body," Hazel said.

"I'd do more than judge your body," Rome said.

"Out!" I growled.

I put my hand to Rome's back and pushed him out, then slammed the door and locked it.

Hazel hurried toward me and jumped to her toes and touched my face.

"You really did this?"

"I guess," I said. "Not what I had planned though."

"But you called them? You wanted to surprise me?"

"Yeah."

"That's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," she said.

"Let's do this, love," I said.

I took her hand and we walked through my apartment.

I kicked balloons out of the way.

One bounced off a table and came back at me.

I picked up my left foot and stomped down on it.

It exploded with a bunch of blue confetti shooting across the floor.

Hazel burst into a fit of laughter.

I kicked my foot, shaking away clingy confetti.

“A boy,” I said.

“That’s what *Dr. Rome* says,” she said, still laughing.

I growled and shook my head.

I led the way to the bedroom with Hazel giggling the entire time.

She sat down on my bed and I went to get the envelope.

Then I sat down next to her.

“Is this okay?” I asked.

“Of course it is.”

“You don’t want to do anything special?”

“Oh, this is special enough, Atlas. I just had five hockey players trying to decorate your apartment.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that,” I said. “It wasn’t supposed to be like that.”

“It was nice. It was sweet. Now can we do this before I change my mind?”

I handed her the envelope. “You open it.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “Why am I so... anxious?”

“I don’t know. I feel the same.”

“No matter what...”

“Just open it, love.”

Hazel peeled the envelope open and took out the piece of paper.

Folded up with an ultrasound picture in it.

Hazel held up the ultrasound picture.

An arrow pointing...

“A girl,” Hazel whispered. “We’re having a little girl, Atlas.”

I grabbed the ultrasound picture from her hands and stared.

*It’s a girl! Congrats!*

I leaned forward.

I forgot how to blink.

“A girl,” I finally said.

“A girl. Looks like Rome was wrong, huh?”

“I’m going to be a father to a little girl. I’m going to be a *girl dad.*”

“Yes, you are, Atlas.”

I sat up straight and looked at Hazel.

I dropped the ultrasound picture and moved for Hazel.

I kissed her.

Soft, slow, gentle.

My hands touched her body the same.

My right hand rested on her stomach for a few seconds, just taking in the news.

Then I moved my hand up over her breast.



My left hand touched her back and I pulled Hazel closer to me.

The kiss grew hotter.

Deeper.

My heart slammed inside my chest.

I took her shirt off.

She took off mine.

We moved slow and calculated.

Taking each second to enjoy one another.

I carefully unclasped her bra and took it off her body.

My right fingertips grazed her tender nipple.

Hazel groaned into my mouth.

I broke the kiss and dipped my mouth down to her left breast.

Hazel grabbed the back of my head and pulled me closer to her.

I took her breast into my mouth, my tongue flicking up and down her tight, hard nipple.

She groaned and started to claw at my back.

We moved up the bed a little more and I began to take off her jeans.

She lifted her butt off the bed and wiggled her hips.

Once she kicked her jeans off, I moved for her panties next.

I guided her panties down and then moved my hand up her left inner thigh, between her legs. Gently touching her soft,

sweet sex. Fingers caressing her smooth wetness.

I kissed her chest and then up to her mouth, needing and wanting her in a way I never knew existed with a woman.

As I teased her clit, her hips thrust and jumped.

She bit at my bottom lip and groaned.

I had to stop touching her for a moment so I could open my jeans and wrestle them off.

I then pulled her toward me.

She was on her right side.

I was on my left.

I held her against me.

Feeling her stomach pressing against my body.

Feeling her breasts against me.

My right hand guided her left leg open.

I touched between her legs again.

Moving so soft and slow.

Watching her reaction as I teased.

I held her before I entered her.

I held her as I gently thrust into her body, feeling her.

*Feeling all of her.*

We were moving slow.

That was the word.

*Slow.*

We were...

*Oh, fuck, I'm making love to her right now, aren't I?*

My right hand grabbed for her ass and I pulled her toward me as I thrust a little bit harder.

I grunted when I did so.

She groaned.

I repeated the same motion over and over.

Listening to our bodies collide. Listening to her voice call out with pleasure.

She grabbed for the back of my shoulder and let out a cry of relief as she bit at my chest.

I felt her body - swollen, clenching, her climax an unstoppable force.

I held her as she came.

When she eased a little, taking a deep breath, we stared at each other.

Then we started to kiss again.

This time she thrust her hips at me.

Her slick warmth sliding against my thickness so perfectly.

I already knew what was happening.

And it had nothing to do with me finishing.

*I was in love with Hazel.*

## Chapter Thirty

---

HAZEL



*HE WAS EVERYWHERE.*

*On top of me. Inside me.*

*I felt his hands touch the backs of my legs for a second and then somehow he was touching my hips. Then in the same breath, I thought I felt his right hand on my pregnant belly and his left hand cradling under my right breast.*

*His thrusts were gentle yet powerful.*

*Movements that were slow but more than effective.*

*And not a second went by where he didn't care about my complete and total comfort.*

*Even when I felt myself reaching another climax.*

*My back starting to arch...*

*It was not a comfortable position for me at all.*

*The weight of my pregnant belly pushing on my body. My heavy breasts on my chest.*

*Not to mention the little voice in the back of my head telling me there was no way this view of myself was enjoyable for Atlas at all.*

*I must have made a move or a face or something because Atlas gently grabbed me and turned me to my side just a little.*

*Enough to take the pressure off my body. But not too far to take away the pleasure of his body.*

*I opened my eyes and stared right into his eyes.*

*His right hand then touched my face.*

*Fingertips near my hair.*

*I wondered if I was sweating. I wondered if he thought that was okay or not.*

*My heart raced but was not pounding.*

*The pounding would come in a few seconds when I came.*

*I felt safe yet empowered.*

*His thumb stroked my cheek.*

*He inched forward and kissed my forehead.*

*I looked down and saw the shape of my body.*

*The way his body was built.*

*I saw his body moving.*

*I felt his body moving...*

*I bit my bottom lip and almost started to cry.*

*Nothing in my life had ever felt so good and so... romantic...*

*Ever.*

*Atlas slid his hand into my hair and I realized he was holding me.*

*Completely holding me in his arms.*

*His body still perfectly thrusting and fucking me.*

*But it wasn't that.*

*It wasn't him fucking me.*

*He was...*

*This huge, muscular, loves-to-fight hockey player...*

*He was making love to me.*



I FELT like my body levitated off the bed.

My hands clung to the sheets as I tried to play everything off as okay and cool.

I squeezed my legs shut tight as my inner thighs trembled.

Next to me I felt Atlas staring.

“Are you okay, love?”

His rough voice shaking the bed.

“I’m fine,” I said.

He kissed my bare shoulder.

The scruff on his face touched my skin... and...

I shut my eyes and started to lose control again.

A whimper came from my throat.

“Hazel, what’s wrong?”

I shook my head.

I groaned.

“Are you...”

“Shut up!” I cried out.

I peeled my left hand from the bed and covered my mouth.

My hips bucked.

“Oh, fuck, love,” Atlas growled.

He slipped his right hand between the covers on the bed and between my legs.

Touching me just as the beautiful explosion occurred.

I wasn't sure if it was pregnancy hormones or the fact that Atlas just legitimately made love to me, but my body was so sensitive.

*And, yes, I was coming again.*

I opened my eyes and Atlas hovered over me.

He kissed me.

Deep and passionate.

His fingers were kind, soft and slow, curling at my clit, leaving my hips jumping and rocking the entire time I came.

When that final wave eased, my entire body melted into the bed.

Atlas drew his hand away from my sex and touched my leg.

He stopped kissing me.

Silence fell between us.

A life changing kind of silence.

Then I decided to say, “Let's call them.”

“Call who?”

“The guys. Your teammates. Friends. Whatever they are.”

“What? You want to call them?”

“They did try to help us out. Right?”

“Are you being serious?”

“Yes,” I said. “Call them right now. Right from bed. Let’s tell them we’re having a girl. Come on, please?”

“Wouldn’t you rather me make you come one more time?”

I laughed. “Atlas, I think if I come one more time, my body is going to hang a *DO NOT DISTURB* sign between my legs.”

Atlas laughed. “You really want me to call them?”

“Yeah. I do.”

He turned and reached for his phone.

“I have to call Henry,” he said. “He’s the only one I really know. He and I go way back.”

“You played together when you were younger?”

“Yeah. He was destined to be a star right winger.”

“And you were destined to be a bully?”

“Not a bully. An enforcer. A pain in the ass.”

“Well, you certainly are that.”

“What?”

“A pain in the ass,” I smiled.

“Oh, love, if it was a pain in the ass you felt, you wouldn’t have gotten pregnant.”



I cried out with laughter and shook my head. “That’s disgusting, Atlas!”

He laughed.

I laughed.

We were just two people naked in bed, laughing together.

It felt so right.

It felt crazy too.

*And I felt so pregnant.*

“Atlas?” Henry’s voice asked.

I turned my head and realized Henry was on the screen.

“Are you naked?” Henry asked.

“We both are,” Atlas said.

*“Who’s naked?”*

A second later, there were faces everywhere on the screen.

“Hazel is naked,” Rome said.

“Now why are those blankets covering up so much?” Jago asked.

He had such a clean-cut *cute* bad boy smile to himself.

“Easy over there,” Atlas growled. “We didn’t call for any of that.”

“To be fair, you have a naked woman next to you,” Joe said. “A beautiful naked woman.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” I asked.

They all said *Yes* at the same time.

“Wow,” I said. “Thanks for that.”

“She is beautiful,” Atlas said. “But she’s mine. It was actually her idea to call. We know what we’re having.”

“Did you pop the balloon?” Rome asked. “You found it?”

“Atlas stepped on it,” I said. “Blue confetti went everywhere.”

“Yes!” Rome called out. “Did you hear that? Blue? They’re having a boy!”

Rome grabbed Joe and tried to hug him.

Joe tossed Rome out of the view of the camera on the phone.

“A boy,” Henry said.

“No,” Atlas said. “Rome is an idiot.”

“Wait, I’m confused now,” Sebastian said.

“We’re having a girl,” I said.

“You hear that, you moron?” Joe growled to Rome.

Rome appeared again. “Who said you’re having a girl?”

“The ultrasound,” Atlas said.

“How do you know it’s accurate?” Rome asked.

“It’s more accurate than you staring at my belly,” I said.

“Now if I was able to see you naked I would have made a better guess,” Rome said.

Joe pushed Rome away for a second time.

“Hey, everyone calm down for a second,” Henry said.

“Yeah, just hold up,” Sebastian said. “This is awesome. You two are having a baby girl. I mean, it doesn’t matter what

you're having. As long as everyone is healthy and all that. But a baby girl. That's special. That's amazing."

"She's going to be well protected," Jago said.

"For sure," Joe said. He cracked his knuckles and nodded. "I don't care how old some little punk is... I'll break him in half if he bothers your daughter."

"Aw, look how sweet that is," Rome said. "*Uncle Joe* coming to the rescue already."

"You guys are crazy," Atlas said. "But there's the big news. Now someone needs to pay for someone to come clean the blue confetti off my fucking living room floor."

"We can arrange something," Jago said.

Rome grabbed Jago's left shoulder. "Hey, do they have naked maids? Like we can pay someone to clean his place while they're naked? We can watch, right?"

"You guys are perverts," I said. "Goodbye."

They all started to scream *congrats* as I reached over and hung up the call.

Atlas looked at me.

I smiled. "That's a good thing you have there, Atlas."

"Relax, love."

"What?"

"I know my position when it comes to this job," he said. "I don't want to talk about that right now either."

I nodded.

I respected what he said and how he said it.

The connection between us. The connection with him and this team.

There was another bout of silence between Atlas and me.

“I want to find him and talk to him,” I said.

“Who? What?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Just a random thought. I’m talking about Charles.”

“Oh, right. Your grandmother’s secret-”

“Stop,” I said. “I don’t need to put those images in my head ever again.”

“You can just go through a closet and find more pictures, right?”

“Atlas. Not funny.”

He smiled. He reached over and stroked my cheek. “Listen, love, you tell me what you want to do about it. I’m there.”

“You really had someone look into the guy?”

“It was more luck than anything,” he said. “One of the letters had a piece of envelope. There were a few numbers of a zip code. So I called my agent and demanded he figure it out.”

“Is that your agent’s job?”

“Hell no,” Atlas said. “But the guy has millions of dollars because of me. He can help me out.”

“You did that for me.”

“Yes, Hazel. I did that for you.”

“Why?”

“Why can’t I just do something for you? There doesn’t have to be a motive behind it.”

“Everything has a motive behind it, Atlas.”

He took a deep breath. “This is how it’s going to be with you? All the time?”

“This is me,” I said. “Should have done this before you got me pregnant.”

“Good point. I’ll consider that next time.”

“Next time... what? You get someone else pregnant?”

Atlas shook his head. “I said some stuff that came across the wrong way, love. It hurt your feelings. You protected yourself from me. I respect that. I am who I am. Just like you are who you are. I don’t lie. I won’t lie. That also means sometimes I say stuff that sounds mean. And is mean. I meant it when I told you I would never abandon you or our daughter.”

*Daughter.*

*Cue the swooning all over again.*

I squeezed my legs together tight again.

Butterflies danced in my stomach and my body tingled.

*Our daughter.*

“So, fine, I saw the chance to do something for you,” he said. “And I did it. I don’t know much about your grandmother. I’m sorry she passed. I’m sorry she’s not here to see everything happening. So maybe if you meet this Charles guy... it’s like having one last chance to be involved with your grandmother. I don’t fucking know.”

Atlas tried to move away and I grabbed for him.

I touched his face.

“That’s perfect,” I whispered.

“Good,” he said. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Good. I don’t want to talk anymore either.”

I moved my left leg over his body and pulled at him.

He slipped his right hand between us, between my legs again.

I put my head back and smiled.

*Okay, just one more orgasm... and then I could put the DO NOT DISTURB sign up between my legs...*

## Chapter Thirty-One

---

### ATLAS



AT SOME POINT someone hit me in the face with an elbow.

If you asked me, it was a cheap shot.

In reality, it was just part of the game.

I had been trying to get into a fight all period, wanting to give the guys and the arena that one last little spark of life. We were down by two goals, but what the hell did I care, right? I turned up the heat on my enforcer capabilities and I made everyone nervous.

I even messed with the goalie too.

Constantly skating too close.

I got him so off balance that Henry scored a goal.

*Now we were down by one.*

For some reason we had a bad habit of scoring a goal and then acting as though the game was over. After each face-off when we scored a goal, the other team would drive right down the ice. Leaving Jago doing cartwheels to make saves that

would put him in contention for being the best goalie of the entire league.

The same thing happened again after Henry's goal.

That pissed me off.

So I took it out on someone.

A guy named *Butler*.

I took him into the boards so hard, the entire team wanted a penalty.

It was a clean hit.

Butler fell to the ice and I started to mess with him.

Pushing at his back.

“Get up, fucker,” I yelled. “Get up and hit me right now. Or do you perform better on your knees?”

Someone hit me from the right side.

I dropped my stick and gloves, ready to fight.

The enforcer for Denver was named Dallas.

A huge guy.

Someone else hit me from behind.

The refs blew their whistles.

Joe came in and pushed Dallas out of the way.

Everyone started to push and shove each other.

The crowd loved the idea of a real hockey brawl.

I turned as someone put their arm around my neck, trying to contain me.

I threw a punch and heard a yell.



That's when I felt an elbow to my left eye.

By the time it was all said and done, the guy who tried to contain me was missing a tooth.

And just above my left eye, I was busted open.

The refs ordered me off the ice to get looked at.

As I skated to the bench, I passed Sebastian.

"Win this fucking game," I said to him. "Don't fucking stop for a second."

Sebastian tapped me with his stick and nodded.

Off the ice and escorted right down the hallway with a towel to my face, I was back in one of the trainer's rooms.

"Stitches or glue?" I asked the trainer.

"You got lucky," he said to me. "Just needs pressure to stop the bleeding."

"Then fucking glue it," I said.

I heard the horn blare and shake the arena.

"Goal," I whispered.

I caught myself grinning.

We tied it up.

But now they needed me more than ever.

To protect the ice. To protect Jago.

I made the decision for myself then and there. I walked out of the trainer's room and went back to the ice.

After three minutes of some of the fastest hockey I ever experienced, we pulled out a huge win.

And while it was worth celebrating that game by itself, we had just snapped a five-game losing streak.

Whatever it was about the *Sola Empire*, we couldn't win the way we should.

But tonight we won.

I noticed the guys all waiting for me in the tunnel.

Coach Denny - *Detom* - did a quick interview for the local sports network, praising our determination to never give up.

Then he stood in the tunnel too.

Rome had no poker face.

*Something was happening.*

Henry took the chance by standing next to me. "Sorry, brother. We had to do this."

"Do what?" I asked.

"Come on," Joe bellowed. "I need a drink and a shower."

He stomped his way down tunnel and opened the door to the locker room.

He motioned for me and I gritted my teeth the entire way.

Everyone followed me.

I really had no idea what to expect.

*What the hell am I walking into here?*

I turned to go into the locker room and I froze.

Behind me, all the guys pushed me into the locker room.

As soon as I saw one thing pink, I curled my lip and growled.

*Did they really throw a baby shower for me?*



MY LOCKER WAS DECORATED the most.

Filled with pink balloons and signs that read *IT'S A GIRL* everywhere.

The rest of the locker room had pink streamers and balloons.

Banners that said the same - *IT'S A GIRL* - but another one that read - *CONGRATS ATLAS AND HAZEL!*

For some reason seeing my name with Hazel's made me pause.

"Sorry about this," Henry whispered to me as he walked by.

"Where's the beer?" Joe called out.

"Wait for everyone to show up," Sebastian said.

"Who else is showing up?" I asked. "Did you invite Hazel?"

"Not for this one," Jago said. "This is just for us. Our family here."

"We're family now?" I asked.

The locker room swung open again.

In came Coach Denny, but he wasn't alone.

I gritted my teeth.

*Ellen freaking Verwert.*

Right behind her?

*Oscar.*

The billionaire owners of the *Sola Empire*.

“Look at this place!” Oscar yelled. “It looks great!”

“Where’s the cake?” Ellen asked.

“There’s cake?” I growled.

“Once again, sorry about this,” Henry said.

I looked to my left and here came Rome, pushing a small table on wheels with a cake on it.

Rome came toward me and I felt like punching him.

“I’m so happy for you, Atlas,” he said. “I feel like I could cry right now.”

He hugged me.

I stood with my arms at my sides.

I glanced at Henry, who knew to get Rome off me, before I choked him, then slammed him through the cake and table.

Henry peeled Rome away from me.

Oscar and Ellen now stood on the other side of the cake.

Oscar stuck his fingers into his mouth and whistled.

Everyone got quiet.

“I’ve still got it,” Oscar declared with a billionaire-dollar smile. “First off, that was one hell of a game out there tonight. There’s nothing like seeing a hockey game in person. The environment is like nothing else. And then the way you all played? What a team we have. We’ve always had good teams, but this one is special. I probably shouldn’t say this in front of your coach, but to hell with the record. You guys are playing with passion. You make me proud!”

A cheesy speech from a cheesy man.

But everyone clapped.

After all, he signed the paychecks, right?

I didn't clap.

Ellen noticed, then smiled and nodded.

"The reason we're here tonight," Ellen said. "Can you believe it's because of Atlas?"

That got a few chuckles.

"He finally lost his virginity!" Jago called out.

More laughter.

"Your mother said thank you," I growled.

Jago stepped toward me.

*He wants to fight me now?*

Joe blocked the path.

"I just want to say," Ellen began as she glanced at her husband. He nodded. "I just want to say how happy I am to see this turn out the way it did. I enjoy charity. I enjoy it a lot. Hosting events like the one that got us here really does help our city. Now, I don't want to take credit for what happened or brag... but it's safe to say that the *'Win a Date With a Hockey Player'* really was a smashing success."

"The only thing that got smashed was Hazel's uterus," Jago muttered.

The entire room went silent.

A definite *too far* comment.

Then out of nowhere Ellen started to giggle.

Her giggling turned into full blown laughter.

She laughed so hard she turned around.

That made me laugh for some reason.

And because I laughed, everyone else laughed.

Oscar whistled again.

This rich guy loved to hear his own voice.

“This is a special team we have,” Oscar said. “ I appreciate you all being here. With that being said, I’m setting my sights right on you, Atlas. You’re going to be a father. One of the greatest journeys a man can ever experience. Now of course I had a son. So I can’t give advice on what it’s like to raise a daughter.”

“It’s torture,” Ellen said. “Good luck, Atlas.”

That’s when I realized everyone started to look at me to say something.

I didn’t do speeches.

So I walked over to a pink bucket full of ice, reached in, and grabbed a bottle of beer.

I twisted off the cap and held it up.

One nod and I chugged the entire beer.

I knew that’d at least get Joe excited.

I tossed him a beer. Then the rest of the guys a beer.

Then I pointed to Oscar.

Who knew the last time the billionaire drank a beer.

He didn’t deny my request either.

I even offered one to Ellen.

She took it.

We all had a drink together.

They cheered for me.

I waved and smiled.

I bypassed the entire speech thing all together.

We talked, laughed, ate some cake...

Rome tried to throw a piece in my face.

I got out of the way and the cake hit Joe.

Joe smashed Rome's face into the cake on the table.

Then a cake fight broke out.

Oscar loved it - just as long as he and Ellen were out of the way.

Once we were done making the mess, I was the first to sit down.

The rest of the guys slowly did.

Henry gave me a nod.

"Thank you for this," I finally said. "Cheers to you all. This is nice. I didn't expect it."

"We are happy for you," Sebastian said.

"Even if the circumstances are crazy," Rome said. "But a good crazy. A sexy crazy."

"Rome," I said.

"Yeah. I'll shut up now."

"You're having a daughter," Joe said.

"I am," I said. "I'm not sure what that looks like for me."

"You have to feel something though, right?" Jago asked.

“I feel a lot,” I confessed. I smiled. “More than I care to share with you assholes though.”

I stood up.

I looked around.

It felt like the perfect kind of night to go out, get drunk, pick a fight or two, and see what kind of insanity Rome and Jago could find.

Yet all I could think about was taking a shower and getting home to Hazel.

I thought about it.

*Getting home to Hazel.*

That word.

Not Hazel.

The word home.

*Home.*

I never knew what that meant until now.

*My home... was with Hazel.*



## Chapter Thirty-Two

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HAZEL



ALL I WANTED to do was take a quick shower before leaving.

Here I thought Atlas had enough the night before.

The two of us in his bed for hours, touching, kissing, exploring, until I finally collapsed on top of him and fell asleep in a comfortable bliss.

I slept so good that I woke up and had no idea what day it was. What hour it was. *What year it was...*

Those were the best nights of sleep.

I stepped into the shower and shook my head.

The fancy shower that Atlas had.

I know he didn't pick the shower out or anything, but it was funny to imagine him worrying about a shower like this.

With five hundred ways to get sprayed.

Fancy tile.

A small window with a shelf that looked out to the beach.

I mean, *come on*, that view alone probably doubled the rent.

As for me?

I loved the shower.

Again - the word *spoiled* came to mind.

I tried to lean into that word a little but it still didn't settle with me all the way.

Not even ten seconds into showering, Atlas stepped in to join me.

This *huge* man.

*Huge everywhere.*

Me standing with the water hitting my back.

My pregnant belly bigger by the second now between us.

My eyes took no shame in looking down just a bit, knowing exactly what I wanted to gawk at first when it came to Atlas.

Everything about him so thick and strong.

A man so beautiful and flawed and just...

He stepped toward me as I sighed.

His hands touched my stomach.

He lowered his mouth down to mine.

Skipping all conversation and flirting.

Going right for what we both wanted.

*Each other.*

Our lips touched.

We shared soft, gentle kisses.

Those kind of kisses that made butterflies blossom in my belly, flying all the way into the back of my throat.

Then it changed course.

One swipe of Atlas's strong tongue against my bottom lip and I melted toward him.

His hands climbed up my body.

From my belly to my breasts.

Cupping me tight. Holding me the way I needed.

Lifting my breasts, giving me a small sense of relief.

I put my head back, letting the water massage my hair and head.

Atlas's mouth moved down to my breasts.

Taking his time with each one.

First, my left breast. His tongue circling my tender nipple.

Flicking up and down.

He kneaded my other breast with his other hand.

Once he finished kissing my breasts, Atlas made another move.

A surprising move as he disappeared for a moment.

*He disappeared until I looked down and realized where he was going...*

I gasped and wanted to tell him he didn't have to.

But... it was... too late...

I felt his tongue nestle between my legs.

My toes curled.

I put my head back again, this time even more, letting the water hit my forehead and slowly begin to smother my face.

I reached down and slid my fingers into Atlas's hair.

The tip of his tongue moved so perfectly between my legs.

I almost felt like clapping for him.

He knew just where to go and just how to do it.

The movements... the speed...

Making big circles, teasing and tasting me.

Then moving to my clit.

It felt magnetic between us.

He closed his mouth over me and I looked down at him again.

My pregnant belly. His head.

The feel of his mouth suckling against me.

For a moment the shower began to spin.

I lost all feeling from my head as it moved down my body.

I reached for the wall and let out an *oohhh* sound.

My knees buckled. Atlas pulled away and hurried to stand up.

His hands cradling me, holding me. Keeping me standing.

I looked up at him and touched his chest.

"Sorry, Atlas," I said in a breathless voice.

"I've got you, love," he said.

His right hand touched the back of my left leg.

He pulled me against him and with one gentle thrust, he entered me.

A slow, pressure-filled kind of feeling rushed over me.

Head to toe, taking control.

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his strong chest.

I felt myself climaxing before he was halfway inside my body.

The orgasmic rush was met by Atlas thrusting.

Taking and loving me.

With the shower water hitting us both.

Lost in a yet another moment I would never forget between us.

*Was it so bad to want this to be my forever?*



I WRESTLED with a brush through my knotty, wet hair.

Atlas stood in the doorway of the bedroom, arms folded, looking dreamy.

Mean and dreamy.

“Want to brush my hair?” I asked.

“Do you really want me to brush your hair?”

“No. I’m kidding. You’re just staring at me. It feels weird.”

“I can’t look at you?”

“Why are you looking at me?”

“I like this. I’ve never said that before to someone. But I like this.”

I turned around. “Have you ever had a woman in your room like this?”

“Pregnant? No.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“This. A woman brushing her hair after a shower.”

“You want to know about other women?”

“Maybe I do.”

“Are you going to tell me about your exes? How many men have you had in the shower with you?”

“Well, if you want to know... my last boyfriend was afraid of my vagina.”

Atlas snorted. “What?”

“That’s right. He told me he didn’t like the look of it. Not just mine. All vaginas.”

“Are you sure he didn’t prefer something other than a vagina?” Atlas asked.

“You asked. I answered.”

Atlas walked toward me. “Hazel, I’ve never been this close to someone before. Pregnant or not pregnant. Okay?”

“So you were a one-night stand kind of guy?”

“Love, we had a one-night stand, remember?”

I blushed a little. “Oh. Right.” I brushed my hair again. “Hey, not to change the subject...”

“You brought it up,” Atlas said.

“Yes, I did. Anyway, you don’t have to do this with me today.”

“I’m all about this.”

“I can follow directions on my own, Atlas.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Why?”

“It means a lot to you. I want to be there.”

“Can I admit I’m nervous?”

“Sure. This is a part of your grandmother’s life. One you didn’t know about. It’s exciting.”

“I’m scared, Atlas. I don’t know what he knows or doesn’t. Does he know about me? Does he know she’s gone?”

“I know,” Atlas said. “You’ve mentioned it before. And you’re going to get your answers today. You have nothing to worry about. I’ll be right next to you.”

“How do I look?”

“You look beautiful.”

“Of course you’d say that.”

“I don’t lie, Hazel. Ever.”

I nodded.

He didn’t lie.

He touched my face.

There was nothing else to say in that moment.

He was by my side.

I had to believe in it and trust in it.

*Which was really hard for me to do.*



"I THINK WE'RE HERE, LOVE," Atlas said.

He pulled into a gravel driveway.

We were twenty minutes south, almost right on the beach, and I stared at an old beach house.

With an old, olive-green car next to the house.

The place felt thirty years in the past - and even then it would have been outdated.

I heard the rush of the waves behind the house.

Atlas grabbed for my hand. "We don't have to do this right now. You know where it is. You've seen it."

"We're doing this, Atlas. I have to do this."

I opened the door and climbed out.

I waited for Atlas to join me.

A part of me wanted to see Charles without knocking.

I wanted him to open the door first.

Or just appear from somewhere.

This man had a relationship with Gram.

A secret relationship at that.

When I told Hannah about what I had found, she insisted on seeing the pictures of Gram.

Her reaction was much like Atlas's.

She cheered Gram on over the pictures. Then she looked as close as possible to the pictures and praised Gram for fighting against gravity and actually winning a little bit.



Atlas grabbed my hand.

We walked together up the gravel driveway, then up the old wooden steps to the front door.

The air smelled like the ocean.

The sun shined so perfectly.

I told myself if the weather was bad, then maybe it was Gram sending a warning to stay away.

But today was perfect.

I reached out and knocked on the door.

*No turning back now.*

After a few seconds of silence, Atlas took his turn.

He hammered on the door so hard I thought it was going to break into pieces.

“Sweet Jesus, I’m on my way!” a voice boomed from inside the house.

“Great,” I whispered. “Now he’s pissed off.”

“Relax, love,” Atlas whispered.

“Don’t tell a pregnant woman to relax. Ever.”

“I just did.”

Before I could respond, the door opened.

There stood a man with thinned, messy blond hair.

An aged, chiseled jaw.

Bright blue eyes.

Wearing an unbuttoned, thin flannel-style shirt with a white t-shirt under that.

I instantly pictured him as a young man, surfing, breaking hearts with his moves and his eyes.

*Oh... Gram...*

“Can I help you?”

“Are you... Charles?” I asked.

“That depends on who’s asking,” he said.

“Are you the guy who was banging Hazel’s grandmother?” Atlas asked.

I gasped.

Charles’s eyes went wide.

He looked at Atlas.

Then he looked at me.

Then he smiled.

He suddenly recognized me.

“I’m sorry about him,” I said to Charles, referring to Atlas.

“What?” Atlas asked. “I had to break the ice.”

Charles reached for me. “You must be Hazel. And to answer the question...”

Charles laughed for a second.

Then he smiled.

*“Yes... I am the guy who was banging your grandmother.”*

## Chapter Thirty-Three

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### ATLAS



THE ICE WAS BROKEN, Hazel blushed at what Charles said, and we were suddenly inside a beautiful yet old beach house.

The place had a vibe to it.

The smell of old wood and fresh ocean.

The beach breeze lingering in the air.

Every window was open with thin curtains dancing and reaching toward us from the breeze.

Charles rushed right to the kitchen area.

“A drink,” he said. “Water? Iced tea? Kombucha? A beer?”

“She’d love a beer,” I said, nodding to Hazel.

“She better not,” Charles said.

“He’s an idiot,” Hazel said. “He’ll take a beer. I’ll take water, please.”

Charles had some expensive import beer I never heard of before.

He tossed a bottle my way.

He grabbed a beer for himself.

He then walked toward Hazel and handed her a bottle of water.

I saw him look at her stomach. “How far along?”

“Not far enough,” Hazel said. “I’m getting exhausted being pregnant.”

“Did... did your grandmother know?” Charles asked.

Hazel frowned and shook her head.

“Damn,” Charles whispered. He touched her left hand. “She’d be thrilled for you.”

Hazel pulled her hand away.

“Right,” Charles said. “Who am I to just start talking like we’ve known each other for years, right? That’s my fault. I just feel like I know you. You’ll have to forgive me for that. I’ll take a step back and let you navigate this. Okay?”

“Thank you for that,” Hazel said. She looked at me.

*She needs me right now.*

“Charles,” I said. “This is going to sound weird.”

“You found pictures and letters,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s exactly what we found. A... a box of stuff.”

“Erotic pictures of your grandmother?” Charles asked.

I started to laugh.

I turned my head.

That didn't stop Hazel from punching me.

"Did I say something wrong?" Charles asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Sorry. It's just... it was a shock. To both of us."

"Well, more to me," Hazel said. "Since she's my grandmother. Atlas is just... he's not even... uh... he's..."

"I'm the guy who knocked her up," I said.

That made Charles laugh.

"So this is interesting here," he said. "I take it you two... how do I say this..."

"Yeah," Hazel said. "We hooked up and I got pregnant."

"It was a contest," I said.

"A contest to get her pregnant?" Charles asked.

"No!" Hazel cried. "It was... it's a story."

"I feel like we both have stories to tell here," Charles said. "I'm curious about this pregnancy. You're curious about the pictures of your grandmother."

"I wish I could have a drink for this now," Hazel said.

"I'm a hockey player," I said.

Charles snapped his fingers. "That's where I know you from."

"The owners of the team had a contest to win a date with a hockey player. I was the hockey player."

"I was the winner," Hazel said.

“And you got the grand prize,” Charles said, pointing to her stomach.

“Yes,” she said.

“So it’s a fun mess right now,” I said. “Hazel has been cleaning things out around her grandmother’s house...”

Hazel looked at me, eyes wide.

“What?” I whispered.

“We don’t know what he...”

Charles reached for Hazel’s left hand again. “Hey. Hazel. Look at me.”

She looked at Charles.

He nodded. “I know. I know she’s gone. I was actually at the funeral.”

“You were?”

“I kind of hid in the back. I had to see it for myself. To know my Evelyn was gone.”

“Your Evelyn...”

Charles took a deep breath. “Why do I feel like this is going to turn hard?”

“Can’t be worse than finding naked pictures of your grandmother, right?” I asked.

Charles chuckled.

Hazel touched her forehead.

“I really wish I could make this more comfortable,” Charles said. “But I guess I’ll just shut my mouth and talk, huh?”

“Yes, please,” Hazel said.”

“How do you shut your mouth and talk?” I asked.

Charles winked at me. “I knew she was sick. She told me right away. She told me everything. I saw her as much as possible. It got really hard on the bad days though. And when she became more immobile. It almost became impossible to see her. That part broke my heart. But we talked on the phone every night.”

“You talked to her on the phone when I was living there?” Hazel asked.

“Did more than that,” Charles said. “I would visit while you were at work.”

“This gets crazier by the second,” she whispered.

“I gave her all that stuff back the last time I saw her,” Charles said. “I wanted her to have those memories for herself. To look back at our love. To remember it. I knew when she knew it was time to go, she was so sad. Worried about you, Hazel. Worried about her house. The condition it was in. Never selfish. Ever.”

“Can I ask a question about those pictures?” I asked. Hazel looked at me. “With Hazel’s permission, of course.”

“Hazel?” Charles asked.

She nodded.

“I don’t mean this in the wrong way,” I said. “How did that happen? I mean... the pictures and letters...”

“That’s a longer story,” Charles said. “She believed in temptation. That was our thing. We loved to be secretive. It felt like a forbidden affair. She would send me pictures and I would write her letters.”

“Did you ever send any pictures to her?” I asked.

“No,” Charles said. “I offered. She just wanted to tease me with herself. I really loved her. *Loved*. I still love her.”

“How did it all start?” Hazel asked. “Why didn’t she tell me? Are you married? Do you have kids?”

“Well, if you want to know the truth...” Charles took a drink of his beer. “I was in an unhappy marriage for a long time. I built my life through businesses. I once was a happy surfer. I smoked a lot of weed. I surfed. I wrote poetry. I thought I’d be someone famous someday but it just didn’t work out. I guess at some point I tried to grow up. I had a knack for business.”

“What does that have to do with her grandmother?” I asked.

“See? Now I’m just an old man babbling.”

“It’s okay,” Hazel said. “Ignore Atlas. He’s just mean all the time.”

“Hazel,” Charles said. He put his beer bottle down and touched her arms. “This is what I can tell you. I wasn’t happy. Money. A nice house. It’s not enough in life. It’s nothing actually. My wife and I were only together for the image. The tax benefits, if you believe it. We were two different people from the day we met. We knew it. I wanted to change her. She wanted to change me. Then we found out we couldn’t have kids. I met your grandmother and a fire was set off inside me.”

“How long, Charles?”

“Twenty years this June.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “You were having an affair for twenty years?”



“I promise you I never put your grandmother in a bad position,” Charles said. “I ended my marriage and moved into this house before anything happened.”

“But you did it because of her,” Hazel said.

Charles nodded.

Hazel turned and walked away.

“How did you meet her?” I asked.

“She was broken down on the side of the road,” Charles said. “So I did the kind thing and pulled over behind her. She came running out of her car after me like I was trying to hurt her. Yelling at me that she didn’t need my help. That it wasn’t my job to stop and save her.”

I let out a loud *Ha!* sound.

“Sounds like someone I know,” I said.

“Shut up,” Hazel said.

“Ah, I see it now,” Charles said. “You two. Anyway, I told Evelyn I wasn’t there to save her or be manly. I just wanted to check on her. She said she had it under control and I should leave. Mind you at that time here I am driving some fancy little sports car. Trying to prove to myself that my house and bank account were all I needed. So I drove away but not far. It was her eyes that did it. The second I saw Evelyn’s eyes, I just knew. For the next thirty minutes I planned it all out. What I was going to do.”

“You decided right then to leave your wife for my grandmother?” Hazel asked.

“It sounds crazy. It probably is. It definitely is.”

“As crazy as getting pregnant after one date,” I said.

Hazel rolled her eyes at me.

“I casually drove back that way. And I found your grandmother with her tire taken off. The brakes taken off. She had half the back of the car taken apart. I pulled over, got out again, and just started to laugh. She threw the damn tire iron right at me. Ended up bouncing off the ground and hitting one of my headlights. And that’s how we met.”

“There’s more to it,” Hazel said.

“Of course there is. I didn’t know how to fix her car. So I offered to call someone who could.”

Hazel looked at me. “Sounds like someone I know.”

“I’m just a nice guy,” I said.

“I had an old buddy who owned a garage. He showed up and helped. Then he pulled me aside and told me the way I was looking at Evelyn... he’d only seen that look one other time on my face. And that was when I was on the beach in the morning, ready to surf. Meaning it was love.”

“That quick,” Hazel said. “And my grandmother just went along with it?”

“Of course not. But we both knew something was there. She told me right away to stay away and call her when I got my shit in order. So that’s what I did. I ended my marriage. My ex knew it was coming. She was happy. As was I. I gave her everything. I just wanted the beach house and a few properties. Just so I could get by.”

“This is crazy,” Hazel said.

“It’s amazing,” I said. “What a story.”

“There’s a lot more, Hazel,” Charles said. “I am just about ready to go to an appointment.” He pointed to his chest. “Gotta

get the ticker checked.”

“Are you sick?” Hazel asked, lunging at Charles.

“No,” Charles said. “A few years ago I had a minor heart attack. Everything is fine but I have to get looked at every now and again. That’s all. Can we do this again? Can we meet up? Talk? I’d love to know more about her. I only saw a part of Evelyn’s life. She talked about you a lot. You were her world, Hazel. It’s an honor to meet you. I really debated how to reach out to you. But I didn’t know if you’d believe me or if you’d think less of your grandmother.”

“My grandmother had a secret twenty-year affair,” Hazel said. “And she took nudes and sent them to you. She got you to change your life. I think my grandmother is the most badass woman in the world.”

“I agree,” Charles said.

They smiled at each other.

I felt honored to witness such a moment.

Hazel had lost her grandmother, but in a way she just gained a part of her back.

Charles walked us outside.

I shook his hand.

Hazel hugged him.

Hours later - after a pizza and some happy tears from Hazel - she was sound asleep in my arms.

I sat up in bed.

I held her.

She slept.

Our baby kicked.

I rested my hand on Hazel's belly.

*It was by far the happiest moment of my life... so far.*

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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HAZEL



THE MORNING ROUTINE CONTINUED, and I didn't mind it one bit.

Waking up next to Atlas, then dozing back off.

Waking up again - this time for good - and leaving the bedroom to find Atlas shirtless. In the kitchen. Except this time he was sifting through brown paper bags with large wet grease stains on them.

“Cheater,” I said with sleepy eyes and a sleepy smile.

“You weren't supposed to see this, love,” he said.

“Have you been doing this all along?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And I'm good at hypnotizing you too. That's why you thought you saw me cooking food.”

“Hypnotizing, huh?” I asked. “That would explain how this happened.”

I placed my hands to my belly and smiled even bigger.

I couldn't believe how pregnant I felt.

The way my lower back just ached all the time.

The way my upper back fought hard to save some kind of posture.

It was probably just the usual stuff for pregnancy.

Anyone pregnant before would understand and nod their head at me.

I felt bloated. From my ankles to my neck.

My boobs were huge. Full, swollen, extremely sensitive.

My stomach? Forget about it.

My butt did round out very nicely though.

Of all things, I liked my butt when I was pregnant.

As far as Atlas went, his fingers twinged and the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know.

His eyes stared at my chest.

My massive chest.

Over two cup sizes bigger than normal.

It also didn't help that I wore a maternity tank top with thin shoulder straps.

In other words - I poured out everywhere.

Side boob. Top boob. My nipples hard because Atlas was looking at me.

He put his hands on the counter and actually bit at his bottom lip.

I sighed and walked toward him.

"Come on, say good morning," I said.

His hands touched my stomach. His mouth moved toward mine.

I grabbed his wrists and moved them to my chest.

“I’m not blind, you idiot,” I said. “You were staring at my boobs. So just say good morning. Then go get me a hoodie. Then explain why you didn’t make breakfast.”

When his hands touched my boobs, my toes curled and I let out a surprised *oh* sound.

Atlas’s thumbs moved over my nipples in a hurry.

I jumped back. “Okay, that’s enough.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks for two reasons.

One was the obvious. *Atlas was touching me.*

The second?

I had a weird feeling in my chest all of a sudden.

A bit of a *rushing* feeling.

Like my boobs were... *going to leak...*

Atlas walked away and got me a hoodie.

I swam in the thing but it was comfy and smelled like him.

“First off,” he said to me, “I didn’t feel like making breakfast. So I didn’t. Nothing shocking, okay? You looked so beautiful sleeping and I watched you for a little bit.”

I shook my head. “Don’t watch me sleep. Ever. This isn’t some cheap romantic comedy movie, Atlas. That’s weird.”

“Well, I was watching parts of you,” he smirked.

“Oh, wow. Waiting for a boob to fall out?”

“Exactly.”

“You’re...”

“What?” Atlas cut in. “Huh? What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Just nothing.”

Atlas hit a home run - *or scored fifty hockey goals* - with his choice of breakfast.

Greasy sandwiches on flaky croissants.

Egg, bacon and cheese.

Egg, sausage and cheese.

Egg whites with turkey sausage and no cheese.

Hash browns, perfectly crispy.

Fresh-squeezed orange juice that was tangy and pulpy. *Just the way I liked it.*

And then, of course, coffee.

“Okay, this is good,” I admitted after eating half a sandwich.

Atlas reached for my face and wiped away a clinging piece of the flaky croissant off my left cheek.

“It’s a place a few blocks away,” he said. “A hidden gem.”

“Guess you’re enjoying it while you can, right?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you said you’re not staying here for long,” I said. “So enjoy it while you can.”

“Something on your mind, love?” Atlas asked.

I blamed the food, caffeine, and as always, the hormones.

“It’s always on my mind, Atlas,” I said. “I think we’re long overdue for a deep conversation here about things. About us.”



About our baby. I mean, where are we going to live? Are you going to leave here when your contract is up?"

"This is on your mind?"

"Of course it is, Atlas. I don't know what I want to do. I can't imagine selling Gram's house but I don't know if that's where I want to live. My entire life is up in the air. And I'm pregnant. I need to figure something out here, Atlas."

I felt myself starting to shake.

Atlas hurried to my side and hugged me.

"I swore I'd never lie, love," he whispered. "I don't have answers to everything here. My only offer right now is to distract you. Make you live in the moment."

"And how do you plan on doing that?"

"Getting you dressed and doing something fun. Something a little crazy for you."

"Which is?"

"Getting you on the ice," he said.

"I'm pregnant."

"I'll protect you, Hazel. I swear on my life. I will protect you."

I stared into his eyes.

Dark, mean...

My body shivered.

I was seriously losing myself with this man.

Falling for him.

I had no idea if he meant protecting me from falling on the ice or protecting me through my life.

*Either way... I couldn't help myself but nod...*



THAT NOD SAW me finishing breakfast, getting changed, and going with Atlas to the *Sola Empire's* practice rink.

A full-size ice rink without the arena seating.

Cold, quiet, a constant hum coming from somewhere through the place.

He had access to the place twenty-four-seven. As did the rest of the team and the organization.

Today the coach had given everyone the day off.

Atlas wasn't here to work on his game though.

He took me into the locker room.

I saw familiar names, practice jerseys, opened gym bags on the floor.

"Nobody here but us, love," he said.

Atlas crouched before me and put ice skates on my swollen feet.

I almost told Atlas my feet weren't always like that.

Instead, I just watched him.

He laced up the skates, then stood up.

Much taller now because of his skates.

He offered me his hand and he got me to my feet.

"This feels stupid," I said. "If I fall..."

"You are not going to fall, love. I swear."

Atlas held me tight.

This really was a dumb idea.

I hated to say *this is what Atlas did to me...* but...

Atlas moved with me nice and slow out to the ice.

He turned on the ice and held my hands.

I stepped and felt my legs wiggle.

“This isn’t fair,” I said. “I’m pregnant. I have no balance at all.”

“That’s okay, love. We’re not doing backflips. We’re just getting onto the ice. The baby in your belly has it in her blood to be on the ice.”

“Oh, that’s a cheap thing to say.”

Atlas gently pulled at me.

I still had no balance, but he kept me standing.

I didn’t do a damn thing other than lock my knees.

Atlas did all the work.

Skating backward.

Keeping me close to him.

His right hand held my arm. His left hand touched my belly.

We skated to the middle of the ice and he stopped.

“There,” he said. “You did it. You’re ice skating.”

“You’re distracting me.”

“If I wanted to do that, I’d take you into the locker room for a little fun.”

I looked around. “Well, you said we’re alone.”

“Hazel...”

“What?” I asked. I batted my eyes, flirting. “Ice skating isn’t exactly fun for me, Atlas.”

“I’ll make it fun.”

He pulled at me and started to skate again.

This time he moved faster.

My heart raced.

This was so dumb yet it became so fun.

Watching the look on his face.

The way he moved on the ice.

It didn’t seem logical that a man his height and size could move the way he did.

He was almost graceful on the ice.

It was sexy as hell to see.

I was used to seeing him in his hockey gear and all that.

This was just Atlas in shorts and a long-sleeved shirt.

Those massive, muscular legs of his...

I completely lost my balance.

Atlas somehow spun around me and was now behind me.

Hands at my hips.

I grabbed his hands.

“You’re fine,” he whispered. “Focus on your feet. You’re fine, love.”

We began to skate like that.

Him behind me.

Like we were Olympic figure skaters or something.

We moved down the ice and then back up.

After a little while my legs felt wobbly and tired.

I didn't even have to say a word to Atlas.

He skated us to the edge of the ice and back into the locker room.

I sat down and Atlas took my ice skates off.

Then he took his off.

"Come with me, love," Atlas then said, offering his hand.

I saw the look in his eyes.

Instant heat flooded my body as I stood up and followed him.

When we ended up in the shower area, I bit my bottom lip.

Atlas turned to face me.

I made my move.

Grabbing for his shirt and lifting it.

We then moved in complete silence, pieces of clothing being removed one by one.

*His shirt. Pushing down his shorts. His thick cock springing free.*

*My shirt - gone. My pants - gently wrestled down and off.*

*My panties? Goodbye.*

*The only thing left... my bra...*

Atlas unsnapped my bra and it fell to the floor between us.

He pulled me close to him, hugging me.

Kissing me.

Slowly walking me toward one of the showers.

He turned the water on and kept us out of it until it was nice and hot.

When we stepped under the hot shower water, I groaned.

I put my head back.

Atlas rushed his mouth and tongue down to my chest.

Loving me. Kissing me.

His fingertips on his right hand touched between my legs.

I thrust my hips at him.

More than ready.

He touched me and I groaned loudly.

He kissed up my chest.

I met his mouth with mine.

We kissed harder, faster.

I grabbed for his hair and pulled.

I opened my legs as much as I could.

Atlas nestled himself between my legs.

My mind quickly recapped everything.

*I was having sex with a hockey player in the showers of a locker room.*

*I was also carrying that hockey player's baby.*

All reality.

And it all felt good.

*Even though we had avoided a serious conversation that really needed to happen, before I gave birth to our baby girl.*

## Chapter Thirty-Five

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### ATLAS



LYNNE WAS the ultrasound tech again.

I decided to break the tension.

“We know we’re having a girl,” I said. “We opened the envelope.”

Lynne looked at us. “A girl? No. You’re having a boy.”

“What?” Hazel asked, almost sitting straight up.

“I’m kidding,” Lynne said. “You’re definitely having a girl.”

“You also got me excited,” I said.

“So having a girl isn’t exciting to you?” Lynne asked.

“*I’m kidding,*” I said to Lynne. “There, now that the tension is out of here, can we get down to business?”

“What business is that?” Lynne asked.

“Tell me about my baby,” I said. “I want to know everything you’re doing.”

“Okay then,” Lynne said. “I’m just checking everything. Making sure she’s growing normally. You know, the boring stuff which is super important.”

“And?” Hazel asked.

“Your baby is healthy,” Lynne said. “Want to see her?”

“See her?” Hazel asked.

“Watch this,” Lynne said.

With a few buttons pressed, the screen suddenly changed.

Gone was the flat looking, grainy pictures of our daughter.

In its place was a thicker looking picture.

I had no idea what I was looking at until I saw a little foot.

“Is that...”

“That’s her right foot,” Lynne said.

“It looks so real,” Hazel said.

“It is real,” Lynne said. “All five little toes. Want to see her face next?”

Hazel and I looked at each other.

This time we agreed without hesitation.

Hazel slowly put her right hand over her mouth.

I grabbed her left hand.

I leaned forward.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Lynne whispered.

“I feel her moving,” Hazel said.

“Yeah. She’s a little stubborn right now.”

“Takes after her mother,” I said.



“Here we go,” Lynne said.

A little face appeared on the screen.

It was a smushed looking face, but a... *a real face*.

“Atlas,” Hazel said.

Her voice cracked.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

“She has your nose,” I said.

“My nose?” Hazel asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I agree,” Lynne said.

“She has your mouth though,” Hazel said.

“This is amazing,” I said.

“Let me take a picture of this...”

Lynne pressed more buttons.

We then got to look at the baby's hands.

Ten tiny fingers.

Then her face one more time.

I never felt anything like I did in my heart.

The good news was that the baby was healthy.

The better news was that we had pictures of the baby to look at.

We both kind of floated out of the office.

Outside.

To my truck.

I helped Hazel into the truck, then got in and started to drive.

I had no idea where we were going next.

Hazel suddenly gasped. "I want pizza."

I looked at her. "Craving?"

"You have no idea how hard it just hit me," she said. "I saw the neon sign over there." She pointed. "I want pizza right now. I want pizza with mushrooms on it."

"Mushrooms? Really?"

"Atlas," she said, touching her stomach.

"Okay, fine. What my girls want, they get."

*My girls.*

Referring to Hazel and the baby.

*I wasn't sure what I was becoming here...*



I ORDERED AN ENTIRE PIZZA. Covered in mushrooms.

I held Hazel's hand when we walked on the beach.

I sat down on the beach and helped her to sit down next to me.

Then she dove into the pizza.

Two slices down to my one.

"You don't like it?" she asked.

"I love it," I said.

"Liar."

“I don’t lie, Hazel. Mushrooms on pizza. I like it. I was surprised when you blurted it out.”

“Cravings,” she said. “They’re wild. I don’t even like mushrooms. But this is heaven.”

“Pizza, the beach, and me,” I said. “What more do you need?”

Hazel laughed. “Okay, *Mr. Romantic*.”

I reached for her face and wiped the corner of her mouth. “You have sauce all over your face, love.”

“Don’t make fun of me. I can’t help how I have to eat.”

“I’m not making fun of you, love. I’m amazed by you.”

“Amazed?”

“Listen, I have to say something. You probably don’t know what’s been on my mind. I heard everything you said to me, Hazel. It hits my heart when you talk. From the first time we had that... argument... over what I said.”

“When you basically said you would abandon me?”

“That’s not what I said, but sure,” I said. “And then you talking about it the other morning. Before we went ice skating.”

“Before you distracted me.”

I took her left hand. “Hazel, I’m not going anywhere. Ever. I’ll be anywhere you need me to be. You want to sell your grandmother’s house? Go for it. You want to keep it? Keep it. You want to live in it? Live in it.”

“I can’t ask you to live in that house, Atlas. It needs work. It’s not what I want for our daughter.”

“Fine. Keep the house. We’ll get our own place together. No need to sell it right away then.”

“Atlas...”

“I’m being serious, Hazel.”

“How are you going to be happy?”

“With you? With our daughter? That’s happiness.”

“Don’t say that,” she groaned. “That’s the romantic thing to say. You can’t think with your heart right now, Atlas.”

“I’m not thinking with my heart. Just believe in it. Believe in me. Believe in us. Believe in our family, love. This is what we are now. We’re family. I’m not asking you to run off and marry me, promise me we’re together forever and that we’re in love. I’m telling you what my intentions are. I’ll sign a deal right now with the *Sola Empire* to stay. I don’t mind it here. I like the guys. They’re becoming like friends to me.”

“Aw, you have friends now,” she teased.

“Hazel.”

“Okay, I get it. I’m listening. It’s just a lot to take in for me, at the moment. Okay? I don’t know how to respond to it all. I’ve never had someone like you, Atlas. I’ve never been pregnant. I’ve... I...”

I touched her face again. “Hazel. I’m in love with you.”

“Oh, fuck, I love you too,” she cried out.

We kissed.

She pushed the delicious mushroom-covered pizza box out of the way so she could grab for me.

We kissed like crazy.

The waves crashing next to us.

Her hands touching my face.

My hands touching her face.

We were in love.

I was in love with the woman I was set up to win a date with.

The woman who I got pregnant on that arranged date.

Our love story nothing but crazy stuff.

We finished making out when Hazel quickly broke away from the kiss and turned her head.

She let out a ground shaking burp.

She covered her mouth and blushed.

“Don’t say a word,” she said. “Just give me more pizza.”

We were in love. We made out. Now we were going to eat more pizza.

And she was going to have my baby.

I watched her take a big bite of another slice of mushroom pizza.

I smiled.

She covered her mouth. “Look away while I’m eating!”

“Don’t tell me that, love. You look so beautiful chomping on that pizza.”

“Fuck you, Atlas,” she said as she chewed.

She laughed. Then coughed.

Her face turned bright red.

She swallowed the big bite and took a breath.

“Don’t do that to me,” she said.

“So I’m not allowed to watch you eat,” I said. “And I’m not allowed to stare when you come walking through my apartment in that tank top in the morning.”

“I’ll make you a deal then,” she said. “You can stare at my boobs all you want. Just don’t watch me eat.”

“Deal,” I said. “Now take your shirt off so I have something to stare at.”

“Look at the ocean.”

I looked forward and smiled even bigger.

*Fuck, life could be good once in a while.*



I TOOK HAZEL HOME.

She had forgotten dinner plans with Hannah.

We made out again like crazy in the front seat of my truck.

I drove back to my apartment doing something I never did before.

*Planning shit out.*

Thinking about a house on the beach. Or a big condo.

Something suitable for the three of us.

*Three of us.*

It was a lot to think about and I wasn’t afraid to dive right in.

When I got back to my place, I grabbed a beer and stood at the living room window.

My phone rang.

I secretly hoped it was Hazel, calling to tell me the plans with Hannah fell through and she wanted to see me instead.

It wasn't Hazel calling.

It was Tucker.

“You sitting down?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Stand up, so you can celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“Pack your bags, Atlas. You're going to Boston.”

“I'm going... what?”

“One of the top defensemen blew out his shoulder last night. Season's over for him. But Boston thinks they can make a run. They're offering a lot to get you, Atlas. The biggest payday of your career is waiting.”

“Across the country,” I said.

“Yeah? So?”

I had no response.

Tucker was used to me saying *whatever* and having my few bags packed in an hour or less.

“You're in shock, huh?” Tucker asked. “Just wait until I tell you how much they're willing to pay you. This part you might want to sit down for.”

Tucker rattled off a gigantic number.

I moved the phone away from my ear.

I heard him call my name a couple times.

If I got traded then that meant I had lied to Hazel.

For the first time ever.

*It meant I wouldn't be around for her and our daughter...*



## Chapter Thirty-Six

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HAZEL



I FELT like I hadn't seen Hannah in years.

I talked more than she did, which was definitely a first for us.

There was so much to catch up on.

It was the first time I saw her since finding out the baby was a girl.

As soon as I entered the beachside restaurant, Hannah popped up and announced to everyone there I was having a baby girl.

That resulted in a round of applause and cheers from everyone.

Hannah also announced she was the designated greatest auntie in the world and that she was accepting free drinks.

Believe it or not, two people sent her drinks.

Two different guys.

Hannah had no interest in either guy but she enjoyed the drinks anyway.

We covered all topics.

From the hot sex with Atlas to the deep conversation with Charles.

Before I knew it, eleven rolled around.

I sat there for over four hours, talking.

Drinking water.

Eating pasta.

The only time I wasn't talking was when I had to go pee.

*Which felt like every five minutes.*

Hannah pointed that fact out, which I really appreciated and needed to hear.

I couldn't help where the baby sat, pushed, kicked, and punched.

After dinner came dessert.

Some kind of three-tiered chocolate cake thing, layered in even more chocolate.

Two slices were brought to the table and I somehow ate both slices.

I thanked Hannah for leaving me feel like a beached whale more than I already did.

She then offered to *roll me back home.*

*What a bitch.*

We ended up outside listening to the ocean for a few minutes.

Of all the things we talked about and all the things she had left to say, she chose Charles.

I wasn't expecting it.

She told me I should get to know the man who was sleeping with my grandmother.

When I got back home, Atlas was there, waiting for me.

I had to admit though... when I looked at the front porch and saw that gigantic, shaded figure waiting, I felt some panic. It was somewhat impossible to look at Atlas and not feel panic.

The panic subsided, then he and I started kissing on the porch.

Acting as though we hadn't seen each other in months.

We went into the house, kept kissing, kept touching, and eventually made it to my bed.

That's where I ended up falling asleep on Atlas's rock-hard chest.

He was warm, comfortable, and the smell of his cologne smelled like protection.

With my eyes shut, I apologized to him.

He hugged me tighter and whispered he loved me.

*I never slept so good in my entire life.*



THE NEXT MORNING breakfast waited for me in the kitchen.

But it came with a note from Atlas.

He had to leave early for a morning practice and what he wrote as *hockey shit*.

Atlas had breakfast delivered, along with coffee. And orange juice.

Atlas knew me. Atlas understood me.

Atlas loved me.

I read it over and over in his note.

*I love you.*

His handwriting.

His words.

I had a lonely breakfast, staring at Atlas's note, thinking about one other person.

*Charles.*

The last living piece of Gram's life.

I finished eating, took a shower, and made the decision to drive to Charles's house.

I had to see him again. I had to talk to him again.

He had been so welcoming to me.

I had been a little standoffish - maybe expected, considering all I found out about my grandmother.

*Those pictures...*

As I pulled into the gravel driveway, I looked at the old beach house and the old car, and I caught myself smiling.

Atlas called me.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm okay, love. I have some time to kill before the game."

“That’s right. You have an early game.”

“I like it. I’ll be done and home early. Then you’re all mine.”

“Are you flirting with me over the phone?”

“What if I am?”

“I think it’s kind of sexy,” I said. “I wish you’d called me earlier.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, if I was home right now. And you were flirting. I just might have to touch myself.”

Atlas laughed. “Why can’t you touch yourself right now?”

“I’m sitting in a driveway,” I said. “I’m at Charles’s house.”

“Oh, I can see how that would be weird.”

“Very weird.”

“I’m going to think about that though, love. You touching yourself.”

“What if you get hard during the hockey game?” I asked.

“Then I’ll have two hockey sticks to use.”

I burst out laughing.

“I love you, Hazel,” Atlas said. “I’m happy you’re there.”

“Me too,” I said. “Without you. No need for perverted comments.”

“Your grandmother was the pervert,” Atlas said. “Not me.”

“Love you too, Atlas. Good luck at the game. Score a goal or break someone’s jaw.”

I climbed out of my car slowly. Without a choice.

My stomach was in the way every second of my life now.

I took a few steps and paused.

I touched my back.

Everything ached.

Head to toe.

Muscles, nerves... just... everything.

I took a deep breath and focused on the front door to Charles's beach house.

"I can do it," I whispered.

And I did do it.

I knocked on the door and Charles answered.

He smiled ear to ear.

"I was just thinking about you," he said.

"Good or bad?"

"Good. I can't believe we parted ways without exchanging phone numbers."

"I thought the same," I said. "How's your heart?"

"My heart?"

"You had an appointment..."

"Oh, right," Charles laughed. "I wasn't sure if you meant literally or in a romantic sense." He ushered me into his house. "My heart is just fine. Ticking like normal."

"What about the other part?" I asked. "The romantic part."

"Heartbroken," he said without hesitation. "Can I get you something to drink?"

“Vodka?” I asked.

“Water,” he said.

“Fine.”

Charles got me a bottle of water.

He glanced down at my stomach.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“I feel huge.”

“Pregnancy is a miracle.”

“Don’t give me that,” I said. “We’re here to talk about the obvious and it’s not me being pregnant.”

“What do you want to know? I’ll tell you anything.”

“Good. You said she talked about me.”

“You were her world.”

“Why didn’t I know about you?”

Charles nodded. “That’s a tough one. We loved what we had. Your grandmother was the greatest love I ever had.”

“But why keep it a secret like this? Didn’t you want a life with her?”

“I had a life with her, Hazel,” Charles said. “The best life ever. I bet if you think long and hard you’ll figure it all out. Trips she took. Times she wasn’t home.”

“So you’re telling me she was never on vacation,” I said. “She never went to Vegas with friends? She never went on a seven-day cruise?”

Charles chuckled.

“She lied to me,” I said.

“She embraced the love we had,” Charles said. “Being secretive. Flirting about getting caught. There was something to it. We just enjoyed it. I’d come home and she’d be here waiting. Or I’d find a note on my porch.”

“With pictures,” I said.

“With pictures. I’d write her back. We’d pass each other in public. Just for fun.”

“This is insane. You know that, right?”

“It was our love. Now, did we have deeper talks? Of course we did.” Charles pointed to his couch. “We sat right there so many times to talk about life together. Debating what to do. We pictured big holidays, with you and Hannah...”

“She talked about Hannah?”

Charles nodded. “She called Hannah her adopted granddaughter. Your best friend, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Your grandmother was a special person, Hazel,” Charles said. “I didn’t blow up my life for her... but I kind of did. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“You have to know how crazy this is for me.”

“I can’t even imagine it.”

“So you knew she was sick and...”

Charles nodded. “She told me in person. We were walking on the beach right behind this house. She stopped, faced me and told me she was sick. Her eyes filled with tears and I knew it was serious. She told me the truth. I told her I would do anything she needed. I actually had a fantasy of her moving here. Letting me care for her. Letting her have this place to see



the ocean and all that. She wanted to be home. I respected that. Then you came to take care of her. I told her we could tell you everything, so you didn't have to uproot your life. She said you would be too stubborn to listen."

"True," I said. "But when she was stuck in bed though..."

Charles swallowed hard and nodded. "That was hard for me. Not seeing her. She did call me a lot. After you went to bed."

"You two sneaking around like teenagers," I said.

"That's exactly what it was. It kept us alive, Hazel."

"That's why she hung around for so long. Because of you."

"I don't know about that. Your grandmother was very stubborn. If a doctor told her she would die in six months, you knew she was going to live at least six months and one day just to rub it in that doctor's face."

I laughed.

"The last time we spoke she told me it was getting bad," Charles said. "She told me she wanted me to close my eyes and picture us on the beach. I won't go into details from there."

"You had phone sex with my dying grandmother?"

"Correction. Your dying grandmother had phone sex with me."

"And then what?" I whispered.

"I think you know," Charles said. "I didn't hear from her again. I just knew. The entire day just felt weird. I didn't hear from her that night. It really started to sink into me. Then I saw

the obituary and I just sat on the couch for hours. She was gone. My dearest Evelyn was gone.”

“You went through that alone,” I said.

Charles’s eyes glistened.

I hurried toward him and hugged him.

He hugged me back and I felt him weep.

My eyes spilled tears too.

“I wish I knew,” I whispered. “I wish you weren’t alone.”

“It’s okay, Hazel. We can’t change anything about it now. But look what happened. You found me.”

I stepped back. “I only found out because of the pictures.”

“Speaking of those,” Charles grinned.

“Ew,” I said. “You want them back?”

“What are you going to do with them?”

I opened my mouth, half ready to laugh, and I felt a twinge in my lower back.

I inched to my right and leaned against the couch.

“You should sit down,” Charles said. “Come on, sit down and relax. We can keep talking.”

I reached for Charles and my knees suddenly gave out.

I let out a scream and Charles caught me.

The two of us fell to our knees.

“Hazel?” Charles asked.

My mouth opened again.

A surge of pain ripped through my entire body.

I had no breath for a second.

And then I suddenly did.

My breath and voice came back as I felt a rush...

I gasped and looked down.

“Hazel, talk to me,” Charles said.

I lifted my gaze and felt my entire body shaking.

*“I think I’m going into labor right now.”*

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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### ATLAS



JAGO STRETCHED ON THE ICE.

Joe and I stood next to one another, eyeing up Colorado.

“They always find a way to beat us,” Joe said. “It’s like they just have this...”

“There’s always that one team,” I said. “If we can’t win, we can still make a statement.”

Rome skated toward us. “I hate these fucking guys. Up there chirping at Sebastian.”

My lip curled.

There was just way too much on my mind.

The offer from Boston waited on the table.

And it really wasn’t my decision to make either.

Certain aspects of the game and my career I had no control over.

The thought of leaving the *Sola Empire* didn’t seem real.

Getting on a plane and flying across the country.

Throwing on my gear for another team.

Meeting new players. A new coaching staff. Fitting into a new system of hockey.

I had done it so many times in my career.

This time though...

“What do you think, Atlas?” Joe asked me. “I think we can let this game go as long as we fight.”

Jago skated over. “What am I missing?”

“We’re playing out Atlas’s fights tonight,” Sebastian said.

“I hate these fucking guys,” Jago said.

“I hate everything,” I muttered, and skated forward.

“What’s up his ass?” Joe asked.

I should have just turned around and punched Joe.

The guys didn’t know about anything happening.

Nobody did.

*Not even Hazel.*

I hadn’t told her about my call from Tucker.

I showed up at her house. I waited for her.

I kissed her.

I ended up in bed with her.

Maybe in some cheap way of making an excuse, my plan had been to make love to her and then talk to her. Find a way to explain how these trades worked and what my intentions were.

*I'll fly to Boston for practices and games. As soon as I'm done, I'll fly back here.*

Which Hazel would have been able to see through in a second.

Not living in the city where you played made life difficult.

And I wasn't going to ask Hazel to come with me.

Instead of getting naked and having fun, Hazel fell asleep.

I held her and stayed wide awake most of the night, trying to think of a way to make it work.

The only thing that truly came to mind was retiring.

Just calling it quits, cashing out and figuring out the rest of my life with Hazel and our daughter.

While I wasn't living on contracts the size of Sebastian's or Jago's, I did have a lot of money sacked away that I could easily live off of for the rest of my life.

But I didn't want to stop playing hockey.

Hockey was my first love. My only true love.

Until I met Hazel. Until I felt the first punch and kick from our daughter in Hazel's womb.

All the emotions mixed together like a toxic soup and produced one thing.

*Raw anger.*

That's why I skated up the ice the way I did.

The arena was starting to fill up.

I wanted to give everyone a show.

I stopped at center ice and watched Colorado skate.

Their biggest defenseman stood six-five and was built like a boxer.

“Hey, Hatch!” I called out.

He looked at me.

“Fuck yourself,” I said. “Go near any of my guys again and I’ll break your fucking jaw.”

When the fans noticed what was happening they started to cheer.

Then the coaching staff saw it.

Then the refs.

Hatch skated toward me, along with three other players.

I knew my team would have my back too.

Hatch came for me and slapped his stick to mine.

I hacked my stick at his, breaking both of our sticks.

Then I grabbed him and pulled him toward me.

The place erupted.

A pre-game fight was a rare sight and a nice treat.

This was how I could send a message to my team, to Colorado, to the fans, and to... whoever else.

In reality, I just wanted to punch someone in the face.

So that’s what I did.

I hit Hatch in the face.

He started to drop but caught himself.

He swung back at me.

Now we were fighting.

Throwing heavy and hard punches like crazy.

A full pre-game fight broke out.

Both hockey benches cleared off.

The refs got into the middle of it all and ended up kicking both teams off the ice.

The fans cheered for us and *booed* the refs for stopping the fight.

When I walked into the locker room everyone began to applaud for me.

Rome came up to me and punched me in the chest.

“Now that’s how you set the tone!”

“I did not see that coming,” Jago said.

“You took off on us,” Joe said.

“I don’t think this game is going to calm down for a second now,” Sebastian said.

“Good,” I said. “Fuck them.”

That’s when Henry came up to me.

“You okay, Atlas?”

“Just playing the game,” I said. “That’s all, Henry. Just playing the fucking game.”

I pushed by Henry and walked to my locker area.

Coach Denny decided to give a little speech.

He talked about playing hard, rough, yet smart.

He wanted us to make a statement not just with our fists but also with our sticks.



His voice droned on as I sat down and caught myself falling deep into thought again.

Hazel. Our daughter. Boston. *Sola Empire*. Maybe retiring. But I wasn't going to retire. But if I wasn't around for my daughter. For Hazel...

I felt someone hit me with their stick.

I looked up and saw Jago.

“Ready?”

“Yeah,” I said. I stood up. “I'm ready.”

“You're going to get kicked out of this game, aren't you?” Jago asked.

“Maybe.”

Jago smiled. *“There's no way in hell you're on the ice for the finish of this game.”*



FROM THE FIRST PUCK DROP...

Sebastian won the face-off and dumped the puck.

Hatch looked right at me, a cut on his face.

He dropped his gloves right away.

Everyone started to cheer.

The refs even blew their whistles, not wanting it to happen.

I dropped my gloves and my stick and Hatch and I collided together.

Nothing graceful about this kind of fighting.

It was a war.

Throwing punches with the refs screaming at us to stop.

We finally both ended up on the ice.

Still throwing punches at one another.

Once we were peeled apart, I got to my skates and threw my hands into the air.

I licked my bottom lip and tasted blood.

The arena swelled with wild cheers.

I went right to the penalty box and took a seat for my five-minute major.

Hatch got up and did the same.

The puck was dropped again.

Sebastian won the face-off again. This time he passed it quickly to Rome.

Rome took a quick shot on goal.

A perfect shot.

But a great save too.

Henry made sure to crowd the net in case of a rebound.

There was no rebound.

Two players went after Henry.

Another fight broke out.

Henry defended himself.

Joe came in and threw everyone away from Henry.

No penalties called on that one.

The game then settled for a few minutes.

Real hockey, moving up and down the ice.

A shot here. A shot there.

Jago looked really good.

I looked up and saw I was down to ten seconds until I could get out of the penalty box.

I looked to my right.

Hatch looked at me.

We both nodded at the same time and stood up.

The fans already started to cheer, knowing what was going to happen next.

The fans even counted for me...

*Three!*

*Two!*

*One!*

Hatch and I got out of the penalty boxes and went right for each other again.

This time we paid respect to the fight.

Pushing up our sleeves, then grabbing for the tops of each other's jerseys.

We swung at the same time.

I hit him. He hit me.

My head buzzed for a second.

Hatch had fists like a hammer.

I hit him again.

He tried to hit me a second time but I lifted my other hand and drove my fist into his jaw.

Then we just attacked each other again.

My head thought about Boston. The flight to and from. The hours waiting to get there and to get back home. I thought about being at a game out there and having something happen with Hazel. Or our daughter. And I couldn't get there.

Hatch and I ended up on the ice again.

This time it took Henry to pull me away.

He dragged me away, screaming at me.

I didn't hear a word he said.

All I wanted to do was to get back to Hatch and keep smashing his face.

Henry finally spun me around.

"That's enough, Atlas!"

"Fuck you!" I yelled back.

"Hey!" Henry pushed at my chest. "You have to go right now!"

"Are they kicking me out?"

From the corner of my right eye I saw Coach Denny standing on the bench, waving his hands. Pointing at me.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

My heart sank.

*The trade went through.*

*I'm no longer part of the Sola Empire.*

*My contract and career now belongs to Boston.*

"Get off the fucking ice," Henry yelled to me. "Go take care of her."

"Take care of who?" I asked.

Henry grabbed my jersey. “I’m trying to fucking tell you something, Atlas. It’s about Hazel!”

“Hazel? What’s...”

*“She’s having the baby right now!”*

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

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HAZEL



*I REMEMBER CHARLES'S VOICE.*

*Calm and soothing.*

*Touching my upper back.*

*Giving me his hand to hold and squeeze.*

*He told me we need to get to the hospital.*

*He promised he was a great driver and knew where to go.*

*But we had to get to his car.*

*Unless I wanted him to call an ambulance.*

*I remember looking up at him and realizing he was supposed to be here for this moment.*

*It should have been Gram though.*

*But it wasn't Gram.*

*It couldn't be Gram.*

*I remember shutting my eyes and desperately wanting to talk to her.*

*Charles stayed calm. Telling me again that I needed to fight to stand and get out to the car.*

*I have no idea how I managed it.*

*I lost track of time during those moments.*

*But I ended up in Charles's car.*

*He drove.*

*The pain increased.*

*My lower back. My sides. My stomach.*

*Pain down between my legs.*

*Pain down the backs of my legs and into my feet.*

*I never felt anything like it before.*

*For some reason a little voice in my head said this wasn't just labor. This was something else.*

*I shut my eyes for a little bit, trying to breathe.*

*Charles sat next to me, driving, and he took deep breaths. Loud, deep breaths. His way of helping. Then he began to hum. Soft, sweet notes. Even more soothing than his voice.*

*I remember my teeth chattering.*

*Pain and fear hitting hard.*

*"Atlas," I said at one point.*

*"Of course," Charles said.*

*"Hannah..."*

*"Yes."*

*"Atlas has a game. I can't call him. I can't tell him..."*

*Finally, tears flowed.*

*Charles touched my hand and asked for my phone.*

*The first thing he did?*

*Called Hannah.*

*I remember hearing his voice telling her what was happening.*

*“I need Atlas!” I cried out.*

*“You’ll get him,” Charles said to me. “I promise you that, Hazel.”*

*“He’s at a fucking game!” I yelled. “He’s at a fucking game playing!”*

*I vaguely remember maybe hearing Charles laugh a little.*

*Maybe he and Hannah were making fun of me.*

*If they were - I hated them.*

*They didn’t know this pain.*

*Also – did anyone calculate how many weeks I was?*

*I was too early! Way too early!*

*I still had months to go!*

*I could not be in actual labor here!*

*Thoughts racing, they took over the pain for a little bit.*

*At some point, I remember being helped into a wheelchair.*

*Charles was there.*

*Two nurses in baby blue scrubs were there.*

*I remember yelling, “I’m having a girl! Why aren’t you wearing fucking pink? I think I have to pee! I think I have to poop! I have to push! Help me!”*

*I remember seeing Hannah running toward me.*



*I remember crying. A lot.*

*Hannah hugging me, telling me one thing.*

*“He’ll be here.”*

*I don’t remember from there how I ended up in a hospital bed, in a labor and delivery room.*

*It all happened in waves.*

*In the bed.*

*Nurses around me.*

*Hannah grabbing my hand.*

*Charles at my side too.*

*Two doctors rushing in and out of the room.*

*They talked. They used medical terms.*

*I heard one word that made me want to scream.*

*Nothing made sense in those tender moments.*

*It was too soon to have the baby.*

*It wasn’t supposed to be like this.*

*I had my entire birthing experience all planned out.*

*It was supposed to be a random day.*

*A day when Atlas was right by my side.*

*Maybe we were in the shower together. Maybe we were in the bed together.*

*Maybe we were on the couch, watching hockey or some romance movie.*

*Then my water would break.*

*Atlas would freak out for a second, then laugh.*

*He'd make a comment about me being wet and then I'd call him an asshole and then he'd hurry me to the hospital.*

*I had it all planned out.*

*And it wasn't supposed to be this.*

*This looked like a medical emergency...*

*"Okay, Hazel, it's time we have a talk here," a voice said.*

*A doctor looked at me and smiled.*

*"Atlas," I said. "I need Atlas. I'll squeeze my legs shut tight!"*

*"Should have done that on the first date," I heard Hannah say.*

*I remember looking at her.*

*The look in my eyes must have scared her because she jumped back and apologized right away.*

*I remember screaming for Atlas over and over.*

*The doctor kept talking to me and I shook my head.*

*I wanted to hit the doctor but Charles jumped into the frame and held my left hand.*

*I remember the nurses saying something.*

*The tension in the room grew.*

*The doctor said something to Charles.*

*It was something along the lines of I needed to push or I was going to end up in big trouble...*

*I remember still yelling for Atlas.*

*"It's time to do this, Hazel," Charles said to me.*

*"We've got you," Hannah said.*

*I remember being ready to scream even louder.  
Ready to break windows.  
Ready to...  
The hospital room door flew open and in ran Atlas.  
He ran right to my side.  
Both Charles and Hannah backed off.  
I reached for Atlas.  
He reached for me.  
I remember hugging him and smelling him.  
He stunk like sweat.  
He smelled like a hockey game.  
He was here!  
He made it!  
I loved him.  
But I was still terrified...*



I LOOKED AT ATLAS.

His eyes were wide and he nodded at me.

“It’s too much,” I whispered.

Tears streamed down my cheeks.

Atlas leaned down and kissed one of the tears on my cheek. “It’s never too much, love. You’re stronger than you think. You’re the love of my life, Hazel. You’re about to give birth to our daughter. You own the rest of my life now, love. I

will give you every second of my entire life to cherish you for this moment.”

That only made me cry harder.

Atlas kissed my forehead.

“We’ve got to do this right now, Hazel,” the doctor said. “Last big push.”

I struggled to push because I just knew it was too early.

It didn’t make sense to me what was happening.

There were weeks to go. Months...

I groaned and felt the painful need to push.

I tucked my chin and took a deep breath, smelling Atlas.

I let out a weak yell, pushed, and then...

That was it.

My body collapsed back to the bed and I didn’t know how to feel.

I looked down and wanted to live the moment I had been thinking of for so long.

Hearing the scream of our daughter.

Feeling her being placed onto my chest.

Looking at Atlas as we met our daughter for the first time.

Only none of that happened at all.

The entire room became fuzzy again.

I looked at Atlas and saw him looking at the doctor.

The doctor and nurses were quick to work.

“What’s happening?” I called out. “Where’s the baby? Where’s my daughter?”

“We’ve got her,” the doctor called out.

Atlas looked at me.

I nodded.

He broke away from me and ran toward the doctor.

Charles got in the way and said something to Atlas.

My head was so foggy and my body so achy and tired...

I looked to my right and Hannah was still there.

I reached for her.

She grabbed my hand and leaned down.

“You did amazing,” Hannah said.

“I want to hold her,” I said. “I want to hold my daughter.”

I started to cry.

Atlas came rushing back to my side.

I looked at him.

I told him to get our daughter.

I saw the look on his face.

The man so huge and strong... and he was scared.

“Hazel,” another doctor said to me. “Focus on me, okay?  
We have to finish up here.”

“What? Am I having another baby?”

“No,” the doctor said. “Just one baby. I promise.”

I realized what was happening next.

The stuff they don’t show in shows and movies.

What happened after giving birth.

“Atlas, stay with her,” I said. “Please swear to me you’ll stay with her.”

I knew he was torn on what to do.

His first impossible decision as a father.

When it should have been a joyous moment.

A moment of me and him holding our daughter, loving her, talking to her, looking at each other, falling more in love with one another.

“Go,” I growled at Atlas. “Tell her I love her...”

My chin quivered.

This was impossible for me.

Unable to just climb out of the hospital bed and take care of my daughter.

I didn’t even get to see her yet.

I didn’t even get to hear her.

Atlas kissed my cheek and walked away.

Charles took his place.

Charles leaned down and began to hum like he had done in the car.

“Thank you for being here,” I managed to say to him.

“She would be so proud of you right now, Hazel. And actually, she is proud of you. I’m not sure what you believe, but I believe in it. I believe she’s here right now. In some way.”

I didn’t need to hear that either.

I just wanted my daughter in my arms.

I just wanted Atlas with me.

I just wanted my family.

I listened to Charles hum.

I felt Hannah holding my hand.

I looked to make sure I could still see Atlas as he stood with our daughter.

My body and heart and mind felt split into fifty pieces at once.

The whole pregnancy and birth thing was nothing like the movies at all.

That made me angry, even though I knew it wasn't real.

I closed my eyes and put my head back.

I suddenly saw Gram.

Reaching for me, arms open, wanting a hug.

I told myself I was losing my mind.

*When I opened my eyes and looked again, I saw that they were taking my daughter away.*

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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### ATLAS



I HATED DANCING AROUND ANSWERS.

I grabbed Dr. Scanil's arm.

Maybe too tight.

He looked at my hand, then at me.

"Yeah," I said. "I know. Call security. I dare you to try and get me kicked out of here."

"What can I do for you, Atlas?"

I released my hold. "I'm tired of the runaround here. Talk to me straight, doc. Right now."

"Let's step away for a second," Dr. Scanil said.

Halfway down the hallway, I stopped.

That was far enough for me from my daughter for right now.

Dr. Scanil folded his hands in front of himself. "She's very premature."



“I saw.”

My heart twisted.

I never saw such a tiny baby before in my life.

She was beautiful. But small. Really small.

Not that I was a small man though.

But...

“Right now it’s about finding out what we can,” Dr. Scanil said.

“Meaning what? I need answers.”

“Okay. Listen. We have the best NICU in the state. Okay? I’m sure as a parent - as a father - it’s hard to look at. She’s premature which means she’s not ready to be handling certain functions on her own yet. That’s the keyword here. *Yet*. That’s why she’s...”

“In that thing,” I said. “Incubator? Like a baby chicken?”

Dr. Scanil smiled. “Atlas, I promise you. She’s in the best hands and care possible. There’s nothing that could have prevented any of this. It happens. Okay? It may not seem like it, but everything went well. All things considered.”

I nodded. “Hazel has to see her daughter.”

“Of course she does,” Dr. Scanil said. “If there’s anything we can do to ease your mind. Or hers. Let me know.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t... it’s really premature, right?”

Dr. Scanil nodded. “Yes.”

“So it’s not all sunshine and rainbows?”

“Well, anything medically...”

“Doc, I’m laying it on the line here for myself and my family. I have to know the worst so I can prepare for it and protect my family.”

“I believe in the same, Atlas. I believe in preparing for the worst. And then I pack it up and toss it over my shoulder. I leave it there. I know what you want to ask me. I know what the answer is. I refuse to say it. If that makes me a bad doctor right now, then fine. In my mind, I can’t see you leaving this hospital without your daughter in your arms. Okay?”

My jaw tightened like it never had before.

Dr. Scanil excused himself with a gentle reminder that he had other patients to care for.

It wasn’t just my daughter in the NICU.

It wasn’t just my daughter facing an unfair fight the second they were born.

But it was my daughter.

*My daughter.*

I stepped back and bumped against the wall.

My knees wanted to give out.

I didn’t allow it to happen.

My throat tried closing up.

I told my brain to stop acting this way.

Just feet away in a room my daughter fought for her life.

That’s what Dr. Scanil didn’t want to say and what I wanted to ask.

We knew the truth.

She was born too early and there was a risk of...

“No,” I said.

I pushed from the wall and took a deep breath.

If my daughter was strong enough to fight, so was I.

If Hazel was strong enough to give birth, then I was strong enough to stand tall and protective for both her and my daughter.

*I had to take care of my family.*



THE FIRST THING Hazel did after waking from a nap, was asked to see our daughter.

I didn't hesitate at all over it.

We both had to be there for her.

Talk to her. Touch her when we were allowed.

Then eventually hold her.

*Eventually.*

*Waiting to hold my daughter.*

*What kind of cruel punishment is this?*

Hazel got to her feet as I held her hands.

“You know I can just push you around,” I said.

“I'm walking.”

“It's quicker if-”

“Atlas,” she growled.

Her voice cracked already.

“Walking it is,” I said.

“You saw her, right? How is she?”

“I told you already. She’s beautiful. She looks like her mother. Took my breath away when I saw her.”

“Not just because of her size?”

“Hazel...”

“What did I do wrong, Atlas? Why did it happen this way?”

“You did nothing wrong. I already talked to the doctor. It happens. It’s just... I don’t know, love. Think of it this way. You were with someone. Charles did the right thing.”

“She’s not supposed to be here yet,” Hazel said. “We don’t know what we’re doing yet, Atlas. We don’t have a house or a place for her. We don’t have a nursery. We don’t have anything. I’ve been so distracted with everything else. With Gram’s house. With those pictures. With Charles. With you.”

“I already told you what the plan is, love,” I whispered. I touched her face. “It’s all going to work out. Think of it this way. We get to find a place and get the nursery together while we get to see our daughter.”

“How can we leave this place without her?”

“It won’t be easy.”

“I’m never leaving.”

“Okay,” I said. “I support anything you want, need, and decide. Now let’s go meet her. Together. As *Mom* and *Dad*.”

That’s when Hazel cried again.

I pulled her against me and held her tight.

Gone was the hard, oversized belly. Gone were the little flutters, kicks and punches.

That part hit me hard.

But our daughter was here.

I didn't give Hazel a choice when I guided her to the wheelchair.

I pushed her from her hospital room and we traveled to the NICU together.

As we approached our daughter, I felt my eyes get misty.

I blinked a few times and told myself to hold it together.

Hazel let out a gasping sob, then covered her mouth.

"There's our daughter," I said. "Isn't she perfect?"

Hazel looked up at me. "Atlas..."

"She's beautiful. And you know she's stubborn. Just like you. And she loves to fight. Just like me."

"Juniper," Hazel said.

"What?"

Hazel got closer to the baby.

Her hands against the clear glass or plastic or whatever it was that protected our daughter.

"That's her name," Hazel said. "Juniper Evelyn." Hazel looked back at me, smiling with tears in her eyes. "If that's okay with you?"

I crouched down and held Hazel's hand.

"I think that's the most beautiful name I've ever heard in my life. That's our daughter. Our little Juniper Evelyn."

"Yeah?" Hazel asked.

"Yes," I said.

We both looked at our daughter.

We were full of love.

I tried my hardest not to look at the variety of medical devices hooked up to her.

When I did, I reminded myself that each one had a job and was there to help. Not to hurt. But to help.

“I’m so in love with her,” Hazel said.

“Me too.”

“I want to see her eyes. And I want to hear her cry.”

“I think you’ll regret saying that in the middle of the night when we get home,” I said.

“Never. Not once. Ever.”

Hazel and I looked at each other.

We finally had the chance to have our first real kiss as new parents.

After a few seconds, Hazel stopped kissing me. “I can’t believe this.”

“Don’t think about anything but what’s happening now. We have to give her all our strength and love.”

“I know. I want to read to her.”

“I’ll get a book for you.”

“Don’t leave though.”

“I won’t.”

I stood up and reached for my phone.

I had already texted Tucker and Henry to let them know what was happening.

The *Sola Empire* lost the game in overtime, not that it mattered at all to me or my life.

I texted Tucker to grab some books on his way to the hospital.

Henry had already texted back that they were on their way.

It had become sports news that I left in the middle of the game because Hazel went into labor early. It was probably the most I had ever been mentioned on any sports show or on social media other than people making lists of their favorite hockey fights.

“Hey, Juniper Evelyn,” Hazel said. “I hope you know how much I want to hold you. And I’m going to hold you very soon, okay? You just keep resting. I’m going to be right by your side the whole time. Either me or your dad.”

I reached for Hazel’s right hand.

She took a deep breath.

She fought tears once more.

We fell into silence.

It wasn’t exactly comfortable.

Just reality really starting to set in for both of us.

I had officially reached my worst nightmare as a father already in that I couldn’t do a thing for my daughter.

I pictured myself building a toy for her.

Or helping her learn to ice skate.

Helping her learn to ride a bike.

Holding her in the ocean so she knew she was safe.

I pictured myself checking under her bed and in her closet for monsters.

I pictured myself dressing up in a suit and buying her flowers for a *Daddy-Daughter* date dance thing where I would show her how she needed to be treated by any other person out there in the world.

But this?

Watching her in the NICU?

I couldn't do a thing.

A short while later, Tucker arrived with a book.

Hazel wanted to read to Juniper Evelyn so I stepped out of the room.

The guys had arrived too.

I met them near the elevators.

They all attacked me at the same time.

A bunch of huge hockey players wanting to hug me.

Rome confessed he loved me.

Jago wanted to know how Hazel was doing.

Of course they all asked about Juniper Evelyn.

They all wanted to see her.

“She needs to know we're here,” Joe said.

“That she's protected and loved,” Sebastian said.

“She's our family now,” Rome said. “I'm her uncle.”

“I don't know what you are,” I said to Rome with a smile.

“How is Hazel?” Jago asked again.

I glanced at him. “Keep it in your pants, okay?”



“I’m not being like that...”

We all laughed.

Then Tucker showed up.

“I think we need to talk,” he whispered to me.

I took a deep breath. “Let me talk to these guys for a second.”

My jaw tightened. My heart ached more than ever.

“I need to tell you guys something,” I said. “It’s about the team. This season.”

“We got wind of it already,” Sebastian said.

“There’s more gossip around this league than in a high school,” Henry said.

“So you know?” I asked.

“We know,” Rome said. “Doesn’t change how we feel about you.”

“Boston though?” Jago asked.

“Not my choice,” I said. “This is how it is for guys like me. I’m bounced around. It’s my career. This one is going to hurt. I haven’t told Hazel yet. I can’t bring myself to just utter the words. That I’m going to be traded to Boston. Across the country. I just can’t imagine-”

Joe clamped a strong left hand down to my right shoulder. “Well... you did just fine now.”

I saw the look on his face.

I turned my head.

I saw Hazel in the wheelchair, Hannah behind her, pushing it.

Hazel dropped the book she read to Juniper Evelyn to the floor and covered her mouth.

*Well, now everyone knew what was happening.*

## Chapter Forty

---

HAZEL



I SAT up in the hospital bed and stared out the window.

It was all I could do to keep from crying.

I told myself no matter what happened in my personal life, the number one thing was being there for Juniper Evelyn. The sweet, little life didn't ask for any of this to happen.

When I asked to see one of the doctors to talk about what was happening, the answers weren't what I wanted to hear.

There was no set answer to this.

Juniper Evelyn had been born a little too soon and now she needed to rest up and let her body finish growing.

On top of that, it was pretty evident I would be leaving the hospital sooner rather than later. Without my baby in my arms. I'd be able to visit as much as I wanted, but that wasn't the same. That wasn't the plan.

At this point I wasn't sure what any plans were supposed to be.

The hospital door opened.

“Okay, I just scored us fresh turkey and cheddar sandwiches,” Hannah said. “Don’t ask me how I pulled this off. I may or may not have flashed the people working in the cafeteria to get these. Plus fresh pickles and some barbecue chips.”

I slowly turned my head and forced a smile at Hannah.

She put the food down and climbed into the hospital bed next to me.

I put my head on her shoulder.

“Fuck,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Everything, Hazel. I usually know what to do or say. Even when Gram went, I knew what to do and say. I knew how to keep things moving, you know? But this? This is a lot.”

“Have you reached your breaking point with me?”

“I reached my breaking point when you made out with Kyle Kuss in the basement closet of Sabrina’s house when we were fourteen.”

“Oh, come on,” I said. “Really?”

“You knew I liked him. You knew I was working on that.”

“Working on what?”

“I wore low-cut shirts for him,” Hannah said. “I would drop my pen in class to bend over in front of him. All those little tricks.”

“But you didn’t go for it,” I said.

“You only did because of a dare.”

“It was a good dare.”

“That’s a rule, Hazel. You don’t make out with someone your best friend likes.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “For the thousandth time.”

Hannah shrugged her shoulders. “I guess it worked out. I got mad at you and we didn’t talk for a week.”

“That’s when you hooked up with Brett Pomme.”

Hannah smiled ear to ear. “That’s right. That was…”

“You came rushing back to tell me all about it. Wasn’t he the first guy you-”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

I snorted. “Yeah. Right.”

“Hey, we could make this even.”

“What?”

“You kissed my guy. Maybe I can kiss yours. Now.”

“You want to make out with Atlas? Go for it. I don’t care.”

“Hazel.”

“I’m not doing this with you.”

“Right. Sorry. Let’s change the subject. How about these sandwiches. We can’t let them go to waste.”

Hannah moved from the bed.

“Did you really show someone your boobs to get these?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter now. The damage is done.”

I sighed.

The hospital room door opened again.

This time... Atlas walked in.

Hannah had a bite of sandwich in her mouth when she looked back.

“*Ut-oh,*” she said with her mouth full.

“It’s okay,” I whispered to Hannah. “Leave us alone for a minute.”

Hannah walked by Atlas, shaking her head.

This was the first time I was alone with Atlas since I heard the truth about what was happening with his life.

“Hazel, can we talk?” Atlas asked.

I pointed to my sandwich. “Turkey and cheddar. It’s a boob sandwich.”

“A what?”

“Boob sandwich,” I said. “Apparently Hannah showed her boobs to get the sandwich for me.”

Atlas glanced at the food for a second.

Then his sight went right back to me.

“Can we talk?”

“If it’s about our daughter, sure.”

“Hazel.”

“Atlas, no. You’re not going to walk in here and try to smooth talk me. Do you remember the one thing you said? You were always a miserable asshole. From the second I got picked and walked up on that stage. You were just mean all the time. But you told me you would never lie to me. That’s the thing, Atlas. *The one fucking thing...*”

My throat tightened.

My eyes filled with tears.

“It’s not as simple as you think.”

“How? You’re getting traded to a team that’s on the opposite side of the country. Right? That’s as simple as can be.”

Atlas hung his head. “All I could think about was how to stay and make it work for us, Hazel. I had no idea what your intentions were with the baby. If you wanted to live in your grandmother’s house or not.”

“Wait a second,” I said. “Are you using me as an excuse?”

“No,” Atlas said. “I never would.”

“You just fucking did, Atlas!”

“I didn’t want you to feel forced to move.”

“Get out,” I said. “You do not get to come in here and try to twist things around on me. Get out of here.”

“I was thinking about retiring. That’s why I didn’t say a word. I thought I would call it a career. Leave the game. I’d have you. I’d have our daughter. I’d make a new life.”

“Without telling me why?”

Atlas’s jaw tightened.

“You’re digging a hole, Atlas. Next thing you’re going to do is tell me you love me and you did this out of love.”

“I do love you, Hazel.”

I believed him.

I loved him too.

But right now?

It wasn't the moment to talk about love.

I turned my head. "I want you to leave, Atlas. Okay? I don't want to talk to you right now. Everything we do right now is for our daughter. I just want to hold my little Juniper Evelyn in my arms..."

Atlas listened to my wishes and left me alone.

Tears leaked down my cheeks.

I took a deep breath and looked at the door.

Then at the turkey and cheddar sandwich.

I grabbed for it and took a big bite.

With my mouthful of food, I called out...

*"Cheers to Hannah's boobs for this."*



MY NEXT VISITOR came after I took a nap.

Charles brought me some flowers.

"You don't have to do that," I said to him.

"Yes, I do," he said.

"Charles, you've brought me a lot of flowers. The entire table over there is covered."

"And I'm not going to stop." He handed me the flowers and kissed my cheek. "Want me to explain why?"

"Yes," I said.

I watched Charles pull up a chair.

The man should have been a stranger to me, yet he felt like family.



Never without a smile on his face.

Anytime things got tense he would hum.

Those soothing notes that got me through labor.

Or at least those soothing notes that got me to the hospital.

“I can’t give these flowers to the person I really want to give them to,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. “Wow.”

“I never went a moment without giving her flowers. Mostly because she hated flowers.”

I laughed. “That’s true. I’m surprised she took flowers from you.”

“She hated them, Hazel,” Charles said. “She would get mad at me. Playfully mad. But she took them. Then came a time I couldn’t do it. She wasn’t there. So if I can give her granddaughter flowers, I’m going to do that. Maybe she’s watching down on us, Hazel. And maybe this eases something. I don’t know. Either way, I get to buy someone flowers now. When I pick out flowers I think of her. I think of her face. How she tried to get so mad at me but she would always smile.”

“You really loved her.”

“With all my heart and soul.”

“I can’t believe you two never...”

Charles touched my left hand. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“Love. It’s all bullshit.”

I laughed. “What?”

“That’s right. Love is all bullshit. What do we know about love? Books. Movies. Commercials. We see other people in love. Some happy. Some sad. People get married. They get divorced. People cheat on each other. That’s love. It’s all bullshit. The real stuff.” Charles pointed to his chest. To his heart. “The real stuff? It’s what you do for you. For the person you feel for. Yeah, maybe your grandmother and I should have done something more. Told everyone we were together? Took vacations together? Lived together? Maybe. Maybe we would have been closer. Maybe if I was there when she was sick... things would have been different? What I know is that what we had, it worked for us. You know, when she got sick, she didn’t tell me. She tried to hide it. I think that was our only real argument ever.”

“She lied to you?”

“She didn’t want to tell me. She didn’t want me to worry. She didn’t want things to change between us.”

“You were mad at her?”

“No. I was sad over everything. Hazel, love is bullshit. Why get mad? Why argue? We were on borrowed time. We all are. We don’t know what’s going to happen to us tomorrow. Or even today.”

I sighed.

Charles squeezed my hand.

“Focus on that baby,” he said. “That strong baby of yours. Look at who you are, Hazel. Did you really expect anything else? Your grandmother loved putting up a stubborn fight. And now her great-granddaughter is too.”

I smiled at Charles. “She’s going to be okay.”

“She already is okay. She just needs a little time to rest before she takes over the world.”

“She already has taken over the world. Juniper Evelyn.”

“That name makes me so happy to hear.”

“Thank you for everything, Charles. You are...”

“I’m the lucky one here, Hazel. I found the love of my life. I loved her until the end. I still love her. And now I get to be in your life and your daughter’s life. If you’ll have me. Believe me, I’m the lucky one.”

I wanted to see my daughter.

Charles helped me out of the bed and I walked out of the hospital room.

Hannah came rushing toward me.

Charles excused himself.

Panic was written all over Hannah’s face.

“What is it?” I asked, fearing the worst.

“Remember the whole sandwich thing?”

“You showed your boobs...”

“I also gave him my number.”

“Hannah.”

“He’s cute. But he... did something...”

She showed me her phone.

I gasped.

It was a picture of a penis. Next to a sandwich.

“Um,” I said. “I guess that’s the pickle?”

Hannah started to laugh, grabbing my arms.

She laughed so hard, it made me laugh.

“He... he sent the picture... and then asked if I wanted another sandwich. If I wanted seconds. If I wanted... a... dick sandwich...”

Hannah laughed even harder.

Only Hannah could show up to a hospital, end up in the cafeteria, then end up showing off her boobs and getting a dick pic like that.

I thought about what Charles said.

*Love is bullshit.*

I wasn't sure if that was true.

*If it was bullshit, then why did I want to punch and kiss Atlas so badly?*

## Chapter Forty-One

---

### ATLAS



I STARED at my daughter and rubbed my chin.

My eyes felt so heavy, desperate to close, even for just a minute or two.

I stood up and stretched my neck.

There was no way I could bring myself to walk away from my daughter now.

Somewhere in my heart I believed little Juniper Evelyn was going to open her little eyes and turn her little head, then look at me and smile.

Then I'd be able to open up the contraption she rested in and hold her.

Walk her out of the hospital and take her home.

*And where is that, Atlas? Where is this baby's home at?*

My jaw tightened so hard I thought my teeth were going to shatter.

Somewhere else in my heart I thought Hazel and I could squish into her hospital bed and look for a place to live. Use my phone and let her scroll, dream and choose anything she wanted.

“Knock, knock,” a voice whispered behind me.

I turned and saw Tucker.

I lunged for him, threw my arms around him and hugged him.

My agent’s back cracked.

“Jeez, Atlas,” he groaned. “I guess I can cancel my chiropractor appointment now.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be,” he said. He made fists and hit my chest. “What’s the news?”

“The same,” I said. “It’s going to take some time. She’s fighting. She’s doing good.”

“Good. I bet time is standing still here, huh?”

“Yeah. Everything is standing still right now, Tucker. I hope you can respect that.”

“All the way, Atlas,” he said. “I didn’t come here to talk business. I came here to check on you. And the baby. And Hazel.”

“We’re just here, Tucker. It’s been emotional as hell. Hazel found out about the Boston thing in the worst way too. So it’s just... a lot...”

“If you need anything, you call me. Same goes for Hazel. She needs anything. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“I’m also here to send my love from Ellen. And Oscar.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oscar, huh?”

“Yeah. Fuck that guy. But Ellen means well. She’s worried about you.”

“I’m surprised Oscar doesn’t have shirts made with my picture on it. Supporting me. Anything to make money off the fans, right?”

“Don’t even say it,” Tucker said. “You know he’d do it.”

“If he ever tried that, I’d snap his neck.”

“Well, no neck snapping today, Atlas. Focus on your family.”

I hugged Tucker again.

His back cracked some more.

He walked away with a slight limp.

I turned and checked on my little Juniper Evelyn again.

I just kept picturing her moving around. Learning to roll to her belly. Learning to crawl. Learning to walk. Learning to ice skate.

I growled in my throat.

*It was getting harder to fight back the tears.*



ROME GRABBED MY FACE.

He blinked fast, his eyes glossy.

He kissed my forehead.

Then he turned and looked down at my daughter.

“Don’t worry, little girl, Uncle Rome is here,” he said.

I looked at Henry.

Henry nodded and smiled.

Joe folded his tree trunk sized arms and stared at my daughter.

Jago next to him.

Sebastian touched my back. “I don’t want to say the wrong thing here but do you need anything, Atlas? Can we do anything?”

“No,” I said.

“You should take a shower at some point,” Jago said. He waved his right hand in front of his nose.

“I’ll just layer on more deodorant,” I said. “I can’t leave her.”

The truth was the only time I left the room was when Hazel wanted to see her.

I hated that too.

Hazel and I giving each other some space.

“Why didn’t you tell us about Boston?” Rome asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I didn’t want to believe it. I still don’t want to believe it. I didn’t come here for all of this.”

“But it’s what you got, brother,” Joe said.

“I realize that, Joe,” I said. “My entire career has been built on helping teams. I’m the muscle. The force. The brute. I come in, raise hell and move on. I’m not meant to be a star. I’m not meant to hoist up championships and all that. I get paid to do a certain thing. And now there’s a chance for



something for all of us. Boston wants me. They need me. They're willing to pay me but also help out the *Sola Empire*. You guys are locked in on contracts. This helps everyone."

"What about her?" Henry asked, pointing to my daughter.

My jaw tightened again.

"What about Hazel?" Rome asked. "You can't leave her behind. Not with me lurking around. Don't make me go from Uncle Rome to *Stepdad Rome*."

Rome grinned and winked.

"If Hazel is up for grabs, I'm making my move too," Jago said.

"She's not up for grabs," I growled.

"She seemed pretty pissed at you," Joe said.

"I didn't know what to do or say," I said. "Hazel has me thinking crazy things. She has me speechless. You know, my first thought when the Boston thing was brought up? I told myself to just retire."

"For good?" Sebastian asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I can't imagine not being near Hazel or my daughter. I can't fly across the country over and over. Too much time without them. And I can't ask Hazel to leave here. Her life is here. She's still undecided about her grandmother's house too."

"You're in love," Henry said. "Like madly in love with her."

"I am," I said. "And I'm in love with her too."

I pointed to Juniper Evelyn and felt like crying again.

Sebastian put an arm around me.

“This is so complicated,” Rome said. “This is why I don’t do any of this.”

“Nobody cares about your personal life,” Joe said. “So just shut it. We’re here to support Atlas and his daughter.”

“And Hazel,” Jago said.

“Would you really retire for her?” Sebastian asked.

“I would. I don’t want to. But I would for my family. That’s what a man does, right? Supports his family.”

“Sometimes this sports stuff just sucks,” Rome said. “You’re part of us, Atlas. You’re family. We can’t lose you. I can’t imagine not seeing you. You’re so happy all the time.”

I curled my lip at Rome.

“Look at that face,” Rome said. “I’m going to miss it so much.”

Rome got Joe to smile.

A rarity.

“Any word on when you can hold her?” Henry asked.

“Not yet,” I said. “Not for a while. It’s going to take some time.”

I swallowed hard.

“Then you just wait here for her,” Jago said. “She needs you. They both need you.”

“I’m aware of that,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“But you should shower,” Sebastian whispered to me. “You smell like shit.”

“I don’t care how I smell. I can’t leave her. Or Hazel. I just want to fix it all. I want...”

“Stop talking about what you want,” Joe said. “You sound weak. I thought you were strong.”

“Joe... not today.”

“Yes. Today. Come on, Atlas. Where are you right now? Huh? You’re this weak? Look at you.”

My nostrils flared.

Jago stayed between us. “Okay, that’s enough.”

“No,” Joe said. “Let him get it out. He’s not going to do anything. He lost himself. Sad.”

I grabbed for Joe.

Jago tried to shove my arm out of the way.

“Not in here,” Henry said. “Are you both stupid?”

“Let’s go then,” Joe said.

He strutted out of the room and into the hallway.

I went after him.

The rest of the guys followed.

I lunged for Joe, grabbing his shirt, driving him back against the wall.

“Don’t ever fucking challenge me,” I growled. “Not when it comes to my family. I’ll fucking kill to protect my family. You got that?”

I slammed Joe off the wall and he smiled.

“There you are,” he said. “There’s that fire.”

Joe surprised me when he wrapped his arms around me.

A quick hug, but still a hug from Joe.

He then pushed me away and walked down the hallway and out of sight.

My hands were tight fists. My heart pounding.

“You okay, Atlas?” Rome asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m okay.”

“He’s a prick,” Henry said. “He loves to do that stuff.”

“I get it,” I said. “That’s his job.”

I appreciated Joe’s reminder.

Yeah, I felt a lot of pain right now.

More than getting hit in the face with a fist or a puck.

More than getting stitches without being numbed.

More than any pain hockey gave me.

This pain was real and it was deep.

Deep in my heart and deep in my soul.

But Joe just reminded me of something.

My instinctual desire to fight.

*And the fight for my little Juniper Evelyn and Hazel... it was the greatest fight of my entire life.*

## Chapter Forty-Two

HAZEL



I HAD to leave the hospital without my baby.

The worst experience of my life.

As I walked outside and felt the warm west coast sun touch my face, my eyes welled with tears.

Hannah grabbed my right hand and squeezed it tight.

To my left, Atlas walked alongside me.

I had no choice in the matter.

He was there.

Always there for me.

Our conversations were based on the wellbeing of our little Juniper Evelyn.

The good news was that she was doing well.

Her tiny body responded to everything it needed to.

But she was still a long ways from coming home.

*Home.*

I couldn't even mentally fathom the idea of home or what home was or where it was or what it looked like.

Hannah drove me home.

Atlas followed the entire way.

I stared in the mirror the entire time, watching him.

Hannah didn't say a word.

When I arrived back to Gram's house, the emotion hit even harder.

I had the same empty feeling as I did the day of her funeral.

My life feeling more empty.

My heart aching once again.

I got out of the car and walked to the front door.

When I opened it, I felt someone grab my right hand.

"Hazel, look at me," Hannah said.

I turned. "What?"

"He's here," she whispered. "He didn't get on a plane and leave. He's here."

"For now. I know where this ends up. I just want to be by myself, Hannah. I want my daughter in my arms."

"I know you do," she said. She touched my face. "What do you think he's thinking right now too? You two have a connection. Together. Through Juniper Evelyn. And now through this experience."

"Experience, huh? Like... I bought a ticket?"

“Actually, I bought the tickets,” Hannah said. She offered a smile. “And I set you and him up.”

“Don’t remind me,” I said.

I looked beyond Hannah and saw Atlas standing outside his truck.

I hated that he respected how I felt.

It would have been easier for him to get mad at me and take off.

Instead, he was there.

I couldn’t ask him to stay. Or to retire. Or do anything with his life that he didn’t want.

It wasn’t fair.

That didn’t mean we weren’t going to be in each other’s lives.

We had our daughter to take care of.

I had no doubt in my mind or heart that he’d be a great father to Juniper Evelyn.

But everything else?

I shook my head.

I opened mouth, almost ready to say sorry to Atlas.

What did Atlas do?

He nodded back at me.

He touched his chest, right over his heart.

Then he took out his cellphone and casually showed it to me.

A reminder that he was always a phone call away.

Or a text.

Anything I wanted or needed...

Except I wanted him.

His presence.

Forever.

*Was that really so much for me to ask?*



SLEEPING FELT IMPOSSIBLE.

My phone was glued to my hand.

Just in case the hospital called.

Being home without my baby...

I cried more than I wanted to admit.

Hannah left for a little while, then came back.

She wanted to sleep in bed next to me but she snored too much.

It was a little after midnight when I got out of bed and walked around the upstairs.

Room to room.

Wondering what to do with the house.

There was plenty of space for a nursery.

One of the spare bedrooms.

Simple.

Clear it out.

Get a crib and... everything else...



My chest tightened and I felt overwhelmed.

From downstairs I heard the faint echoes of Hannah snoring.

I looked down at my phone.

*I need you, Atlas.*

Not even a second later, my phone lit up.

A text.

From Atlas.

*Not sure if you're sleeping, love. Thinking about you. Thinking about Juniper Evelyn. I can't sleep right now. None of this feels right.*

I blinked back tears as I read the text.

My fingers touched my phone.

*I'm standing in a spare bedroom debating about making a nursery. It just doesn't feel like it's meant to be here though. I don't know what to do, Atlas. Will you come over? Just hold me?*

I highlighted the entire message and deleted it before typing a second one.

I replied with...

*It sucks.*

Atlas replied.

*If you need anything...*

I didn't respond.

I went back to bed and cried myself to sleep.

The next morning I woke up to find Hannah gone.

She left a note saying there had been a thing at work and she had to get to her laptop.

She had made coffee and left out a box of cereal for me.

Her version of cooking breakfast.

I missed my shirtless, hunky hockey hottie standing in the kitchen...

I called the hospital to check on my daughter.

Everything was the same. Which was good.

I drank some coffee, skipped the cereal, made a bagel, and got changed to go to the hospital.

Just as I opened the door, there was a slight knock.

I screamed when I saw Atlas in the doorway.

His size would never not be shocking to me.

“Morning,” he said. “Thought I would check up on you. See if you wanted a ride to the hospital. Was going to see if you wanted breakfast.”

“I ate,” I said. “And I was just leaving to go there.”

“You don’t want a ride?”

“No, thanks,” I said.

I pulled the door shut and started to walk.

Atlas stepped back and got in front of me.

“This whole thing is fucked up, Hazel,” he said.

“I’m not doing this right now, Atlas.”

“But I am. I wanted to pick out a place for us to call home. No strings attached either. Just a place for the three of us to live. To figure out what our family felt like.”

“Yeah? Here? Or in Boston? Or were you planning on leaving me as a single mom five out of seven days? You were just going to pay the bills and leave me home alone?”

“Hazel...”

I pushed by him and ran to my car.

That’s when he finally ran after me.

Stopping me at my car.

He spun me around.

Looked into my eyes.

I wasn’t sure there was anything he could say to fix how I felt.

No matter if I was right or wrong in the situation.

Instead of talking, Atlas kissed me.

He pressed his lips against mine.

I smelled his skin. Felt the hair on his face touching me.

The kiss lasted a second but it had the allure of a lifetime.

That was it.

He didn’t say anything else.

He got into his car and waited for me to get into mine and drive.

*He followed me all the way to the hospital, so we could see our daughter.*



ATLAS GAVE me the room first. By myself.

He purposely hung back.

As if he knew I wanted - needed - a moment alone with Juniper Evelyn.

I walked into the room and took a deep breath.

I promised myself no showing fear or worry near the baby.

She needed all my strength and love.

I looked down at my baby. My daughter.

“Hey, you,” I said. “So happy to see you again. Doctor said you’ve been resting and getting big and strong. That’s good. Feel free to be as stubborn as you need to be, okay? I want you to know how much we all love you. I love you. Your Auntie Hannah loves you. I know you’ve heard her voice. I know you’ve heard her talking about the guy at the cafeteria. I don’t think he’ll end up as your uncle though. Maybe someday I’ll explain all of that stuff to you. Right now I just want you to keep resting and keep getting bigger. I can’t wait to hold you. Neither can your daddy. You’re going to love him when you meet him. I know you’ve heard his voice when you were in my belly. He’s amazing, Juniper Evelyn. You’re going to fit so perfectly into his hands. And I know you’ve already won his heart. Just... just know we all love you.”

I turned around because the tears were trying to come fast.

When I did, Atlas stood behind me.

I looked up at him.

I threw my arms around his neck and buried my face into his chest and began to cry.

I wanted to beg him not to leave me.

Not to leave us.

I wanted to slap him and demand he never leaves this town or this hockey team. Ever.

Atlas gently guided me out into the hallway.

He hugged me and held me and didn't say a word as I got out a good cry.

When I finally looked up at him, he wiped tears off my cheeks.

"There's nothing you can say and nothing you can do," I whispered.

"I know that, love. But we can be here. And we are here."

"She's strong, Atlas."

"Of course she is. She came from you."

"She came from us, Atlas. Us. She's a perfect mix of you and me. This isn't one sided."

"I never said it was. I never meant it to sound that way."

"Let's go back in and read to her. Together."

I took Atlas's hand and we walked back into the room.

We sat down next to each other.

Atlas was so big he took up the entire chair and his knees almost came up to his face.

I had a book with me.

Atlas and I took turns, reading one page at a time.

I just wanted to know our daughter could hear us.

But all I could do was believe in it.

Believe in her.

Believe in love.

When we finished the book, Atlas slipped his hand into mine.

His fingers interlocked with mine.

We sat there in silence, staring at our daughter.

Both of us thinking.

Both of us giving out all the energy we could find to her.

I looked at Atlas and he slowly looked at me.

We leaned toward one another at the same time.

Our foreheads touched.

We still had zero answers.

*Where to live. What to do. How to handle the Boston thing.*

A million racing thoughts.

I felt it.

He felt it.

Atlas lifted his head a little and kissed my nose.

I shut my eyes.

I felt like crying again.

“Hazel,” he whispered. “Look...”

I turned my head and felt the emotion get the best of me.

Juniper Evelyn’s right foot moved.

Then her left.

Atlas and I looked each other.

We smiled.

We looked at our daughter again.

We held hands tight.

*I told myself at least we had this moment to be happy together.*

## Chapter Forty-Three

---

ATLAS



I STARED down at my daughter.

I looked at my hands.

*Empty.*

No longer holding Hazel's hand.

No longer sharing a tender moment with her.

More than anything else, my hands weren't able to hold my daughter.

My sweet, little Juniper Evelyn.

Cruelty had a funny a way of looking and feeling a lot like anger.

"I love you," I said to my daughter. "You keep kicking butt, okay? Listen to your daddy on that. You're learning a lesson in your life that most don't for a while. You have to fight for what you want. And, my little girl, you've got fighter's blood in you."



I exited the room and saw Charles with his big smile.

“She’s not in there,” I said.

“I was hoping to talk to you, Atlas,” he said.

“Talk to me?”

“She loves you. And you love her.”

I touched Charles’s left shoulder. “Listen, my friend. This is the part of a movie where you give a talk to me that changes my life. This isn’t a movie. And I don’t need you to talk to me about anything. I know what happens next.”

“I can see that in your eyes, Atlas.”

“Good. So we don’t have to talk right now. Which is perfect. Because you need to go spend some time with that little girl that’s going to grow up and think of you as her grandfather. So you better keep that ticker of yours ticking. You got that?”

Charles’s eyes filled with tears. His face beamed with pride.

“Yeah, I get it,” I said. “I don’t have time to talk about it all.”

I walked around Charles and never felt so laser focused in my entire life.

From the hospital I drove to Tucker’s office.

My agent living near the beach, his office near the beach, making trades for players that altered their lives.

*It’s not Tucker... don’t waste this on Tucker...*

I opened Tucker’s office door.

He was mid-sentence on a call, took one look at my face, and he hung up.

He rushed from behind his desk.

“What happened, Atlas? Is the baby okay?”

“The baby is fine,” I said.

Tucker sighed and touched my chest. “Oh, that’s good. You had me nervous. That look on your... face...” Tucker swallowed hard. “What is it?”

“We’re going for a walk, Tucker. Then a drive. Then another walk. We have plans right now.”

“Atlas, what are you doing? Huh? What’s going through your head?”

I grabbed Tucker’s tie and pulled him toward me. “Whatever I say and do next, you’re going to support me. I’ve never asked for a thing from you, Tucker. Got that?”

“Oh, shit, Atlas. This is the Boston thing...”

“Let’s go,” I said.

I pulled at Tucker’s tie like it was a dog’s leash.

As I dragged him past the front desk of his fancy office space, his secretary jumped up.

“Mr. Tarmelo?” she asked.

“Sit down and relax,” I said to her. “Catch up on some shows.”

“It’s okay, Jess,” Tucker said. “Just cancel everything I have right now.”

Was it a little dramatic to drag Tucker out of his office the way I was?

Absolutely.

But then I remembered what Tucker's fees were.

What he made from me as I skated on the ice and fought, took hits and got stitches and all that.

*So, yeah, it was worth it.*



"HOLY SHIT, ATLAS, YOU CAN'T..."

I swung my right foot and kicked open the huge office door.

Oscar Verwert jumped up and looked at me as though I were going to shoot him.

I pushed Tucker out of the way.

"My agent and I are here to talk," I said. I looked to my left and saw Ellen sitting on a leather couch. Elegant as ever. "Ellen."

"Atlas," she said.

"Atlas!" Oscar yelled. "Just the man I wanted to see."

His panic quickly turned into a sleazy car salesman attitude.

"I want you to see this first. For your family."

"I'm here to talk to you," I said. "I think you know why."

"Just watch this," Oscar said, ignoring me.

He pointed to a projector screen and began to type on his computer.

“Look at this promotion we have,” Oscar said. “*Jump for Juniper!* It’s a night dedicated to premature babies. A night to bring awareness to the NICU and all the hard work the doctors and nurses put in. We have shirts being made. All proceeds are going to go into a special fund dedicated to parents who need financial assistance if they’re dealing with what you are.”

I looked at the screen across the office.

The stupid logo purposely made to look like a kid used a crayon.

My daughter’s name being exploited.

My name on the screen too.

I hated it.

I hated everything about it.

I turned and Oscar almost got right in my face.

“What do you think of that, Atlas? That’s for you. Our thank you to you. You’re going to bring so much awareness to this that it will-”

I grabbed Oscar’s shirt.

Tucker let out a yelp. “Atlas!”

“I don’t give a shit who you are,” I said. “I don’t care how rich you are. I don’t care how powerful you are. If you put my daughter’s name on some goddamn event in order to sell extra hockey tickets... I will throw you from this window right now. And we’ll see how your billions of dollars does saving your head when it smashes to the ground like a watermelon.”

Oscar’s knees instantly gave out. “Atlas...”

“You’re going to cancel that event immediately. You got that? If you want to help, you do it without the need of your

fans' money. You have enough money to help out without promotion. With that said, you're going to take a seat and we're going to talk."

I released my hold on Oscar's shirt.

He stumbled back and reached for his phone.

"Oscar, don't be a pussy," Ellen called out. "Seriously."

Oscar looked at his wife.

He cleared his throat.

"Allow me to apologize," Tucker called out. "As you can imagine, it's been a very trying time for Atlas and his family. I had no idea what his intentions were here. Why don't we just-"

"Tucker, shut up," Ellen said.

Tucker closed his mouth.

Oscar walked behind his desk. "Okay, Atlas. You have my attention."

"I'm sure you're a busy man. I'll keep this simple. You're going to call Boston and cancel the deal. You're going to tell them you're not interested."

Oscar let out a laugh. Then he looked at me. "You're serious?"

"Oscar, did you hear me?"

"Atlas, that's not how this works. I'm sorry, but you're an asset to this organization. You knew that going into this. This has been your entire career. Boston is in a desperate position and they're going to overpay for you. I can't turn that down."

"You will turn it down," I said. "You have no choice."

“Don’t you dare try threatening me right now. Look, I’m sorry for what’s happening with your daughter, but that doesn’t-”

I launched my right hand across the large desk and pulled Oscar toward me.

He was halfway off the desk, his back arched, head back, face turning red.

“I didn’t say this was a negotiation,” I said. “Or even a conversation. If you don’t cancel the trade, I’ll refuse to go. I’ll fuck everything up for you. Better yet, I’ll just retire. I’ll walk away from hockey.”

“You wouldn’t,” Oscar said.

“For my daughter and for the woman I love, there’s nothing I won’t do,” I said.

“Atlas, he’s turning purple,” Tucker said. “It does you no good hurting him and ending up in jail. How does that help your daughter? Think about her.”

I pushed Oscar away.

He grabbed his throat and chest and coughed.

He turned and looked out the window.

Everyone stood in silence.

“Here’s the way it goes,” I said. “You tell Boston, *no thanks*. You extend my contract two more seasons. I won’t ask for a dime more either. I’m not here to shake you down, Oscar. I have to be here. I have to live here. I can’t be chasing flights to see my family. And guess what this does? It gives you power.”

Oscar looked back at me. “How so?”

“You took a massive deal and told a team to fuck themselves. It shows you have big balls. And I’m going to get this team in the winning column. Mark my words. We’re going to be big, fierce, fast, and fucking mean. These fans are going to pack the arena to see me play. And not just the fights.”

“I’m not sure I agree with your thinking,” Oscar said.

“I didn’t ask if you agreed or not.”

Oscar looked at Ellen.

Then at Tucker.

“Again, Oscar, I am so sorry,” Tucker said.

“This is between us,” I said to Oscar. “Don’t look at anyone else. This is you and me talking. What was life like when Timmy was a baby?”

Oscar frowned. “Okay. I get it.”

“He wasn’t even in the country when Timmy was born,” Ellen said.

“Ellen, please,” Oscar growled. He put his hands to his desk. “I want that event to happen.”

“For the NICU?”

Oscar nodded.

“Not with my daughter’s name on it. Change it.”

“You’ll appear.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll appear. I’ll mention my daughter, but not by name.”

“I want you on center ice with nurses and doctors and parents,” Oscar said. “I want you at events for it. To raise awareness and money.”

I put my right hand out and Oscar jumped back, squealing with fear.

“Whoa, Oscar, I’m just trying to shake your hand,” I said. “We have a deal.”

Oscar let out a nervous laugh. “Right. Yes. Of course.”

Oscar shook my hand.

He smiled.

“I think I like this,” he said. “This is good. I like your attitude.”

“Oscar, shut up,” I said. “Call Boston.”

I glanced at Tucker and he looked ready to pass out.

It took guts to talk to a billionaire the way I just had.

Call it love. Call it protection.

I knew what I wanted and I was going to forever fight for it.

As I started to walk away, Ellen stood up and rushed to join me.

Once outside Oscar’s office, she smiled at me.

“Thank you,” I said to her.

“Hey, anytime I get to see my husband squeal and be reminded that he’s five-foot-eight and weighs next to nothing... it’s a good day.”

“I didn’t think you’d help me,” I said.

“For some reason, Atlas, I have a soft spot for you,” Ellen said. “Maybe I secretly just want a bad boy hockey player in my bed. Who knows. But you found love. You have a family. I hated the idea of you leaving us.”



“Thank you for answering my call and setting this up.”

“Just do me one favor.”

“What?” I asked.

“Get Tucker something to drink so he calms down,” Ellen said.

She winked at me and nodded to Tucker.

I walked to Tucker and put my arm around him.

“You need a shot of whiskey, my friend,” I said to Tucker.

Tucker tried to laugh but whimpered. *“I need a new fucking career.”*

## Chapter Forty-Four

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HAZEL



*SHE'S GETTING BIGGER.*

*She's getting stronger.*

*You'll be able to hold her soon.*

*This will all be in the past.*

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

I still tasted the turkey and cheddar sandwich Hannah brought me for lunch.

I could have eaten anything for lunch from anywhere, but she had a thing going with someone that worked in the cafeteria.

At first it was just her showing him her boobs to get the food she wanted.

With a dick pic in return.

Then it grew from there.

They pretended to bump into each other at a bar.

I got a picture that night at two in the morning of Hannah in some bed with a guy next to her sleeping.

That was her version of romance.

And, hey, the turkey and cheddar sandwiches were pretty good too.

I smiled and shook my head as I stared at my daughter.

Picturing Hannah as *Auntie Hannah* scared me.

But I knew Juniper Evelyn was going to love Hannah.

“I didn’t bring a book to read today,” I said. “But I want to tell you a story. There once was a big, mean man who was actually nice. He only acted mean just to keep people away. He didn’t want anyone to know he was nice. Or maybe he was just waiting for the right person to come along and show him he could be nice. Anyway, there was a village. Well, more like a town. With a large castle. And inside was a mean king. A rich ruler who demanded things from everyone. He brought the big, mean man into the kingdom to protect it. Then one day he told the big mean man to go away. He didn’t want him there anymore. But what the rich ruler didn’t know was that the mean man met a woman. Not exactly a princess.”

“More beautiful than a princess,” a voice said from behind me. “More powerful than a queen.”

I didn’t look back.

I smiled.

“I’m trying to tell my daughter a story,” I said.

“I’m trying to make sure my daughter knows everything,” Atlas said.

Atlas sat down next to me.

“So,” I said.

“Get to the good part,” Atlas whispered.

“Do you mind?” I asked.

“Sorry.”

“So the big mean man told the rich ruler he wasn’t going to leave,” I said.

“And he was ready to kick his butt,” Atlas said. “Defend the woman he loved. Defend all those he loved.”

“You’re ruining the story.”

“I’m making it better, love.”

“Can I just have this moment?”

“You like the story,” he said. “Right?”

“What story? The one I’m making up or the truth?”

“Both.”

“Well the truth - from what I hear - is that you threatened a billionaire to keep you on his hockey team so you could be closer to your daughter and the woman who gave birth to your daughter.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“And the billionaire went along with it?”

Atlas nodded. “That’s the story.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it, Hazel,” Atlas said. He reached and touched my face. “You can be mad at me. You can push me away all you want. But I’m not going anywhere. I promised you that a long time ago.”

“You’re giving up a lot of money.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Atlas, stop it.”

“It’s too late,” he said. “Oscar made the call. Boston moved on. They traded for someone from Florida.”

I shook my head. “That’s too much. That puts a lot of pressure on me.”

“I didn’t ask you to marry me. I didn’t ask you a thing. I did this for myself. For my daughter.”

“You just said you did it for me too.”

“Well, fine, I did. I love you. Love makes you do crazy things.”

“And what happens in five years when you think about the money you could have made? Or that you could have won a championship?”

“Then I’ll go on a drinking binge and screw a bunch of women and blow up my life.”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear you say.”

“Why are we talking about the future?”

“This is the future,” I said. “Look around, Atlas. This is who we are. We have a daughter.”

“It’s exactly why I did what I did,” he said. “I get to stay here and play hockey. You get to take your time and decide what you want to do with your grandmother’s house. No pressure. In return for that, I made Oscar out to be a shrewd owner. And I agreed to do some events for him and the team.”

“More dates for women to win?” I asked.

“Do I smell jealousy?”

“Very funny, Atlas.”

“Don’t worry about that stuff, Hazel. This is what I want. I’m doing what I want. I never lied. I never will lie.”

“What about the Boston thing?”

“That was bad judgement on my part. I didn’t want to tell you and have you get scared. I was going to figure it out and then talk to you. I didn’t lie but I shouldn’t have hid it.”

“Okay. Fine. Thank you for saying that.”

Atlas stood up and looked down at Juniper Evelyn.

He smiled ear to ear.

“She’s growing. You can tell.”

“Still has a way to go.”

“She’s perfect, Hazel. Thank you for bringing her into the world.”

I touched my lips.

That felt like something unfair to say.

Talk about going right for my emotions.

Atlas looked at me. “I have to get going. Game soon.”

“You drove all the way here just to see her for a second?”

“Of course,” he said.

I jumped up and grabbed for Atlas.

His shirt.

My hands shaking.

He looked down at me.

Things weren't easy between us.

Mostly because of me.

I was terrified and didn't know what to do with it.

"You think maybe we should talk about a nursery for her?"  
I whispered.

"Yeah," Atlas said. "Get everything ready. That makes sense. You tell me where."

"I was thinking we should get a place together. You and me. And Juniper Evelyn. Obviously. You're not going to just spend money and spoil me though. I'm going to pay my share of everything."

"Okay," Atlas said. "Any location in mind? Any places?"

I shook my head.

He touched my chin and nodded. "Then I guess we have to figure it out together."

"Right. Together."

He lowered his mouth down to mine.

A gentle kiss.

He pulled away.

"Hey," I said. "Think you can score a goal tonight for her? She said she wanted you to."

"No pressure on me, huh?" Atlas asked.

"That's what your daughter wants."

Atlas grinned.

My body melted.

*"Whatever my girls want... they get."*



I WATCHED the hockey game on my phone.

I sat in the room with Juniper Evelyn.

Hannah sat next to me.

“Okay, so no more turkey and cheddar,” she said.

“Why not?”

“It’s over.”

“You broke it off?”

“I got chicken salad,” Hannah said. “No boobs. You know?”

“Whew. How did he take it?”

“Got some nasty texts. Then I reminded him I had a phone full of pictures of his *thing*. And it wasn’t that nice of a *thing* either.”

“And here I thought it was maybe true love for you.”

Hannah laughed. “Turkey wasn’t that good.”

I laughed.

“How’s the game?” Hannah asked.

“Tied right now,” I said. “Waiting to see Atlas again. I like showing Juniper Evelyn videos of her father.”

“You know, I was thinking... she’s going to grow up so protected and loved.”

“For sure.”

“Not just Atlas. Or you. The entire hockey team. Can you imagine when she’s a teenager and starts dating? She has some



boy come over. And there's a bunch of hockey players there?"

"Excuse me. Did you say *teenager and starts dating?*" I asked, laughing. "She won't be dating until she's thirty."

Hannah leaned toward me. "Then I shouldn't mention about you as a teenager?"

"Shh," I said.

"What? We don't want to talk about that summer at the lake? Remember that? Isn't that when you met some cutie and-"

"Hannah," I said.

She laughed.

I looked down at my phone just as Atlas got back onto the ice.

Someone passed him the puck.

"He's got it," I said. "Juniper Evelyn, your daddy has the puck."

Atlas skated fiercely.

Two guys went after him and he threw his shoulders at them, hitting them back.

It was actually kind of hot to see Atlas play that way.

He skated to the net and took a shot.

The goalie made a save.

I groaned.

Rome skated from out of nowhere and made a move and the puck popped free from the goalie.

Rome had a perfect shot to score.

Instead, he passed it to Atlas.

This time when Atlas took a shot, there was no stopping it.

The puck hit the back of the net and almost ripped through it.

I stood up. “He did it. He scored a goal for you, Juniper Evelyn.”

The arena cheered for Atlas and his teammates hurried to skate around him.

What did Atlas do?

He looked around to find a camera and looked right at it.

He pointed.

He smiled.

That one was for Juniper Evelyn for sure.

I looked at Hannah.

“Are you crying over a goal?”

“It’s not that. I told him Juniper Evelyn wanted him to score a goal. And he did. For her.”

“Wow,” Hannah said. “You two have reached the level of romance that’s kind of annoying to watch and be near.”

“Aw, you poor thing,” I said. “Do you need a turkey and cheddar sandwich to cheer you up?”

“That was mean,” Hannah said. “But kind of funny. But... yeah... mean...”

Hannah playfully pouted.

I looked at my phone.

Then at my daughter.

I had a glimpse of my life.

Juniper Evelyn and I on the couch, in matching pajamas, cuddled up with a bowl of popcorn, watching Atlas play hockey.

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath.

By the time I opened my eyes and looked at my phone again I saw him getting into a fight.

Gloves on the ice.

Hockey stick on the ice.

Him and some other guy grabbing each other, throwing punches.

I shook my head.

I smiled.

*Oh, Atlas... I can't believe how much I love you.*

## Chapter Forty-Five

---

### ATLAS



I LISTENED to the shower running and stood outside the bathroom door.

I stared down at my feet.

My fists balled up tight.

*I have to. I just... have to.*

I grabbed the doorknob, opened the bathroom door and stepped inside.

Our new place had a bathtub in one corner and a shower in another.

A clear glass door gave me the best view of my life.

Hazel naked, standing under a shower head.

Her head back, neck stretching left to right.

My eyes moved down to her full chest.

Down to her stomach.

Her perfect body.

Complete with new changes that only made her more attractive.

Stretch marks she wasn't completely sure of yet, but to me they told a story.

And I wanted to revisit that story as much as possible.

"I know you're there," Hazel said.

"I'm just standing here, love. I'm just looking."

Hazel looked forward and pointed to the bulge in my shorts that I felt.

Trust me, I felt it.

"Something says it's more than looking," she said.

"What am I supposed to do about that?" I asked.

"Take your shorts off and join me?"

Zero hesitation on my part.

My shorts were gone and I stepped into the shower before Hazel had a chance to say anything else.

She playfully turned around, letting the water hit her chest.

Behind her, I pressed myself against her back.

"Oh, Atlas," she whispered.

I touched her shoulder.

Down her arms.

My fingers interlocking with hers.

We were going to shower and go right back to the hospital.

We settled into our new routine of caring for our daughter at the hospital.

We took turns staying and leaving.

I had to travel for an entire ten days with the *Sola Empire*.

That was torture.

Six games in ten days.

We went three-and-three.

Juniper Evelyn made great progress.

She was *close* to maybe coming home.

Week after week, it never got easier to say hello or say goodbye.

*Week... after... week...*

Hazel moved my right hand to her right leg.

Then slowly... between her legs.

Her butt clenched and she thrust back a little, sighing.

“Hazel,” I whispered.

“It’s time,” she said. “It’s been long enough.”

She moved her hand away from mine.

I curled my fingers against her sweet body.

My middle and pointer fingers sliding against wetness.

I touched her clit and her head fell back against my chest as she groaned.

“Slow,” she purred. “Gentle. I want to feel you, Atlas. All of you. Take care of me. Okay?”

“I’ll always take care of you, love,” I said.

I kissed her.

My fingers moved slowly, making circles.

My free hand gravitated to her left hip.

I turned her around to face me, grabbing for her ass.

Pulling her against me.

I bent my knees and rested my cock against her warmth.

The kiss came to an end and our foreheads touched.

There was something so primal about this moment.

The allure of a first time...

It almost made me nervous.

“I love you, Atlas,” Hazel groaned.

“Fuck, Hazel, I love you so much.”

We kissed again.

This time harder and faster.

My tongue swept deeper and hers wrestled with mine.

I carefully inched forward and up.

Her tight sheath grabbed tight against me and pulled.

I slowly took the woman I loved.

The woman who gave me everything I could ever ask for  
in life.

Her hands grabbed my legs.

She scratched her way to my ass.

Then she began to use me.

Pulling and pushing.

Wanting me the way she wanted.

Needing me the way she needed.

I felt her finish and she yelled against my chest.

I never felt so alive in my life.

I never felt so powerful.

*I never felt love like this ever.*



I REACHED in and touched my daughter's tiny hand.

My eyes felt a little heavy at the moment.

But I always smiled.

“Hey,” Hazel said. “I have a surprise for you.”

“You do?” I asked.

I saw movement from the corner of my eye.

I saw Rome first.

*Oh... great...*

Then Henry, Joe, Sebastian, and Jago.

“That’s my surprise?” I asked. “These bums?”

“Love you too,” Rome said.

“Oh, look at her,” Henry said. “She’s getting so big.”

“Little hockey player,” Joe said.

“Goalie,” Jago said. “I can sense it.”

Sebastian looked at me and just smiled.

“What?” I asked him.

That’s when Hazel touched my arm.

“Want to hold your daughter, Atlas?”

“What did you say?” I asked.

Hazel smiled. Her eyes filled with tears.



She nodded. “We... we can hold her today. Right now.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

A second later one of the nurses came into the room.

She talked to Hazel while I stared at Juniper Evelyn.

“Are you ready?” Hazel asked.

“Wait,” I said. “You should hold her first. That was the plan, right? You give birth and hold her first. She should feel you before me.”

Hazel bit her bottom lip.

“What?” I asked.

“I already held her,” Hazel said. “Earlier. You weren’t here. I couldn’t help it.”

“You held our daughter?” I asked.

Hazel nodded. “Are you mad?”

“No,” I said. I reached for Hazel to hug her. “You held her. How was it?”

“It was magical, Atlas. Now it’s your turn.”

The nurse carefully lifted little Juniper Evelyn up and came closer to me.

I felt too big for this.

My daughter was so small.

“It’s okay,” the nurse said. “Trust me, she’ll be fine.”

I sucked in a breath and my daughter was placed into my arms.

Well, into my hands.

I pulled her close to me and just held her.

I was frozen in place, taking in the moment.

I heard a noise behind me.

When I turned, I saw Rome blinking fast, blubbering like a fool.

Henry grabbed Rome's left shoulder.

Rome nodded. "It's a good moment, right?"

"It's a great moment," Henry said.

"Look at this," Joe said. "Big, mean Atlas..."

"Reduced to goo," Jago said.

"By the love for his daughter," Sebastian said.

"Not just that," I said. "My daughter." I looked to my right.  
"And my Hazel."

Hazel moved closer to me too.

She put her head against my right arm.

"She's perfect, Atlas," Hazel said.

"Of course she is. I made her."

Hazel looked up at me. "Don't even start with that. You made her? I'm sorry. You did this alone? You carried her in your womb? You have stretch marks now?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," Rome said, wiping the corners of his eyes. "Stretch marks are sexy. It means you know a woman not only puts out but can handle a lot."

"Hey, Rome," Henry said. "Go back to crying."

All the guys started to laugh.

Hazel and I looked at each other.

We smiled.

Then we looked down at our daughter.

Juniper Evelyn.

One date won.

One night in bed.

One positive pregnancy test (or a few hundred...)

One pregnancy.

One baby.

And now it was just us.

*One brand new family.*

Preview Sebastian's book now!

**The SOLA EMPIRE hockey romance series skates down  
the ice with this steamy story...**

My best bud asks me if I can let his younger, forever pain-in-the-you-know-what sister crash at my place while she gets settled into a new job. I say yes. Why not? Except I forget it's been ten years since I've seen her dorky, mouth-full-of-braces face... and what shows up at my door is a beautiful WOMAN who is about to ruin my life...



SEBASTIAN

*What the hell was I thinking?*

Andy was the pain in the ass, just like his little sister.

When he set his sights on something, he never let up.

Just like this notion that April was going to crash with me for a minute.

*For a minute.*

That's how Andy sold it to me.

He had a big road trip as his team prepared for the playoffs.

They were the second best team in the league.

That meant it was now my job to greet April and then *maybe* help her find a place to live while she did her work.

That was the only part that mattered to me.

*She's not staying long.*

I had my lasting impressions of April.

Right down to the last time I saw her.

When I caught her crying her eyes out, leaning against an old tree, arms folded, wearing a blue sundress.

Her blonde hair messy and with butterfly clips on the sides and top.

Her lips dry and chapped.

Her braces were forever too big for her mouth.

She had bright blue eyes.

When I asked her what was wrong - *my need to protect her kicking in like it always did* - she told me nothing was wrong.

That was April.

She never answered on the first try.

You had to poke at her and piss her off, which I was really good at doing.

I actually literally poked her that day.

Tickling her until she screamed and tried to punch me.

That ended up catching me off guard for a moment.

“Who hurt you, April?” I finally whispered.

That was when she pointed at me. “You did, Sebby. You hurt me.”

She turned and ran off after that.

It was the last time I saw her.

Her knotty blonde hair dancing behind her.

Her dress jumping all around.

Not to mention she wore big shoes too.

Basketball shoes. Skater shoes.

That was her thing.

With sundresses.

I wasn't sure if that was her way of being a rebel or just trying different looks.

So that became my lasting impressing of April.

My life went in direction.

Hers in another.

Even Andy and I... best friends?

We saw each other during the season when we played.

In the offseason it was always talking about making plans but never doing it.

And now?

I heard the knock at my door and I took a deep breath.

Not just a regular knock either.

Not a simple...

*Knock. Knock.*

And then wait.

This was a continuous knock.

As though a freaking woodpecker attached itself to my door.

I felt my lip already starting to curl as I walked to the door.

*Same old, April, huh?*

I unlocked the door and ripped it open.

I opened my mouth to call April a pain in the ass...

Nothing came out.

Frozen in place, I stared at April.

Except it really wasn't April.

Except it really was.

She stood there, staring at me.

Almost the same way.

April's hair was still blonde, but she learned how to take care of it. How to style it. It had light, natural curls to it, touching her shoulders.

Her eyes as blue as eye.

Probably the only part of her that resembled the old, *pain in the ass* April.

Or maybe her nose too.

A little button kind of nose.

Her lips were smooth and pouty.

Not fake, just... *grown up?*

The first thought I had?

*Kissable lips for sure.*

She smiled at me.

Gone were those gigantic braces.

Instead, a beautiful smile greeted me.

She still had that one slight dimple on her right cheek.

And an even slighter one on her chin.

Then my eyes did something they had never done before with April.

It was almost like having no choice or no control over myself.

My eyes looked down.

April wore a baby blue t-shirt and dark blue jeans.

But the t-shirt...

*Someone filled out her body, huh?*

I almost felt like a pervert for a second.

Telling myself this was Andy's little sister.

Except Andy's little sister wasn't little anymore.

Our five year difference in age suddenly didn't mean a thing.

Not with the woman standing in front of me...

"Sebby," she said.

Her voice smooth.

Her voice instantly giving away that she knew she was beautiful now.

Not that she wasn't beautiful back then.

She was young, dorky, weird, a little cute.

"Is this really happening?" I asked.

"I guess so," she said. "Only for a minute, right?"

"He gave you the same speech?"



“I didn’t get a speech as much as I got orders.”

“Sounds like Andy.”

“So, are you going to invite me in?” April asked. “Or should I just unpack right here in the hallway. I can hang some shirts from that light right there. I guess I’ll roll my thongs up right small and hide under the doormat, huh?”

*Thongs...*

My jaw tightened.

I stepped back and nodded at April.

There were two bags next to her.

She reached for the handles.

“I’ll get those,” I said.

“Why? So you can find my thongs?”

I half smirked. “I’m surprised you know what a thong is and how to wear it. I figured you’d be wearing *granny panties*.”

“You never know,” she said.

“You’re right. I will never know.”

April laughed.

Almost the same flirty giggle as always.

I reached for her bags and she grabbed my left arm with both hands.

The two of us froze in place and looked at each other.

I felt her fingers gently squeezing.

Realizing there was new muscle on my arms from the last time we had seen each other.

*Oh, babe, there’s a ton of muscle...*

“I’m not exactly a fan of this either,” she said. “And I’m sorry Andy demanded this. I’m just trying to keep things loose and fun.”

“You’re just trying to be a pain in the ass,” I said. “Like you always were.”

She smiled.

*I had to look away.*



**My best friend’s sister.**

**Last time I saw her?**

**Mouth full of braces.**

**Total dork.**

**Pain in the a\$\$.**

**That was a decade ago.**

**Now?**

**She’s a woman.**

**All woman.**

**And I’m supposed to help her out.**

**This is a ‘hands off’ kind of thing...**

**But the more I’m near her...**

**I can't keep my hands to myself.**



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