



His Match

An Arizona Rattlesnakes Novel

EDEN DUNN

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HIS MATCH

Nothing shocks me more than getting a call from the police telling me my sister and her husband died in a car accident.

Except perhaps finding out I'm legally bound to raise my niece and nephew with Zadie St. Clair.

There's only one problem - Zadie resents me, and she always has.

I've always kind of enjoyed the tension of our back and forth, but things are different when we all move in together - me, her, and two grieving kids struggling to find our footing.

And it doesn't get easier once I make my way into Zadie's bed.

Being an NHL hero means nothing off the ice, not when it comes to finding my way with my new family. It's not going to help me win Zadie's heart, either, or convince her I'm serious—I want to give us a real chance.

I'm not fast enough to stay one step ahead of her or the kids. The best I can hope for is to make it out the other side in one piece. With my family and heart intact.

COLTON

The off-season was a really fucking weird time.

Between the end of the last hockey game and the beginning of the first, endless months stretched out with nothing to occupy my mind. No scheduled travel, just the wide-open metaphorical road. And too much time on my hands for anything good.

I loved it.

By the end of the playoffs, I was spent mentally and physically. Millionaire status aside, and how much I loved playing hockey aside, it wasn't an easy gig. Demanding, brutal, bloody. That was the hockey season.

At least I still had all my teeth.

A few cracks where there shouldn't be and a few crowns I hadn't had when I first signed my contract, but they were there, and they looked great when I stared at my reflection. I didn't begrudge the dental work, my multiple fractures that healed over the years, or the money. I definitely didn't begrudge the money. Except this summer...

It felt different from the past few.

"Can you stop mulling over those massive thoughts in your head and enjoy our last day together?" Luca Stone admonished. "Swear to God, Colton, only you would manage to get lost in your head instead of enjoying our vacation."

I glanced over at the captain for the Rattlesnakes and my new best friend since my *previous* best friend, Will Harper,

was forced to divide his attention between his wife and me. Not that I was bitter about it. It left me and Luca smashed together as the only two single men left on the team, well, at our tier anyway.

For fucking real. It seemed like a strange fantasy world where everyone partnered up, and there I was, left in the cold. Last man standing. Maybe I'd get lucky, and Luca would be the last one.

"I'm sorry," I told him, grabbing my piña colada from the tiki table beside me and taking a long sip. I wasn't really a fruity cocktail guy but when in Rome... "Habit."

"You're not still mooning over Ginnie, are you?" Luca asked. He sounded fed up with my bullshit. At this point, who wasn't?

I shook my head. "Absolutely not."

Well...not exactly.

She kind of floated into my brain from time to time, mostly when I felt lonely. When I longed for a little female companionship, if you got what I meant. Wink, wink.

I really did need to enjoy the last days of my vacation, though; Luca was right. Pretty soon, I'd be in the air on my way to Texas to visit my sister, with the loose ends of my life trailing in the air behind me. Just flapping away, waiting for me to tie them together again.

I sighed, shifting in my lounge chair and doing my best to make my legs more comfortable.

The rattan cabana overhead blocked out most of the sun, and the ocean crashed on the shore a few paces from where we lounged. It was paradise on earth.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I was single without any kind of leads. Free as a bird and no new prospect on the horizon to step up and take the empty spot at my side. It had taken me way too long to finally break from my ex, but I wasn't used to being alone. More like I hated it. In fact, that was half the reason I'd hung on to Ginnie so long.

Finally, I'd gathered the guts and dumped my volatile ex. *Again*. I lost track of the times we split and came back together, only to go our separate ways again.

This was the last time, though. I wasn't going back again, no matter what happened or what she said to try to convince me otherwise. She clearly didn't believe me if our last phone conversation was an indication. She'd ended the call blowing air kisses at me and promising to talk soon.

Not really the period I wanted at the end of our sentence. Both meanings were true.

Although the more I thought about it, whether on a plane or in my condo at the Nest in Tucson, the less I could justify my reasons for staying with her as anything healthy.

Still, I was shit at being alone.

Too much fucking alone time as a kid. Not that I wanted to blame my childhood for the toxic push-and-pull relationship with Virginia, but my parents made things more difficult than they should have been. When they split, in their infinite wisdom, my mom took my twin sister Cara, and my dad took me.

Who did that?

Seriously, outside of a movie? Who did that?

"This is the life, isn't it?" Luca wanted to know, expecting an answer out of me. "I told you this resort was the tits. Didn't I tell you?"

"You really do know how to pick the best places. We've got anonymity, cold drinks, sexy women..." I trailed off.

I'd been to Jamaica plenty of times before but never with a dude friend. Never without a romantic agenda.

The resort was killer for multiple reasons.

Who did that? I thought again as I tried to lean back and close my eyes, blocking out the troubled memories. Teenagers.

That was probably why I kept trying to make it work with Virginia. The last thing I wanted was to be a quitter, like my

parents. I hated the idea. Made me sick to my goddamn gut.

“Soak up the sun right now, my friend.”

I scoffed and pushed my dark glasses closer to my eyes. “Why? We get plenty of sun in Tucson.”

“Yeah, but it’s not this kind of sun. Caribbean sun is a different beast than in the desert. You know what I mean?” Luca chuckled. “It’s a different flavor. Relish in it and stop thinking whatever you’re thinking.”

I did know what he meant.

For the past two weeks, we’d dug our toes in the sand, tried our hand at windsurfing, and practiced our powers of seduction on a bevy of sexy, single ladies. Everything really was included at this resort. We checked in under assumed names, and it didn’t matter; the resort packed the beach with sand and fresh drinks, and women in bikinis made of floss came for the same reasons.

I’d be heading to Texas as soon as our vacation came to an end for an extended family visit. Too long since the last time I saw Cara, and she’d been pushing me to come for a while. Even told me I was a bad uncle for not seeing the kids more often.

My twin knew what buttons to press.

We had missed out on a lot growing up in separate houses. A lot of memories and time we might have spent together if things had worked out a different way. And it felt harder for us, as twins. Like constantly missing a piece of yourself. Having it taken away from you for no good reason other than two people refused to come up with a co-parenting plan.

Here, you take a kid, I’ll take a kid, and we’ll call it a day!

It was no way to live.

“I feel guilty,” I told Luca. “All the piña coladas. The buffet.” I patted my still-flat stomach. “How many thousands of calories have we taken in between us?”

Luca cast me a sideways grin. “There’s a gym at the resort. We counteracted.”

One we'd only visited a handful of times in fourteen days. Right now, the thought of being active outside of the bedroom sat poorly with me. Luca must have seen my scowl because he broke out in a loud laugh.

If you counted extracurricular activities between the sheets as a workout, then Luca and I had both been busy. Which was the whole reason we'd gotten separate villas in the first place.

No need to see each other too often.

Just because we were here together didn't mean that we were here *together*.

"Thanks, my brother." I held out a hand for him to slap. "For forcing me to get out of my comfort zone."

Luca did so, his lips pursed in a question.

"For getting me out of my house and planning this baller vacation," I continued.

"My pleasure, dude, my pleasure."

I started to say more, but the phone on my side table vibrated against my glass.

The cell stayed at my side for emergency purposes. With so many of the guys starting their families now, or expanding, I never knew what to expect from them. Or from my sister, who had twins of her own. It paid to be connected at all times.

Especially seeing the name on the screen.

I smiled on instinct before pressing the button to answer. "Car, I was just thinking about you," I said in greeting. "Twin ESP for the win. What's up?"

A throat cleared, and the voice who answered me was certainly not the soft alto of my sister. "Is this Mr. Ramsey?" a man asked.

My blood ran cold, and I sat straight up in the lounge chair, the hair on the back of my neck rising to attention. "Yes?" The word came out in a low rumble.

"This is Officer Miles Lankford from the Houston Police Department."

This wasn't good, and I didn't need anyone to tell me otherwise.

"Why are you calling from my sister's phone? What's going on?"

I knew.

I knew the way my bum knee from an injury on the ice told me when to expect rain. Mentally I reached out for my twin and the sliver of energy connecting us no matter how far the distance. Somehow it always felt as if I'd be able to sense her even when we were in different states. She was a familiar and comforting presence in my subconscious at all times.

Today I came up blank.

There was nothing there. No one there. No energy opposite mine to show presence.

Yeah, I knew.

Office Lankford sighed, the sound full of sympathy. Enough of the stuff to turn my stomach inside out. "I'm so sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, Mr. Ramsey, but there was an accident. A car accident. Your sister and her husband were both killed by an oncoming tractor trailer on the highway. They were pronounced dead on the scene."

Forget about my blood going cold. My body felt bloodless, and I couldn't feel my hands anymore. My fingers trembled, pressing the phone hard enough against my head to ache. "No."

"I truly am sorry. We are going to need you to come to Houston," the officer continued. "As the next of kin, there are several legalities for you to take care of, and although I know this is going to be a trying time, I must ask you to hurry. Are you able to arrive in the next several days?"

"You need me to come to identify the body?" The word stuck in my throat, and I wanted to puke. Bodies, plural. My twin and her husband, gone.

Gone.

Gone.

A pit opened up underneath my feet.

“No, sir. Actually, we have someone else who is on their way to the morgue right now. Ms. Zadie St. Clair?”

My breath came in short, shallow gasps, and the rest of the world faded away.

My sister was dead.

My sister had gone somewhere I couldn't reach, and she was never coming back.

I wasn't sure how the rest of the conversation went with poor Officer Lankford, who probably had to deal with this kind of thing all the time, and I never remembered hanging up. Only that I needed to get back for the kids. The twins, like Cara and me...

They had no one. Their entire world had been rocked, just as much as mine. No, more. Both their parents were out of the picture now in a violent way.

“Colton? What's wrong? What happened?” Luca had swung his knees around to the side of his lounge chair.

I blinked, noticing then that his hand had slapped against my knee to get my attention. How long had it been there? No idea.

“My sister—” I tried to tell him.

Tears.

The rest of the day passed in a disgusting blur of pain and confusion. Luca made all of the accommodations for me, arranging a private jet to Houston, where I'd land and go straight to the kids.

He even took my phone and called the one person he knew would have the right information.

“Let me do this,” he urged softly. “You're not in a position to handle the details right now.”

I reached for the phone, lamely, before letting my arm drop wooden to my side. He was right. Sure, he was right, but I knew I had to do something. I had to—

My mind broke apart into several pieces, and neither of them came together again. Not at the moment when I really needed them, anyway.

Luca called Zadie.

The same Zadie St. Clair who had to go to the morgue to identify Cara and her husband. Zadie, who was with the kids, taking care of them and making sure they were safe.

We never saw eye to eye. We never had, and I doubted if we ever would. Zadie was Cara's ride-or-die friend and saw fit to blame me for never being around, kid or not.

I wasn't a kid anymore.

Not now.

Now, it was time to step up and do the impossible: see a way through my grief without my twin. And all I could think about was the fact that we'd never get to make up for our lost time.

ZADIE

I squeezed my eyes shut, my hands fisting at my sides so hard my nails dug into my palms and left little crescent indentations. Not like a little physical pain made a lick of difference from where I stood. It only served to sharpen my thoughts to the barest minimum. It helped release a fraction of the pent-up anger inside of me.

More than anger, I thought as I hugged the kids closer. Fury. Pure fury.

Of course. Of course, fucking Golden Boy, AKA Colton Ramsey, AKA pain in my goddamn ass because he had an ego the size of the moon, was in fucking Jamaica sipping on cocktails.

Or a tit.

With him, it could go either way. Probably both.

It figured he'd be in the tropics having the time of his life while the rest of us were sludging through shit in the real world and dealing with death. With despair.

With the loss of someone so irreplaceable, I wasn't sure I'd be able to go on without her.

The day-to-day details were mine to handle because I was the only one here to do them. Which meant the kids and their school, their appointments. Dealing with funeral arrangements. Talking to the police and the lawyers.

Oh, but we had to wait for Colton since he was the executor of the will and not me.

Found that out when I called trying to get ahead of things.

Logically, I knew I was out of my mind with grief, and it was unreasonable to be mad at him. He was allowed to go on vacation. He was an adult and allowed to do whatever the hell he wanted, especially since he made the big bucks. His contract with the NHL brought in more money than I'd see in three lifetimes, maybe four.

He'd also been due to land in Houston in a few days anyway.

Colton hadn't done anything wrong. He really hadn't this time around.

But my best friend and her husband were in two coolers in a morgue.

Her kids were crying in my arms, inconsolable, and I needed to be mad at someone. Colton was, as always, an easy target. The easiest target because he wasn't around to defend himself right now.

There was just me and two seven-year-olds who didn't understand why their parents weren't coming home. They only knew it wasn't fair.

"Shhh." I ran my hands along Diana's back, and she shuddered, scooting even closer to me. "I'm here for you."

I could tell her it was going to be okay. I could lie through my teeth and say the grief would fade, and her parents would always be there watching over her. They'd always be in her heart.

Their hearts.

Watching down on the twins from heaven.

What difference would it make, though? No words were enough to put a damper on the grief.

"What's going to happen to us?" Noah mumbled. He shook his head, his dirty blond hair so much like Cara's I wanted to cry all over again.

I shook my head and bit down on my lower lip hard enough to split the skin and draw blood. It helped keep my own burning tears away. The physical pain made my insides feel a little better, but not by much.

“I’m not sure what’s going to happen. Not until we talk to the lawyer,” I answered as honestly as I was able. “Just know I’m always going to be there for you. I’ll make sure you’re safe. I’m going to do my best.”

“What if we get hit too? What if another car accident happens?” Diana asked. She craned her head to stare beseechingly up at me.

Aquamarine eyes. She’d gotten the color from her father, her face a curious melding of the two of them. Right now, her eyes were red and puffy, and her cheeks stained by the tears.

“There’s always a chance that an accident will happen. We’re going to be as careful as possible.” I refused to be the person to offer empty platitudes. I’d never been much in the way of saying what people wanted me to say.

I’d rather tell them what they need to hear as sensitively as possible.

The twins had already been subjected to the worst cruelties of life. I’d offer them the truth, and I’d do my best to say it in a soft way. They’d be better equipped to handle—

What?

Disappointments? Heartbreak?

I didn’t know anymore.

I barely knew my own name, and if I’d gotten four hours of sleep in the past two days, then it was a lot.

“When is Uncle Colton coming?” Diana continued, clutching her stuffed cow to her chest in a death grip. “You said he was coming.”

“I’m not sure. He should be here soon. I think his plane was due to land about an hour ago.” Or so his friend had told me when he called.

I had no idea who Luca Stone was, but I told myself I wouldn't get mad at him or Colton because Golden Boy hadn't been man enough to talk to me himself.

I told myself a lot of things.

The thought of Colton helped push aside the sadness and pain. Focusing on the emotions surrounding him helped.

Everything had seemed to come so easy to Colton. Everything in life, from school to his extracurricular activities to making friends.

Cara had struggled.

She and I had met in third grade. An incident in the playground where Joe Turner tried to make me ride the merry-go-round even when I told him I had balance issues. I'd gotten sick to my stomach and puked all over Joe Turner and the rest of his little buddies, which totally served them right.

Cara swooped in avenging angel-style, and took me to the bathroom to clean up. None of the teachers even knew what had happened. She hadn't known me, we hadn't talked before then, but she'd been there for me regardless.

We'd been inseparable since. Through all of the ups and downs of adulthood, we'd been at each other's sides. Who would stand with me now?

Who would be there to fill the empty space?

Colton might have been her twin, but she was *my* person.

I hugged the kids tighter to make up for my own sadness.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon. You know he doesn't want to keep you waiting," I told them both. "He wants to be here with you both."

True. I'd only seen Colton when he came to visit the family, pointedly refusing to watch his hockey games on television, but he'd always done well with the kids. They loved him, and I knew he loved them.

"Do you promise?" Diana asked.

"I promise he's on his way, yes."

I wasn't sure how long I sat with the kids, keeping them pressed to my chest and under my arms as if I'd somehow be able to protect them with wings of steel. If anyone could do it, I assured myself, it was me. People didn't call me a bitch for nothing.

"Come on, guys," I told them. "Why don't we build a fort? We'll take all the cushions off the couch, and once we're inside, no one will be able to get us."

Noah sniffed and ran the back of his hand beneath his nose. "A fort could be pretty cool."

"Dad never let us do it," Diana replied.

Well, shit. There went my heart. Just clutching in my chest.

They liked the idea, and we did exactly that, piling the cushions high and draping blankets and pillows against all the entrances. Once inside, in the comforting darkness, we held each other again.

I didn't move even to check my phone, so I wasn't expecting anyone to barge through the front door. I jumped at the sound of the lock sliding out of place, but the kids were sleeping so soundly they didn't budge.

Poor things. They'd exhausted themselves crying.

I untangled myself from the kids and made my way out of the fort, knowing I had to greet the man and happy I hadn't been asleep and drooling myself. It was the middle of the night, and the windows showed nothing but never-ending black.

Normally I'd be passed out in my bed. But having spent last night on the couch and way too much time in my own mind, I'd become too wired to sleep. Only rest.

Colton showed up looking as distressed as I felt. His hair stood out askew, and despite the golden tan he'd gotten from his time in the islands, he looked ashen. Dark circles dotted the skin beneath his eyes, and his lips were drawn into such a thin line his mouth looked bloodless.

Even disheveled, he was hot. The stubble lining his sharp jaw was hot. His broad shoulders were hot.

I may not like him, but I wasn't blind, either.

For a long moment, the two of us stood there in Cara's living room just staring at each other. He took my measure the same way I took his, and the frustration wasn't enough to stop the niggling voice in the back of my head from remarking on how he'd filled out since the last time I saw him. Even his muscles had muscles of their own, and they all seemed to flex the longer I stared.

Colton closed the space between us in three steps and automatically pulled me into a hug. His arms banded around my back to keep me in place. I stiffened.

Zadie St. Clair was not a hugger. But...

But.

I went with it because he smelled really damn good, and I needed the comfort. He trembled against me, and I automatically hugged him back. As much as it pained me to admit, I might have needed the touch, craved it as much as he did.

We held each other until his shaking stopped, and mine began.

"You made a fort in the living room?" Colton asked.

My hair muffled his voice.

He topped the charts at six four, but I was no leprechaun either. I'd been bullied all my life for my height. It felt strange and more than a little disconcerting to have to look up at him now.

"It was the only way to distract the kids. And they were exhausted enough by the time we finished that they passed out," I told him. "I stayed in there with them."

"Thank you."

He smelled so good. Not cologne, though. Or aftershave. A combination of man musk and sun and maybe a hint of

coconut from the sunscreen he'd worn on his vacation. I wasn't sure, but I knew one thing: the combination was potent and deadly beyond measure to a girl like me.

Besides, I needed the comfort.

I needed to cling to someone who lost as much as I did.

Neither one of us made any move to break away from the contact, either, even though he had to understand how rare this was for me.

The hugging. The being nice to him.

The getting along even though neither one of us said anything.

The time for words would come much too soon. There were years of conversations built up between us, and only Cara's death had provided the impetus for them now.

Otherwise, I would have gone until death, keeping them all to myself.

Death.

The word ripped through me with such force I shuddered. Colton finally lifted his arms from around my shoulders and bent to peek inside the fort to check on the kids.

"Don't wake them up," I whispered in warning.

He popped out of the fort and glared at me. He knew. Of course, he knew.

Rather than say anything, he stood to his full height and pointed toward the kitchen. My heart flipping in my chest, I followed him out of the dimness of the living room into the warm glow of the kitchen, where Cara had just gotten a new overhead chandelier for the table.

She'd gushed over it, the clean lines and the globe in the center where she'd hopefully have to dust less. We'd gone through about a hundred different ones on several online sites before she found the one she wanted. She'd saved for it since fixtures weren't cheap. And when she had it installed, we'd shared a bottle of wine and admired the finished product.

The tears returned with a vengeance.

Colton made himself at home and crossed to the fridge, bending to check the shelves inside. When he straightened, he had a beer in one hand and held out a second bottle to me.

I shook my head, but he didn't put the second bottle back. Instead, he took them both to the table and dropped hard onto one of the seats. He looked about half a second away from collapsing.

He let his forehead drop between his hands until it rested flat against the tabletop. "What happened?" he asked. "Tell me the truth."

Lower lip trembling, my insides a squirming mass of hornets on the attack, I grabbed the chair at his side and sank, gripping the edge of the table. "Um..." How did I start? "What did the police say to you?"

"Car accident," he continued. "Tractor trailer on the highway. That's all I heard. I got my ass on a plane as fast as possible, but it wasn't easy. Lots of goddamn layovers."

"Car accident puts it mildly. It was date night. I was here with the kids keeping them company, when the call came in. I'm, ah, I'm Cara's emergency contact. Or I was." I stared down at my white knuckles and the uncontrollable twitching in my fingers. Rings decorated both index fingers and my thumb and pinky on one hand. The bands looked too tight, about half a second away from cutting off my circulation.

Colton lifted his head to stare at me. The bright, fresh pain in his eyes had me coming undone.

"A tractor trailer hit a patch of oil on the road. It rained a little earlier today. Everything was super slick. It plowed into them and sent them spiraling into the guardrail. They were dead on impact. Luckily, they didn't suffer. The driver is in the hospital, but they expect him to recover."

"Date night," Colton repeated dully.

"Yeah. They tried to always go out and spend time with each other to keep the magic alive," I replied.

I used to feel bitter about it because Cara's husband, Harlan...wasn't exactly a prince among men. He used to chap my ass in the worst way, and I remember ragging on Cara about how her idea for date night wouldn't fly with Harlan.

I was wrong.

Colton nodded along with me.

"What...what do we do now?" I asked, twisting my hands together.

He shrugged. "I have no fucking clue, Zadie. I'll be honest with you. I'm just empty. I know I have to talk to the lawyer since I'm the executor of the will, but I haven't thought much past that."

I seconded the sensation. "Like a huge piece of you is missing. A piece you always thought would be there."

"Exactly," he agreed. "I keep reaching for her. You know, in my head? Because it might sound nuts, but I always knew she'd be there, and it brought me comfort. Now there's empty space and darkness, and my twin has gone to a place where I can't follow her. I can't stop thinking about that."

I swallowed over the huge-ass lump in my throat to keep from crying out loud. His admittance made me want to sob. I'd done enough crying to make my eyes red and puffy, and the rest of me feel as if I'd been beaten.

"So, I don't know what to do," he finished.

"I guess we get through the next few days, and we will take it from there. One step in front of the other, and we figure it out along the way," I supplied.

Colton nodded along with me.

The kids loved their uncle. It counted for a lot. And they were going to need all the love they could get.

He reached across the table and placed his hand on top of mine. A tremor ran through him, and when I didn't automatically pull away, he grabbed hold and squeezed hard enough to snap my tendons together.

“We’re going to get through this.” He made it sound less like a statement and more like a plea for security.

“We’re going to try.” It was the only statement I could offer.

And it meant nothing in the grand scheme of things.

COLTON

We made it through the funeral somehow. One numb step followed by another, and then another. Thank fucking god Zadie had enough presence of mind to make the arrangements. We stayed up until well past three in the morning the night of my arrival as she brought me up to date on what she'd done so far.

She'd had to sacrifice so much more than her time while she waited for me to land.

It didn't feel real to me. Not one piece of the situation felt real.

There was a sea of people I barely knew from Cara's life who all showed up to show their support. There were parents from the school and soccer teams, the kids' friends, and a few guys my late brother-in-law had worked construction with.

The faces blurred together in an endless sea of swollen eyes and chapped lips and empty words of shared sorrow.

They were empty to me, anyway.

Our own parents each made a brief appearance, arriving separately, of course. Dad came with his fourth wife, and Mom with her latest boyfriend. Mom looked shell-shocked but didn't do any of the grandmotherly things one might expect.

She wore a three-piece suit in bold blue rather than the habitual black. Blue, she told me, because it was Cara's favorite color. I never corrected her that Cara preferred green.

In her own way, she had loved Cara, but her maternal instinct was close to nonexistent. I think Dad realized any hope he had of a decent relationship with my sister was now gone. His relationship with me was already barely existent.

He'd raised me with the best of intentions and never went out of his way to do more.

At least he'd shown up, he and what's-her-face.

"I'm sorry, Son," Dad said, slapping me on the shoulder.

"For her death, for our shitty childhood, or for your inability to step up for your grandchildren? I notice you never took the time to go sit with them at the service." I turned on him irritably.

No, I'd sat with them. I'd cuddled them close, me on one side, Zadie on the other, together even if we were only united in loss.

My mom sat behind me, bawling into a silk handkerchief as if she actually gave a flying fuck, and Dad and his girl were at the back of the funeral parlor.

They'd been among the last to arrive.

Dad glared at me, his salt-and-pepper eyebrows knotting together. "This is not my fault."

"Yeah, man, nothing ever is, right?" I sounded like an ass, but I was mad as hell at the world.

Zadie had opted for closed caskets. The photos she'd chosen to have blown up were not any I recognized and showed Cara and Harlan in the yard at the house, their arms around each other.

Smiling for the camera.

Now, with the funeral over and done and everyone just standing around waiting to talk to the kids and me, I stared the old man down and wondered how we'd gotten to this point.

"Hey," Dad said in warning. "These are supposed to be my golden years, Colton. Now they're my black years. I lost my daughter."

I almost forgave him for his inability to be a decent father because he was only eighteen when Cara and I were born. His behavior now? He was a grown-ass man. Not so easy to accept his bullshit anymore.

In his mid-forties, on his fourth wife, and already retired from a cushy job. Trying to enjoy his golden years, as he'd said to me on more than one occasion.

"That's great for you," I muttered. "Now, how about you head over to where Mom is standing with your grandkids and pretend like you're happy to see them. Okay?"

I pushed Dad away and greeted the next person in line. Thanking God above that it was Will and his wife Celia only a step behind him.

"Thank you for making it," I muttered, clasping him in a tight hug.

"Dude, I'm always here for you. And I'm so fucking sorry," Will replied.

I appreciated so many of my teammates and their women coming in for the service. There was a sea of suited-up Rattlesnakes taking up a solid third of the space. I knew Luca had rallied the troops as soon as I'd abandoned him on our vacation, but this went above and beyond my wildest dreams.

A lot of the guys had been far away, but they'd come anyway. Bates and Elizabeth cut their trip to Sweden short for me. Will and Celia arrived from Washington state, and Coach and Willa from Nashville, where she was recording her latest album.

Hell, even Zach and Sasha had postponed their trip to Australia to lend their support.

I was beyond grateful to all of them.

"Just know we're always here for you, man," Will finished. "Whatever you need, even if it's someone to show you how to be with kids twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

Celia cradled her baby girl to her chest and nodded along with her husband. “Anything,” she repeated.

I bit my lip hard to keep from crying again.

These were my people.

I loved my sister more than anything else, but I wasn’t a part of her life in Texas. I went to college in the area to be closer to Cara and to try to build a relationship with her.

Then I’d been recruited to Arizona and the Snakes, and I’d bolted.

I never much liked her husband, either, which had been an issue for us. He was lazy, and he expected me to pick up the slack when their finances ran thin. I did it for Cara and the kids.

I’d have done anything for them, even when it grated on me to have to subsidize a husband who didn’t manage their money well.

Liam Montecinos and his wife Cassidy stepped up in line and grabbed me for another round of hugs.

“We’re here for you too. Whatever you need,” he said in his usual gruff tone.

I clung to him.

The layer of rage bubbling below the surface wasn’t helped by the cops informing Zadie and me last night that her husband had been over the limit. A few too many beers at dinner. Learning he’d been drunk driving hadn’t surprised me, and while he hadn’t caused the accident by any means, his reflexes had been compromised.

Maybe they might have made it otherwise?

Wishful thinking.

Cara shouldn’t have gotten in the car with him. She knew better. She fucking knew better.

“Who are the ghosts in the corner?” Liam asked me in a whisper.

“My sister’s mother and father-in-law,” I answered.

They stood off to the side, pale and lost.

I had only met them at the wedding, and while I didn’t know much about them, except they weren’t active in Noah and Diana’s lives, I felt for them. Losing a child had to be the worst thing ever.

Unless you were *my* parents.

None of this was helped by Zadie radiating resentment toward me (nothing new there). I thought we’d made progress until a few days went by, and I realized it had been her exhaustion. She had no energy left to snipe at me.

Once she got a few hours of sleep under her belt, she was back in action and feistier than ever.

How was any of this my fault? I wondered.

From the day I’d met her, she made it clear she disliked me. I thought part of it was that she worried my relationship with Cara would impact hers. Never happened. Not on my watch. I tried hard with Cara, but I never got as close to her as I wanted.

Luckily, I had the Snakes family.

“You going to make it through the wake?” Liam asked me. “You look like you’re going to barf.”

I offered him a thin smile. “I’m going to have to. Won’t I?”

Rather than tossing my empty guts up for the crowd, I focused on Zadie.

She looked absolutely goddamn gorgeous in a fitted black dress that hugged her curves. It was very demure for Zadie, who maintained a certain look about her. She was no shrinking violet, and she’d never been afraid to draw some attention. In fact, today she wore killer spiked red high heels with that demure dress, and the end picture left her towering over everyone else in the crowd.

What she wore underneath was a mystery, but the long lines of her suggested very little in terms of bra and

underwear. I'd love to see her that way, which was really not an appropriate thought for a funeral.

I had a long history of inappropriate thoughts where Zadi was concerned.

I'd been trying with her and the kids for the past few days, but nothing I said or did pleased her. If they wanted to be with me, she acted as if she resented it, and if they clung to her, she wanted me to "step up and do something."

Unlike on the ice, there was no winning here.

The wake at the house became an endless torture, and I wanted to beg one of the guys to take me with them when they left. No such luck.

Someone around here needed to man up. And I guessed that someone was me.

"You going to be fine, Colton?" Elizabeth was wrapped around my waist, hugging me hard. "What can we do? Tell me. I feel so useless knowing you're hurting."

"Not much right now. But thanks." The truth was I had no idea. "I wish it would all disappear."

She rubbed her hand down my spine. "I know, honey, I know. You let me know if you think of anything, though. Okay?" She unhooked herself, cast me a final sad smile, and suddenly—

I was left with the guys.

"This sucks, man," Zach said. He shook his head and pulled at the black tie he wore.

"I can't even imagine how those kids are feeling." Coach looked across the living room at Noah and Diana, still in their funeral attire, playing feebly with some friends in the corner.

As a father of two, I knew this would be his worst nightmare.

"One day at a time," I replied dully.

"One day at a time, sure," Coach replied. "Doesn't make it any easier. Does it?"

“You’re here. That makes it easier for me.” I clutched at a glass of water hard enough to shatter the cup. “Your presence.”

Will was the last guy left beside me as people made their exit. “How you doing with Zadie? You two always had a fire-and-ice, love-hate chemistry.”

He knew me too well.

He’d been the one I griped to whenever I came back from a visit to Houston and needed an ear.

Probably chewed his a little too much.

“It’s more ice and hate right now. She needs someone to be mad at, and apparently, it’s me. Not that I begrudge her,” I told him.

Will chewed the inside of his cheek as he stared me down. “As much as you’d like to, don’t use her to fuck through your feelings, man. It will only make things worse.”

And somehow, Will knew where my thoughts went.

“Wow, you just went right there. Didn’t you?” A small smile tugged at my mouth because it would be a lie to say I hadn’t thought about sex. How it would feel to get the tension and the emotion out of our systems with a quick fuck.

It might help to burn out a lot of the anger. The frustration.

“I know you well, my man. Don’t do it, and don’t call Ginnie either. If you can keep it in your pants right now, you might just be okay.”

Will had the best advice.

I shook my head, partly hating how he called me out. “Nice funeral talk.”

“I’m your friend, and I know you well. There’s too much at stake right now for you to think with little Colton. It would be easy to do, and you’d spend the rest of your life wishing you’d exerted some self-control.”

I nudged him with my shoulder, grateful for the banter.

“We both know he’s not so little. Come on, now. Massive Colton has a ring to it. Or how about Girty Colton?” I teased.

We’d shared a locker room for a long time.

“Either way, don’t let the mother fucker out to play.” Will abandoned me there, staring at Zadie’s long legs while she spoke to some random mother from the kids’ school.

He was right, of course, and I did need the stern talking to. Zadie was sexy as all hell, and I’d always been attracted to her, but that would be a total dick move on my part.

Taking advantage of her grief and calling it a mutually beneficial release.

I slapped the side of my head and then pressed the cool side of the water glass to the area.

The following day we left the kids with the neighbor, and Zadie and I bundled in my rental car and headed for the lawyer’s office for the reading of the will.

“You’re serious?” I asked when I parked. “This is the place?”

I had to control my temper.

It was a shitty little office, and on the inside, the mismatched chairs of the waiting room left me wondering about the quality of the man’s legal advice.

The lawyer himself reeked of *good old boy* with his giant silver belt buckle and cowboy boots, who seemed to have reluctantly removed his Stetson for the proceedings. Instant dislike wasn’t fair, but that was how I felt.

Both sets of parents were there, mine and Cara’s and Harlan’s as well. They gathered as close to the lawyer’s desk as physically possible without moving chairs. It made me a cynical bastard, but I couldn’t help wondering if they thought there would be some money for the taking. I kept the thought inside by the skin of my teeth and shook my head.

Poor Noah and Diana. They’d have a hard time adjusting to life with Harlan’s parents, surely, but my own were not an

option. I didn't know if either of them would even take the kids if it came down to it.

Mr. Stetson—I forgot his name and didn't care to remember—squinted at the paperwork as he continued to read.

“In the case of guardianship regarding Diana and Noah Taylor, the last will and testament states that the duty will be shared equally between Colton Ramsey and Zadio St. Clair,” he said.

I wasn't sure who in the room was more surprised.

“What?” I barked out. “Co-guardians?”

Zadio stiffened at my side in shock.

In the back of my mind, I'd assumed, as next of kin, the kids would be mine, especially when I looked around this room and saw the offerings of guardians available. Not that I knew what to do with children of any age; maybe that was the point.

Zadio looked as shell-shocked as me. Her cheeks were bright spots of red, while the rest of her went fish gill green. “What? Seriously? Read it again. You must have missed something.”

“This isn't right,” Harlan's mother exclaimed, sobbing. She pointed at me. “Harlan would never allow that to happen. It has to be a mistake.” She followed her, pointing with a glare. “Just because *he* has money. That doesn't make him qualified.”

“I think you'll find the decision was based on stability for the children and their energy levels,” Mr. Stetson continued. “I assure you, as I was present with both Mr. and Mrs. Taylor while constructing this will, they were clear on who they wanted to parent their children.”

Harlan's parents were quite elderly, having had their son late in life, but I'd be lying if I didn't agree with her. I was the money, and Zadio was apparently the stability and energy.

Fuck.

What the hell were we going to do about this?

“I’m sorry. I really had no idea,” I said to them, but they were not interested in hearing. And what was I apologizing for anyway?

“Come on. We’re out of here. We won’t take this insult lying down,” Harlan’s father burst out.

He helped his wife rise without a second look, and they turned and left. Like that.

Fuck them. What assholes. It was another loss; I understood, and even though it felt like a slap, I had to accept it was not, not really. This had nothing to do with Zadie or me.

This had to do with money, pure and simple. They wanted what they wanted.

My own parents remained only a moment or two longer until Mr. Stetson reached the end of the will and concluded the reading.

“You know, Cara made the right decision,” my mother told me with a sad smile. “Those kids need two parents. One person can’t do it alone.”

I refused to dampen the arch tone in my voice as I said, “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I am. I know it makes me a hypocrite, Colt, but you could have used a mother and a father, as could Cara. We messed up, and we know it. Cara made some mistakes, too, but this isn’t one of them.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek before exiting the room.

It might be the nicest thing my mother ever said to me, and it was as close to an apology as I was ever likely to get.

“She’s right, Son. Do better than we did. Do what you can for those kids. They’ll need you.” My father followed her out.

That left Zadie, who sat still firmly in her seat, the lawyer, and me. I ran my hand through my hair, down the side of my face, and scratched my growing beard.

“You think we could have a minute before we delve into the particulars?” I growled at Mr. Stetson.

“Sure, I’ll give you five.” The lawyer sauntered out as if he hadn’t just blown up our lives.

“You okay, St. Clair?”

“Nope, not even a little bit.”

I slipped down in a chair. “I did not see this coming. Isn’t this a kick in the balls?”

“Well, that’s one thing we agree on,” she snapped. “I don’t know what I thought. Maybe they’d go to Harlan’s folks, maybe you...”

“Well, looks like we’re in this together.” I didn’t need to add *whether we like it or not* because we definitely didn’t. “I guess I’ll have to find a house for us in Tucson. My condo at the Nest won’t cut it,” I replied.

Her eyes popped wide at my comment, and her cheeks flushed with anger. The color reached all the way south to the perfect tits I saw peeping out above the silk camisole she wore. “I never agreed to uproot the kids and move. You better think again. We’re staying here.”

Was she fucking serious? “I can’t stay in Houston, Zadie. It’s not an option.”

“Yeah, well, Golden Boy, everyone’s life just got smashed, and we’re all going to have to make changes.”

Sure we were, but that wasn’t going to be one of them.

ZADIE

C o-guardians.

Co-fucking-guardians.

What had Cara and Harlan been thinking when they made that miraculous decision? The least she could have done was tell me what to expect. The one and only time I asked her what would happen to the kids in case of an emergency, she'd told me not to worry. There was a plan, and Diana and Noah would be fine.

I figured they'd head to their grandparent's house and call it a day.

Apparently not.

Apparently, my best friend in the entire world decided to play the world's worst joke and pair me with her brother until the kids turned eighteen.

What the fuck was I going to do?

I stared at the ceiling, running on fumes with no sleep in sight.

It was 3 a.m. the night after the will reading, and when I finally couldn't take it anymore, I pushed out of bed and headed into the kitchen. Colton was still upstairs doing whatever it was he did.

Soon, I sat at the table, staring at my glass of amaretto liquor over ice, which had been a favorite treat with Cara and me. Except it didn't taste right without her here.

Nothing tasted or smelled, or felt right.

The more time that went by, the more I figured I'd even out eventually, and it would stop hurting like a wound opening again and again. I kept bleeding out and wondered when it would stop.

It never stopped.

The will reading was a slap in the face, and Colton wasn't helping with his we're-moving bullshit. Not even a conversation.

I took a sip of liquor. I was mad at everyone—Colton, Cara for dying, her douche of a husband for drunk driving. I had a lot of feelings, and none of them were good, all jumbling together in a mess inside of me. I took another sip, hoping it would help.

Alcohol might be the only way for me, at this point, to feel less. So be it.

Hearing Colton's name, even in my head, had me remembering how frustrated I'd been in the lawyer's office. I lost my fucking mind when he announced we were moving. Casually. Easy. As if it wasn't the detonation of the bomb dropped in my lap.

He may be Mr. Big Shot with enough money to choke a horse, but I lived here. I had a life here, and I'd built it with my own fucking hands.

The liquor turned sour in my stomach.

Okay, I was just a car saleswoman and not an NHL star. When you compared those two things, they were apples and oranges, but I had a life.

Golden Boy didn't see things that way.

He came out with, "I'll just buy us a house."

Who the fuck could buy a house out of nowhere? *Not me, that's for damn sure.*

"It's my life," I told the glass of liquor petulantly. "I need to at least be a part of the discussion."

It was not my dream existence, sure. I rented a one-bedroom apartment, and I saved my pennies to start my own business. Everyone said you needed a three-to-six-month buffer when you gave up your job to start another one, but no one told you how hard that was to achieve.

I'd donated plasma; I took online surveys; I sold extra crap on eBay, and I was still months away from achieving any kind of financial security. One emergency, and poof. All gone.

Even taking the days off to be there for the kids and plan the funeral set me back and talk about an issue with the boss. He hated anything to inconvenience the sale of cars on his lot.

So no, my life might not be perfect, but Houston was my hometown. I had roots here, and they weren't the kind you could pick up on a whim. Not because some man who had money told me we were leaving.

"Arrogant fuck," I muttered under my breath.

Just like that, my glass was empty, and when I rose to grab the bottle, my knees turned to jelly.

I hated my boss, and my best friend was dead, and honestly, nothing else was tying me to this place, no matter what excuses I made.

The excuses were getting sour, and now I made them only to prove to myself that Colton was inconveniencing me.

I'd thought about making a fresh start a few times. Cara always talked me out of them. She said she needed me here, and I stayed. I'd done my best to build a life with no support. My mom got me to eighteen, and then she said it was her turn and cut loose.

She was a nurse and currently working in London and living it up on her terms. Not that I blamed her for any of it. I didn't begrudge her a moment, but I sure could have used some help along the way.

Almost all of my adult life, I worked fifty hours a week or more, often two jobs. Since I was a teen. *I'm still barely getting by.*

My fingers trembled on the bottle as I poured more liquor into my glass.

Maybe I hadn't *made it* yet, but that didn't mean my life was worth nothing at all. I deserved consideration. I deserved a conversation where I felt heard and seen, and we decided, together, what to do about this mess.

Co-guardians, my ass.

More like "Colton's life" and me along for the ride.

"What are you doing down here?"

Colton came down in nothing but sweats, and I lost the ability to speak. Shirtless, sweatpants, sleep deprived...

Holy crap he was hot.

And there I sat in nothing but a cami and a thong because I had *not* expected him to get up.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I held my glass up to my face. "I'm getting drunk."

"You didn't eat anything today."

"That's the point," I replied.

His eyes roamed my body. I could use a good hate fuck about now. The thought clanged around in my head and landed right between my legs.

Yet...we had to raise these kids together, and shit was complicated enough. I'd have to find someone else for the job. Guaranteed, they wouldn't look nearly as delectable as Golden Boy, though.

Shame.

Shame he was him, and I was me.

He sank into a chair, looking as defeated as me, and for some reason, seeing the fight go out of him made me sad. We'd had a hell of a week, and I barely spoke to him since the will reading. Until bedtime, each of us seemed to have a kid attached to us like a monkey to a tree.

Noah and Diana were out, though. Both of them were sleeping in his bed. Had he tried to sleep at all? Had he waited to talk to me?

Who knows.

“I’m sorry I was presumptuous earlier,” he said in a low grumble. “I’m used to kind of making decisions quickly and not really used to factoring other people in. I’m a lone wolf, always have been.”

“Me too.” I poured him a liquor, and he looked at it with skepticism. “I appreciate the apology. Looks like we are going to have to keep to snarls rather than snapping at each other’s throats, though.”

I’d love to have his teeth on my throat right about now and his hands bruising my skin.

“We both have to make decisions with everyone in mind now. It’s going to be a struggle. For me, for you. We learn as we go, I guess.” He chugged the drink and screwed up his face. “What the fuck is that shit?”

“A little sweet for you, huh? It was Cara’s favorite.” My eyes misted again. “She always liked things with too much sugar.”

Colton winced, running his tongue over his teeth until he came down from his mini sugar rush. “I remember hauling you two out of a bar once for doing body shots with that crap.”

A smile ghosted my lips. He’d been so mad at us. To be fair, we were drunk, and there were some pretty skeezy guys at that bar. It wasn’t exactly high-end.

“I remember you were so mad at us, and Cara was furious at you,” I replied softly.

“That was something else you two had in common, apart from a love of this drink. You both loved making me the bad guy.” He blew out a breath, shaking his head again. “Not that I blamed you for it. I was fine to be the villain in your story. Now, though, I’m a little fucking sick and tired of playing the part.”

I automatically went to argue with him, to tell him he was wrong. And stopped myself.

Did he have a point? I knew I was always quick to judge him and always assumed that was me having my friend's back. "Sorry. For making you feel bad."

The alcohol made me sappy.

He waved his hand as if to say it didn't matter now. "Yeah. The thing is. I can't really walk away from the Snakes yet. Not only does it not make financial sense, I signed a contract for another few seasons. Getting that changed and switched to another team is a lateral move and may cost me sponsors, and I want these kids to have every opportunity. I don't know what kind of a parent I'll be, given, as you know, mine both sucked. But the financial thing...I know I can do that."

I dragged my attention away from his pectoral muscles and wiped the proverbial drool from my lips. *Focus.*

"I just wish you'd asked me before blurting out what you intend for us. For me," I continued. "It wasn't right."

"You want to talk about it? Then we'll talk about it." He spread his hands on the table. "I have the means to take care of them. A good base and opportunities they won't have here. Tell me why we should stay."

He was right, of course, and the honesty disarmed me. Neither of us had lives filled with role models. The thought of acting like my mother or like his had me lowering my guard.

"I may have overreacted," I admitted. "We're both dealing with a lot."

"I have two months before I need to be back. The season starts in October. So, let's take our time. See what we can accomplish along the way," he suggested.

Hearing him talk about the season reminded me of the funeral, the way I'd watched his team and their families rally around him. The way I'd always wanted a large group to rally around me. I'd had Cara, and she'd been enough; we'd been enough for each other.

Still...

“It was nice that your team came for the funeral.” I had been shocked to see so many of them there, and when I overheard how far they’d come, I’d been even more surprised.

Golden Boy couldn’t be *that* bad of a guy if he had those kinds of friends.

“We’re a family as much as we are a team,” he said with a smile. “Those guys are ride or die for me and vice versa. I know you don’t think much of me—” he held up a hand to silence my protest. “But you need to know that family is very important to me. I’ve had to make do with what I had for a long time, and when I signed on with the Rattlesnakes, I found the support I always wanted. Now I can be that for Diana. For Noah. For you, if you’ll let me.”

I nodded.

“Cara had been my family, and it’s possible I stood between your relationship with her a time or two.” Wow, the booze really did make me sappy.

I’d certainly been less than welcoming when he’d shown up for college in the area.

My mind flashed back to a young Colton bouncing with excitement to meet me. And memories of me shutting him out of conversations, encouraging Cara to stand him up, and us generally taking him for granted surfaced. I hadn’t wanted him to replace me, and I’d been a jerk about it.

“I see that about you, Colton. You always showed up for the kids.”

“Well, I did my best from afar. You’ve been a constant presence.”

He was right. I babysat the kids, came over to hang with Cara whenever her husband was out with his buddies, which was often and was generally around.

“I guess we had different strengths.”

He bobbed his head. “Let’s think on it a bit, see how we can use those strengths in the best interest of the kids.” Colton

stood and turned to go. “Maybe you could try wearing a little more clothing around here. Just a suggestion.”

The way he spoke, the strangled tone, and the heat in his eyes...It was nice to know I wasn't the only one affected. “Right back at you, Golden Boy.”

“Sure. I guess we do need some ground rules...something else to consider.”

“I'll start a list.”

“Already have one.” He stared at my tits. “But the clothing thing is now at the top.”

“Does it bother you?” I asked, rising to set my empty glass in the sink.

Rather than saunter sexily to the counter, the way I pictured in my head, I stumbled and lost my balance. My feet tripped one over the other, and Colton was there to catch me.

“Whoa there,” he warned.

His big hands grazed the sides of my breasts, and I slapped him away.

“Ground rules,” I barked out. He needed me to repeat it, apparently. “Don't fucking touch me.”

He held his arms up in front of him and took a step in the opposite direction. “Fine. Night, Zadie.”

He sounded pissed.

“Night, Grabby.” I poured myself another drink, needing to get the way his eyes raked over my body before he'd turned away out of my head.

COLTON

S omewhere along the line, I lost time.

Easy to do in these circumstances, but when I stared at the date on my phone screen, I wanted to pass out. A little bit. Three weeks passed in the blink of an eye. There and gone.

Luckily for me, I had a lot of shit to fill in the hours. I kept at it, kept busy so that at the end of the day, I fell into bed and drifted off into dreamless sleep.

Summer vacation worked in my favor. The kids didn't have school or any of their usual extracurricular activities. Okay, well, it worked in my favor on one hand.

On the other, I had two bored children who looked to me for entertainment.

I also had a scantily clad Zadio who walked around the house in booty shorts, showing off her legs for days, torturing me. Whether torture was the main reason or a side benefit? No clue.

Three weeks and the four of us fell into a semblance of a routine. The continuity of the schedule helped keep the grief at bay, if only for the meantime. Rather than letting the kids watch television, I signed them both up for day camps and lined the weeks with those kinds of activities.

In the morning, I dropped them both off at their respective camps and went to the gym to push myself to the breaking point.

My muscles screamed, and my joints ached, and I kept going for an hour or two or three. When I managed to drag myself home from the gym, I slogged through the paperwork my sister left behind. I went through the house and packed up their clothing, their knickknacks, old toys the kids didn't want anymore, all of it.

She'd never been the best at organization, but the boxes were out of control. Boxes of scrap paper with numbers and information and articles she'd saved from magazines. There were recipes and notes on activities she thought the kids would like.

Three weeks of monotony under the Houston sun with kids who cried themselves to sleep every night and an uncle who had to pretend to be unaffected by life itself. To hold it together for their sake when I wanted to break down too.

I cried once they were tucked into bed, and I had the guest room and a quiet house to myself.

Every day, Zadie went to her job. She woke up in the morning around the same time I did and helped get breakfast ready before she took off for the day, rain or shine. Coffee or no coffee, as I found out the one day we ran out of grounds of black goodness.

She made the choice not to go back to her apartment on her own. We talked about selling the house, so she knew it wasn't a permanent place for us to land. Still, she hated wasting the gas driving back and forth between her rental and the house multiple times a day.

And after three weeks of watching her go off fresh-faced and come home ready to drop, I decided to make a change.

Once the twins were at camp, and I'd completed my workout, I picked up lunch from one of the local Japanese hibachi places she liked. We'd been eating a lot of takeout lately, but I hoped the surprise would count. A little something to let her know we were going through a lot, but I recognized how hard she tried. How much work she put in.

Maybe even a little peace offering.

We'd been treading on thin ice, and the old tensions were still there. They'd only taken a back seat. We were living together and moving around each other like two caged animals.

I thought about the arguments we'd skirted around for the past three weeks as I drove the rental toward the car yard. Our day would come soon enough. For now, we'd have wontons and fried rice.

I pulled into the used car lot and stared grimly at the waving arms of the red and blue inflatable men outside the front door. Oh, yuck. Personally, I felt like any business that resorted to the use of those freaky things was grasping at straws to make money.

Okay, so it wasn't *exactly* a dump. But it wasn't top shelf either.

How the hell had she ended up in a place like this?

The Zadie I remembered from every visit to Texas had been a go-getter and driven to make a success of herself. Almost hungry to prove herself.

I knew she'd studied business at community college.

She was the child of a single mom who was much more stable than mine and had worked her ass off to keep Zadie fed and clothed. Probably where Zadie herself got her stubbornness and gumption.

She'd had big dreams, a chip on her shoulder, and enough talent and intelligence to build a rocket to the moon if she wanted. Why here, then? What did this place offer her?

What had happened along the way?

I pulled into one of the empty parking spaces around the back of the gray brick building and stepped out into the blinding heat.

Whatever the reason, Zadie was a car saleswoman. I'd known that, of course, but in my mind, she was selling high-end cars to business executives, not working in a joint like this.

I was sure she put just as much effort into her role here as she would any other.

The food smelled phenomenal, and I clutched the bag in one hand as I pushed through the side door into the showroom. Where was Zadie?

Several rows of doors at the back of the showroom were surely offices, and one of them had to be hers. A quick glance at my watch showed it was lunchtime on the dot.

She was here.

Rather than call out, I walked slowly through the air-conditioned space.

“I don’t give a *shit* about morals.” A loud voice cut through the constant hum of elevator music playing over the speakers. “I don’t give a shit about feminism or anything like that. If you want to sell cars, then you need to put your assets on show. It’s not like I haven’t seen you wear less on your own time, babe.”

“Stop calling me babe.”

Ah, there was Zadie. I’d recognize the voice anywhere.

“I’ll call you whatever I damn well please,” the man continued. “You work for me. Remember?”

Each step brought me closer and closer to the conversation and the thug it belonged to. I didn’t need to see to know the type. When I turned into the nearest office, the one with Zadie’s name on the plate on the wall, I saw the dude. A lanky, balding man with a ring of hair that stopped at his ears and nothing on top.

The two of them stood there facing off against each other, Zadie tight-lipped and the guy with his back to me.

Berating her.

He thrust a pudgy finger at her face. “Show what you’ve got. Get the ass out. Whip the nips out. It’s the way the world works, *babe*,” he finished. “If you don’t like it, then you can get the fuck out and see if someone else will deal with your bullshit attitude.”

I understood his point on one level. The baser level of my masculinity certainly bought a few items over the years because they had the attached sex appeal. While it was true, it would probably work to push the merchandise using her figure, no boss should ever talk to an employee like that.

Ever.

I also hated the way he looked at her. Zadie was pinned between a desk and her boss, who stood way too close. He loomed down over her, and a quick step to the right gave me a better view of the leer splashed across his face.

Guys like him burrowed under my skin like a fucking maggot and deserved some serious stomping.

No matter what kind of ideas her boss had in his head, he had no right to talk to his employee that way. He had no right to talk to *Zadie* that way. My overprotective streak kicked into high gear, and I had to force myself to stay rooted to the spot instead of barging in there and strangling the no-good fuck to death.

It wasn't my business.

Zadie could take care of herself.

She'd be the one to kick my ass if I tried to help her.

None of those thoughts mattered a lick, though, because the truth was, I'd been attracted to Zadie from the moment I came back for college. She made it perfectly clear she thought I was an ass, so the attraction never went anywhere.

She had hated sharing Cara, even with me. She admitted it was a part of the reason for her dislike for me, but I thought she also resented how I'd...how did I say it? Found a way out of being poor.

I'd gotten my first hockey contract pretty much out of college.

She and Cara had never found their way above poverty level, no matter how hard they worked. Not even for my sister, who had married a man she thought would take care of it. He had, in his way. She'd gotten her kids and a house, with some

help from me, but none of the financial security she'd wished to have.

I got it now.

I got it all in startling clarity, and I hated it.

I shook the thoughts out of my head and stared at the door to the office, where the dealership owner continued to lecture Zadie on the right kind of bra she needed to close her deals.

“Let a little lace peek through!” he insisted. “Let them see the goods. They’ll be more likely to sign a contract if they think you’re part of the package they’re getting.”

“But I’m not,” Zadie insisted through gritted teeth.

“Oh, but you are,” her boss continued.

And I’d heard enough, I decided on the spot. More than enough. Let her hate me for this. I didn’t give a shit anymore.

White knuckling the bag of food, I strode forward and plastered a viperous smile on my face. “Hey, Zadie? You have time to talk to me?”

It was all I had to say to get the man to step back, knowing he now had an audience. He swiveled his round gut, looking out of place on his bean pole frame, out of the way faster than I would have thought he could move, and the moment he realized who I was, his bug eyes bugged out further.

He slicked a hand over the thinning strands around his ears.

“Damn. Unless I miss my guess, you’re Colton Ramsey, the center for the Snakes over there in ‘Zona. Holy fuck, Colton Ramsey. In *my* place!”

Ah, the charm.

I wasn’t buying it.

“I am.” I widened my smile and showed him my teeth. Without saying anything else, I grabbed Zadie by the elbow, hauling her out of the office without a backward glance.

“You, you lead the charge into the offensive zone during your last game at the end of the season,” the guy called out.

“Sure did,” I muttered under my breath.

I didn’t let go of Zadie and barely paid any mind to the way she lurched behind me until we were outside alone.

“Shit, I almost forgot. This is for you.” I handed her the bag of food I’d bought. “I came to bring you lunch. Never thought I’d have to mean mug an asshole before noon.”

She stared at the bag for a long moment before she took it from me. “Thanks. Good timing,” she said. “He’s a disgusting prick on the best day.”

I sneered at the building. “You shouldn’t have to work for a guy like that.”

“Yeah, sure. Easier said than done.” She set the bag on the top of my car and undid the knot, leaning down to breathe in deeply. A low groan erupted from the back of her throat. “You got me steak hibachi.”

“I did. I, ah, wasn’t sure what kind you were in the mood for, so I got a lot of everything. There’s spring rolls in there and some crab wontons too.” I probably bought too much.

More than one person would be able to eat on a lunch break. I stared beseechingly at the bag, my stomach rumbling.

Zadie glanced up at me with her brows furrowed. I knew the look. The you-shouldn’t-have look she often gave me whenever I’d tried to surprise Cara or the kids with something big.

Except this was just lunch and nothing that deserved the look from her.

“Why don’t we share it?” I offered her a small grin. “My stomach is pretty damn empty right now.”

It seemed to appease her somewhat, and Zadie dug into the bag to grab a set of plastic ware.

I plopped down on the hood of the car beside her with the meal spread between us. Much easier that way to grab a little

bit of this and a lot of that.

“So why are you here?” I asked, curious.

“Here in Houston? Where I’ve always been?” she quipped acerbically. “Gee, do we have time for me to tell you the story of my life?”

I rolled my eyes. “I mean here in this shithole with a boss who thinks it will improve his bottom line for you to dress like a stripper,” I corrected.

“Ah, you mean Twig. That’s his nickname. Everyone in the showroom calls him Twig.” She speared a spring roll with her chopsticks and chomped half of it in a single bite.

Fit him remarkably well, considering his body type.

“I’ve actually wanted to open up my own business for a few years,” she said through the bite of food. “Some kind of virtual assistant work. Except starting a small business costs money, as does food and bills and all kinds of things.” She rapped her hand on the hood of the car. “Gas prices. You know, the cost of being an adult. So, I took this job in the meantime, and here I am. Still.”

“Years, huh?” I asked.

“Years,” she agreed. “I mean, the commission is decent even though this isn’t the best lot in the city. And normally, Twig isn’t such a jackass. Today was just one of those days for him. It happens to the best of us.”

“I feel, with a name like Twig, he has more bad days than the average person.” I bit down hard on a piece of zucchini and onion. “You know?”

Zadie took her time answering, and I suspect it was because she waited for Twig to come around the corner and catch us badmouthing him. When nothing happened, she nodded.

“Six days out of seven, he’s a real dickhead,” she admitted with a small laugh. She poured another spoonful of mustard sauce over her own veggies. “I’ve gotten used to it. He’s always in a great mood whenever your hockey team wins,

though. Guy *loves* hockey. In fact, if you give him an autograph, I guarantee he'll stay happy for two days, three max. It will be a new record for him."

I wasn't giving that guy shit. But Zadie admitting to me what she really wanted to do , gave me pause. Got me thinking.

"You want to be a virtual assistant, huh? Seems like the kind of gig you could do anywhere. As in, you could move and still be able to do your job as long as you have access to the internet. Why don't you try it out in Tucson?" I was taking a risk in proposing such a thing.

Zadie stopped chewing mid bite. "What?" she asked.

"I'm just saying, it would give us some flexibility with the kids. Sooner or later, I'm leaving. I have no choice unless I want to break my contract and ruin my career. We can't shuffle them between Arizona and Texas since we're sharing custody. So..." I trailed off, trying to sound much easier than I felt.

Trying to let Zadie know, without saying it, how badly I wanted her to consider the move. To really want it.

It took me by surprise how badly I wanted her to want to move in with me. Not just so that I'd keep seeing her in those little outfits she wore when she was at home. Maybe it made me a masochist.

I loved sparring with her.

"Well?" I pressed.

My insides went cold, and every bite of food in my stomach turned to cardboard.

She wasn't going to go for it.

I'd been chewing on the conversation for about a week now, trying to figure out how to convince Zadie to uproot everything. She was a stubborn jerk sometimes, and I said that with all kinds of affection. Normally I appreciated her sass and her temper. This time, the outcome mattered.

Her happiness mattered too.

She shouldn't keep on working in this place for creeps like Twig while she put her own dreams on the back burner. For how long? How long would she continue to do for everyone else but not herself?

"It would give you a chance to build something real," I continued, staring at my food rather than Zadie. "Especially if you moved in with me and the kids. You wouldn't have to pay rent. Or expenses. I'd handle all those things and give you a chance to focus on—"

"You shouldn't have to carry me," she snapped. She narrowed her eyes and glared. "I'm an adult. At this point in my life, it's practically an insult to step in and pay my bills like some kind of sugar daddy. I'm not the type to accept handouts."

"It's not a handout. I own the house. I mean...the house Cara and the kids lived in was mine." I hadn't meant to tell her. "I bought it for them."

"You, no. Colton? You can't own the house." Zadie looked lost. Yeah, because that meant staying there was also a handout. She'd seen it as neutral territory, but it wasn't. "What are you talking about? Cara would have told me."

It embarrassed me, on multiple levels, knowing my sister kept that a secret from her best friend. I thought I'd done something good by purchasing the place for my twin and her kids. With Zadie staring at me, her eyes warmed by betrayal I wasn't sure was from Cara or from me, I wanted to crumble.

I cleared my throat. "When I sell the house here, as we discussed, then you can have the money. String free. All of it. It makes no difference to me; as far as I'm concerned, the money is already spent," I replied. I had enough money to not worry about losing the cash from the sale.

Zadie could have it. The money would mean a lot more to her than it would to me. A life-altering difference.

The realization surprised her enough to have her drop her chopsticks. It clattered against the hood, and they rolled away. "I can't take your money," she blustered. Her cheeks flushed,

and the color crept all the way down to her collarbone before she got herself under control. “You’re out of your mind.”

“If you won’t take the money from the sale, then agree to live with me rent-free. It gives you more time to work on your business. Everything you make, you can put toward your business.” I held my hand out for her to shake, refusing to go back. Refusing to bend.

She was coming with me to Tucson. No way would I accept any other outcome.

Zadie stared at my outstretched palm like a snake ready to strike.

“Colton, it’s too much.” She floundered to grab her fork and wiped it on a napkin before pushing her rice around the container. “It’s way too much, and I’d never ask it of you.”

For some reason, the way she said my name, I hated it. I would much rather have had her call me by the derisive nickname she was fond of using. But no. *Colton*. Suddenly I felt too far away from her.

“You’re not asking for anything. In fact, you’re doing the opposite. You’re practically throwing my offer back in my face, which is insulting. I’m giving you an option to grow without struggle. To provide a new home base for the kids where we can all make a good life. Without worries. Life brings enough hardships as it is,” I finished. My mind was made up. “This is a shit situation with Cara, and we need to find a way to make the best of it. There’s a slim possibility I could get a trade down here, but the team is terrible, and I’d be tanking my career. I can ask, but it feels to me like a fresh start might not be a bad thing for you or the kids...”

My hand was still outstretched for her to take, and at least it didn’t tremble.

She met my eyes.

It took several more baited seconds before she took my palm, and we shook on the deal. “Fine. A fresh start.”

I kept my grin to myself. The move to Tucson was on, for real this time.

ZADIE

I knew as soon as Golden Boy's skin touched mine and electricity ripped between us that I'd made a mistake by shaking his hand. I followed up the gesture by purposely wiping my hand on my shirt and stuffing so many crab wontons into my mouth at once that it made speech impossible.

I couldn't believe I'd agreed to this move. Picking up and taking my entire life to another state where a man I barely tolerated offered to pay my bills for me. What was I thinking?

Correction: not my bills, but my rent. He'd handle the rent and the household expenses, but the other bills were mine to have, to hold.

"What do you mean we're moving?" Diana asked me.

With the decision finalized, it was time to tell the kids. Go time, I assured myself, and although they wouldn't take it well, Colton and I were on the same page. *Finally*.

I pushed my own doubts aside as I faced Diana.

Her eyes were wide and frantic. She reached out and grabbed hold of the hem of my shirt, refusing to let go, her stuffed cow clutched in her opposite elbow crease. As such, she trailed me around the kitchen, only a step behind me.

"I mean, your uncle is selling the house, and we agreed, together, it would be best for us all to go to Tucson with him. That's where his life is. It's going to be a really nice change of pace for us," I told her in an even tone.

“No,” she insisted. Tears turned her voice thick and high-pitched. “This is Mom and Dad’s house. We have to stay here. We grew up here.”

I was freaking out, and so were the kids, although Noah showed it less than Diana. He sat glumly at the kitchen table with his focus on the glass of milk in front of him. He hadn’t drunk a drop.

“Your uncle actually owns the house. It’s a fact. That said, he and I discussed this together, and we both agreed it was time to move to Arizona and sell this place.”

It made me sick to think about. All those years Cara had complained about her brother making more than her, and he’d actually given her this place. Like, for real. Maybe he held it over her head as some kind of ransom? *You can’t afford your place, but I can, so you’re going to be grateful, and I’ll never let you forget it?*

I didn’t think so.

I’d never be able to ask her now.

“And he doesn’t want to keep it? But we grew up here. It’s ours. It was Mom’s and Dad’s, and they wouldn’t want us to leave.” Diana’s lower lip trembled, and those tears turned her eyes to glass.

“I know, honey, I know. We discussed it and agreed a move is the best direction for us.” *Stay firm.* “We’re going to have to get used to the new normal.” I drew in a breath. “And you’re going to your cello lesson this afternoon.”

It kind of made sense now, how Cara could afford so many activities for the kids even though she constantly complained about having no money. She had no mortgage. Or was Colton paying for the lessons and the camping too?

I was pretty sure neither one of the children kicked up a fuss about the camp programs he’d found because they wanted out of the house, away from their memories. They wanted to forget, even if it was for a couple hours, that they were orphans. Sure, they had family, but their parents were gone.

Their lives would never be the same again, no matter how much we all tried to pretend.

“I’m sorry,” I told Diana when she continued to tug on my shirt and bawl. “It’s final.”

“It’s not fair!” Noah pushed away from the table and swatted at his glass of milk, sending it flying.

Rather than go off the handle, I watched him go and silently moved to get a towel and clean up the mess.

I drove the kids to their afternoon appointments and met my friend Jess for a cup of coffee. Jess was a mutual friend of mine and Cara from way back in the day. I guess...she was just *my* friend now.

The last member of the three musketeers had checked out of the party early.

Jess was already waiting for me in the coffee shop we’d chosen as our own and lifted her hand to make sure I saw her.

“I grabbed a table,” she greeted with a smile. “I hope you don’t mind.”

I bent to grip her in a quick hug. “I see. Did you order already?”

She stared up at me, her bright blue eyes buried under way too much makeup. She tried out every new look on herself before she did anything for her clients, but this look seemed a little dark for her pretty features. Jess looked like a fairy. Naturally pretty and delicate.

She rarely needed help from any makeup or powder.

“Of course I did,” she replied with a grin. “I would have gotten something for you before the line got too long, but I wasn’t sure what you’d be in the mood for today.”

Jess knew me. My coffee preferences changed on a dime depending on the weather, my mood, the news, you name it. I liked to keep it fresh.

“Today feels like a matcha latte day with a dash of cinnamon on top,” I told her. “I’ll be right back.”

I had a lot to say to her, and I didn't want to rush the conversation. There were too many things bubbling beneath the surface. I thought of them all as I waited my turn. Luckily the line moved quickly, and I returned to the table with my mug in hand and steam rising from the design on top five minutes later.

Jess flipped her blond hair streaked through with red and pink over her shoulder. "So." Her expression went sober.

We hadn't seen each other since the funeral, although we'd kept in touch through text. Daily. I felt my own face shift into a familiar frown, and sadness rose. "Yeah. It's weird, isn't it?" I asked.

Jess stared around the cafe. "Cara always loved this place. It was her favorite."

"She would have gotten here early to grab the wingback chairs by the window and made one of us drag a stool over," I agreed. "She loved their homemade vanilla syrup."

"An extra pump," Jess added, her smile equally heartbroken. "Way too sweet for a normal human but never enough sugar for her."

What else was there to say? Cara would never come here again and ask for a mocha with extra pumps of vanilla syrup in addition to the chocolate.

It was down to the two of us.

"I wanted to talk to you." I decided to dive right into it. "I've had...a few things come up. Some life-changing things. It took me a little while to get my thoughts straight."

Jess hid her immediate fearful reaction in a sip of coffee. "You were intentionally vague on the phone. Now, do you want to continue to scare me, or do you want to tell me what's up? Because if you leave me hanging, I'm going to jump to all kinds of confusing and probably dramatic explanations."

"No more hanging, Jess. I promise. I've, ah, talked to Colton and agreed to move to Tucson."

Out with it. Like ripping off some kind of bandage. I had to let the fresh air hit; otherwise, I'd never heal. Just like I needed to talk to Jess about this and get her opinion.

I didn't trust myself anymore.

My intuition was too clouded by grief.

"You're moving to Tucson?" Jess asked. She blinked, and her eyes seemed overly large all of a sudden.

"He offered to pay for household expenses if I move in with him and the kids. He wants me to be able to focus on growing my own business. Starting from scratch takes a lot of money, so he says, once I find a job, I can put everything I make toward the business."

Jess stared at me for a long moment while she mulled over the words. I never expected her face to break out in a grin like the sun shining through the clouds overhead.

"Are you kidding, Z? That is amazing!"

Okay...what?

"You're happy about it?" I wanted to know, an inch away from gawking at her with my mouth open.

I wasn't sure how I felt, and here was Jess ready to congratulate me.

"Yeah! I think this is a great opportunity for you. It's like a wish granted by a fairy godmother. Or godfather, in this case. And Colton isn't the type of person to hold it over your head. He's the guy who would genuinely want you to succeed." She sucked on her teeth. "Wow."

I had the same gut feeling about him. Not that I wanted to admit it, not when it felt much easier to hate Colton. To blame him for everything bad going on the way I always did.

"What gives you that impression?" I took a sip of my matcha latte and swiped at the foam dotting the tip of my nose.

"I'm not claiming to be an expert on all things Colton Ramsey, of course, but I always thought Cara was kind of

ungrateful about him.” Jess hurried to finish her sentence, and I wondered if it was another Band-Aid moment.

Well, knock me the fuck out. “You did? Really?”

Jess toyed with her mug, fidgeting in her seat, clearly uncomfortable telling me this hard truth. “I mean, sure. He came down to college in Houston so they could be close to each other. She never moved for him, never wanted to. He always looked out for her and tried to talk her out of marrying that idiot husband she saddled herself with.”

I nodded along with Jess’s assessment. She wasn’t wrong there. “I do remember a few overheard arguments,” I admitted.

“Plus, he came here every summer to visit her and the kids. He flew the family to games and paid for every expense. He gave them money...” Jess trailed off. “Apparently, he bought her house, too, and never asked anything else of her. Doesn’t sound like a bad guy to me. Sounds like a man who goes above and beyond for those he loves and considers his to protect. Correct me if I’m wrong here, Zadie, but did he tell you he expected anything out of you if he pays for all expenses?”

I opened my mouth to automatically tell her yes and stopped. Colton had been adamant that there were no strings attached to the deal. My mind, of course, went to sex. He’d expect someone to be there when he snapped his fingers.

Someone to call *good girl*.

I wasn’t that person.

Except he’d made sure I understood he’d pay, and I’d start my business while we both raised the kids. No more, no less.

Jess saw the answer on my face and settled back in her seat. Clearly pleased with herself. “Did he tell you he wants hot, steamy sex with you whenever he snaps his fingers?” she pressed.

I blushed, sipping at my matcha latte. “He did not.”

I wasn’t sure if I was upset about that or not, though, come to think of it. The way he looked in gray sweatpants was

Greek god-level gorgeous.

“He’s not a bad guy,” I conceded begrudgingly. “And you’re right. He did go to great lengths for his family. I’ve just always been so loyal to Cara. She was mine, more than anyone else in my life.”

“Of course. She was our friend. We’d go to the ends of the earth to defend her even from imagined slights.” Jess reached across the table and grabbed my hand, squeezing it.

God, she’d done her nails to match her eye makeup.

I never even noticed before now.

“It’s hard to see the truth of things when we’re so close. Especially when Cara was so stressed out all the time. We commiserated, we empathized, and we listened when she needed us. She did the same when the tables turned.”

I nodded, biting down on my lower lip when the tears threatened to fall again. They burned at the back of my eyes and rimmed every corner. I’d been so loyal to Cara that I never even stopped to question, especially when I saw Colton as the Golden Boy.

What if...I switched the narrative?

Now that I looked at things, it seemed to me Colton wanted a family in whatever form it came, and he had been willing to step up to get it. Cara had...kind of taken advantage of his fortune and his willingness. I remembered several conversations where I wondered if Cara didn’t feel the money was somehow owed to her just because her twin had it and she did not.

“I think,” Jess said, squeezing my hand again to get my attention back. “You need to give Colton and Tucson a chance. A real chance. This kind of opportunity doesn’t come around often, if ever. It’s the stuff out of a storybook. You’re being given a chance to not only start fresh but to build your business without worrying about whether you have to budget to keep the lights on.”

“You’re right again,” I replied. I broke away from her to chug my now-cool latte. “Which only leaves one thing left to

do.” Besides feel like a piece of shit.

Jess lifted a brow. “What?”

“I’m going to have so much fun quitting my job.” I flashed her a toothy smile and gladly reacted to her high five.

And no time to waste, either.

After Jess and I had our time and she had to get back to her studio to meet a client, I headed for the car lot. Twig was going to be pissed when I told him. I already saw the look on his bony, smug face in my head, how he’d react to being told I quit. Now, did I want to be nice and give him two weeks or not?

Guess I’d see how I felt when I got there.

I pulled into my familiar parking spot around the side of the building and pushed in through the side door, heading for his office.

As usual at this time of day, Twig sat behind his desk with a portable television blasting out a golf tournament. His eyes followed the movement on the screen, enraptured.

I cleared my throat, and when he didn’t blink, I followed it with a few raps on the door jam.

“Hey,” he said without looking away.

“I need to talk to you,” I started. “Do you have a moment for me?”

“You’re not scheduled to come in for another hour. Why are you here early?” Twig scoffed, gaze darting over to scan me from head to toe before he returned to the game. “Please don’t tell me you think you’re going to get a raise out of me. Don’t even ask me for one. You’re not getting it. You’re nowhere near my best salesman.”

“Salesperson,” I corrected on instinct.

“Like I give a shit? No raise, Zadie. You want more money, then you take my advice, and you shorten the skirt and get the tits out.”

My stomach churned at his words. *What a pig.* How had I managed to work for a man like Twig all these years? Survival, pure and simple.

“I’m not going to whore myself out to sell cars. In fact, I’m not planning on doing anything else for you ever again,” I told him, taking pleasure in the way my voice never faltered or dropped. “I quit.”

Twig didn’t glance at me again. He pumped his fist when one of the golfers on the screen put the ball into the hole. “No, you aren’t,” he told me.

Not paying attention, unsurprisingly. Not respecting me, unsurprisingly.

“Actually, I am.” I sidled forward and made myself comfortable on the edge of his desk. Man, this was a heady time. I felt so damn powerful it wasn’t funny. “I’m moving to Tucson. If you want sex to sell, then how about you hike up your own pants and push those tits out. I mean, fuck, Twig. Yours are better than mine anyway.”

That finally got his attention, and he swiveled in his wheely chair to slowly face me. “The fuck you say to me, Zadie?” he asked.

“I said you can take this job, and you can motorboat yourself with it. I’m out. I’m moving to Tucson with Colton and the kids, and I’m finally going to start my own virtual assistant business.” I rose, cracking my neck from side to side. Completely unbothered by his blustering. “It’s my time to shine.”

“You little shit. You know you’ll be back.”

“No way. Not this time.” I’d threatened to walk away before. This time was different. There was no going back.

I was determined to make it work, and if Tucson wasn’t the final destination for me, then it was a stepping stone.

Zadie’s time to shine.

Twig yelled after me all the way out the door, and his voice echoed off the rafters of the showroom. I was out, and I’d let

the naysayers and people like Twig be the fuel on my fire. This was something for me. I'd never have to work for him again.

COLTON

The ladies of the Rattlesnakes helped me find a great house.

For some reason, when they banded together, they were this unstoppable force of nature. And apparently, they were goddesses of real estate too.

They searched and made calls and researched areas until they narrowed down on five potential properties.

Zadie, bless her, actually gave me the go-ahead to look at them, and it seemed to me she trusted me to make the right decision. That or she'd gotten too worn down to fight.

The place I decided on was right around the corner from my man, Will. Zadie and Celia seemed to hit it off when they had met in Huston, and I hoped having someone she knew, who would be close by, would help her a little.

Every bit helped.

I stood in the driveway staring at the property, trying to muster up pride at being a homeowner. It came in spits and spats, but it wasn't the wave I'd thought it would be.

The house was a two-story, southwestern style, and the community boasted a pool, basketball courts, and a clubhouse. I banked on having areas like that would help the kids make friends. The school district was killer, too, of course.

I drew in a breath of steamy air, hot and thin, and tossed my keys in the air. I caught them in my palm, and they jingled.

The house itself wasn't enormous, but I wanted it to feel like a home. The truth was, I'd personally never lived

anywhere larger than a two-bedroom apartment. Having five bedrooms felt big to me. Too big, even when I knew we needed all of them.

Five bedrooms, five bathrooms, a triple car garage, and a pool of our own. The outdoor kitchen was amazing, and there was an extra space on the main floor that I planned to use as a home gym.

This house was more than I ever dreamed of owning as a child. With my income now, the money I made from playing, and through sponsorships, I had the ability to purchase a house four times the size of this one.

Why would I?

This place? More than four people needed.

The kids were going to have plenty of space to run around and act like little heathens.

I unlocked the front door and paused with the knob in hand, heated by the sun. Maybe I'd add some kind of portico over the front door to block the heat. Now that, I decided, tickled me.

I let myself inside and stared at the foyer, a curving staircase to the right, and a short hallway leading back to the open living room and kitchen combination at the back of the house.

The kitchen had been done in white, all custom work. Once upon a time, I thought white cabinets with a white countertop were the epitome of class. Now the clean lines had me wondering how badly they'd show handprints.

Could we be happy here, in this place?

I really fucking hoped so.

The others weren't due to arrive yet. I'd come ahead of time to set everything up, and soon the movers would arrive to recreate the kids' bedrooms on the second floor. With any luck, the transition...well, I wanted it to be as seamless as possible.

Especially since my own childhood had been a spectacular disappointment.

Was I overcompensating?

You bet your sweet ass.

My dad moved me around often before he married my *first* stepmother. I couldn't even remember how many times we had relocated. Although I didn't say anything to Zadie, I did understand why the kids would have preferred to stay in Huston.

The more we discussed it, the more I looked for an alternative, the more I knew there was no way I could swing it. She also didn't know I'd had my manager reach out to the Houston team to discuss a trade, but they couldn't afford me.

The Rattlesnakes were too good of a team as of right now, and I was too good of a player to take a drastic pay cut. I vowed to do my best to make this move as easy as possible for all involved parties.

There'd be stress. I wasn't delusional. It took more than a nice house and a swimming pool to lessen the grief, but it sure didn't hurt.

The movers arrived right on time. I spent my first night in the house in the master bedroom, wondering how the three of them would react when they saw it for the first time.

Their flight arrived bright and early at eight a.m. Zadie kicked up a fuss on the phone when I told her I planned to pick them up, of course, which had me gritting my teeth and powering through the expected argument using logic as my weapon of choice.

She had to make things difficult.

I got it.

Without knowing the area and traveling with two young children, I felt more comfortable getting them. I met the three of them in the baggage claim area, noting the matching looks of anxiety on the twins' faces. Zadie, too, if I had to be honest.

To counteract, I opened my arms wide and gave them my biggest smile yet. “There’s the Taylor family!” I practically shouted.

Not good to draw attention to myself, but I’d come to the airport dressed in shades and a hat as a disguise.

Noah didn’t want to hug me back right away. Diana, it seemed, was more concerned with her stranglehold on her stuffed cow.

Everyone was quiet on our drive to the new house. They’d seen photos of the place, and I even walked them through on video calls, but I knew it wouldn’t feel real to them. Not until we had a few weeks to settle in and make it our own.

On our way there, I pointed out some interesting sights in the area and kept up a steady stream of chatter. It took me by surprise to pull into the neighborhood, to navigate those winding streets not on a visit to Will and Celia but as a neighbor.

Fuck me, this was different.

A whole different experience from anything I was used to.

I pulled into the driveway and stopped the car, the air conditioner cutting off and the heat from outside already pressing in.

“Go explore!” I told them. “Check out the new place.”

Noah and Diana were slow to get out of the car. When they finally moved, they ran toward the house, Zadie pausing by the door.

She wore skin-tight jeans and ankle boots along with a flowy top that left her shoulders bare. It shouldn’t have looked as sexy as it did. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail, and large cat-eye sunglasses rested on her nose.

“It’s pretty nice, Colton.” She worried her lip, and I wished I could kiss it. Suck her lip right into my mouth and worry it *for* her. “Nicest place I’ve ever lived and better in person than in pictures.”

“Same,” I assured her, placing a hand on her back to guide her toward the front door.

“Really?” She sounded skeptical.

“Really. You didn’t corner the market on childhood poverty, remember? I was living at the Nest until now. It’s an apartment complex they move new players into when they’re ready to head out.” I hadn’t been ready. Not until I was left with no other choice.

“You’ve been here for years,” she informed me as if I was an idiot.

“I’m one guy,” I replied. “I didn’t need a house. Or I didn’t think so anyway. It’s possible I’ve always needed an outdoor kitchen and didn’t know until now.”

She glanced over and grinned at me. “I guess we’re all making some changes.”

We made it into the foyer, the door swinging shut behind us when the kids ran up to us from the living room.

“Uncle Colton, this place is huge! Did you see the pool?” Noah gushed.

“I did,” I told him solemnly.

Diana hugged me around the waist. “My bedroom looks exactly like it did at home. How?”

I chuckled and told her, “Magic.”

They gave out a running commentary of all the things they liked, bursting with joy. Their smiles were a sight for sore eyes. Noah and Diana loved the house.

“You’re going to love it even more because tonight, we’re having a cookout,” I replied, pushing them toward the living room again. “In our swimsuits out by the pool.”

They were stoked. Me too, for that matter, until...

Dinner with Zadie in a string bikini was a special kind of torture. I had to keep jumping in the pool to cool down and give my raging erection a chance to deflate. Still, that pain was

worth it to see the kids happy, and I knew it would happen. The bikini part.

Somehow being aware didn't actually prepare me for the sight of her. The black string tied at her hips showed off those legs for days. Fuck me. I thought she'd looked good in underwear and a cami?

No. The bikini...pure agony. I burned the kabobs.

We made it through the next few hours of our official first day, and much to my surprise, the kids were even happy to go to bed in their own rooms. Another win.

After much thought, I decided to move my shit and give Zadie the master suite because it had a sitting room as well. Perfect for her new business venture.

This wasn't easy for her, and she needed some privacy when she got to work.

"It's yours," I told her in hushed tones, standing in the middle of the upstairs hallway and arguing. Of course, Zadie objected. Of course, she had to kick up a fuss about it.

"You should have the master bedroom," she hissed back. "It's your house!"

"It's *our* house, and." I put a finger to her lips to silence her next statement. "I'm away a lot. It doesn't make sense for the largest space to stay empty."

She rolled her eyes, but she seemed to cave. "We'll see how I feel. I'm not going to like this, though, if you keep micromanaging and cutting yourself off at the knees."

"I do not want to rearrange any more furniture, St. Clair. This has been quite enough for me." That was not exactly the truth, but I hoped it would appease her.

I wanted Zadie to be comfortable in the house. Not to mention, I really was going to be away a lot. I didn't think she realized how much she was going to appreciate a room to retreat into when I was here or a place to hide and breathe a minute or two when I went on the road.

There was also the grueling and intensive schedule once the season started again.

“Fine,” she growled out. “I’ll take the master for now. And if I’m not happy in a month or two, we’ll revisit. You’ll have to get some of your friends to move the furniture.”

She smacked me on the shoulder.

Then, to my surprise, she followed me down to the backyard and plopped at my side. We dangled our feet in the pool.

“There needs to be ground rules here too,” she continued. “A few things we talked about in Houston but never really hammered in.”

Christ, those legs of hers. I thought of something I wanted to hammer in and bit my tongue to keep the groan inside of me.

“You first, then,” I said. “What’s on your mind?”

She stared off into the distance and the fence surrounding the yard. “No bringing dates back, or women in general. It’s rude, and it’s disrespectful to the children. We have a weekly meeting to see how things are going and if anything needs to change, and family dinner when we can. When you’re home, I get some nights off.”

“It seems only fair,” I replied lightly. “As long as it means that you don’t bring men around here, either.”

Her lips shifted into a smirk. “I know what to do when it comes to dates, Golden Boy. Don’t worry. Oh. And no walking around half naked.”

“The half naked one was mine in the first place if you remember.” And it had been tough to adhere to in Houston. “But we are currently half naked, so I’m not sure how well that one is going to keep up with the pool.”

“Bathing suits don’t count,” Zadie clarified with a pout.

“They fucking should,” I said, shoving her playfully with my shoulder. “Especially those ones you’re wearing. Talk about dental floss.”

She leaned back in her elbows so I got a full view of her goods. Fuck me sideways and backward. She was such a tease, and I always wondered if she did it on purpose.

I responded by flopping forward into the pool, splashing her, and making her squeal. When I came up for air, she was still smiling. I liked seeing her smile. Maybe too much.

“No dates for you either,” I repeated. “And also, be sure to tell me if I’m not pulling my weight.”

“You are kind of hefty.”

“*Hey.*” I splash her before putting on a gun show with my muscles. “Nothing I don’t need and no fat.”

She shook her head and chuckled, the sound dark and rich. “You are ridiculous.”

I had no fucking clue how the two of us would make it work long-term, but I knew we had to try. Day one in the books, and it went pretty well. The raging erection I’d woken up with, well...I took care of it in the shower. With the sexy brunette down the hall, I knew I’d have many more boners to deal with, and I wasn’t dumb enough to think this was a one-off.

I wasn’t proud. I was a realist.

She knew how to push my buttons.

I liked seeing her stunned and a little off balance, though, the following day when my teammates and their families rolled in for a cookout, she grabbed me by the shirt and dragged me into the dining room. “This is a lot of people,” she said in an undertone.

“You’re going to have to get used to it.” I purposely patted her on the top of the head, knowing she hated how much taller than her I was. “They like to get together. A fucking lot.”

“We’re the welcoming committee,” Celia informed her when we made it into the kitchen, sliding a potato salad down along the island. “We know moving is hard under the best circumstances, and these are definitely not the best. Still, we’re here for whatever you need...”

Celia's voice trailed off as if she didn't know what to say. Like mentioning my sister's death would somehow trigger us.

"Well, I appreciate it, and I bet the kids do too," Zadie replied warmly, no hint of her earlier internal struggle visible on her face.

"A few of us are reasonably new to town—me, Sloan, Elizabeth, and Eleanor. Oh, and Liam. He moved here because of his wife, Cassidy. That's a cute story," Celia continued.

"Not as cute as our story, babe. That one is my favorite." Will hip-checked his wife while still managing to look masculine with a baby carrier strapped to his barrel-like chest. "And Liam has been here for years now. What are you talking about? He's not new."

"Ours is cuter," Tommy chimed in, putting a tray of chicken wings on the counter.

His stepson rode high on his shoulders as Eleanor trailed behind him. She pushed her glasses up on her nose. "What are we talking about?" she murmured.

"Well, ours is hotter! Never forget it!" Elizabeth called out from the outdoor kitchen.

That woman's hearing was something else.

"You guys are all nuts," I replied as I opened the fridge and hauled out drinks for everyone.

Zach's large hand clapped me on the shoulder. "Mate, you're *not* wrong. And honestly, we should have name tags at this point; there are a lot of us to get straight."

Poor Zadie did look more confused than ever now. She'd gotten to meet a lot of the guys and gals at the funeral and wake, but this was different. This was our home turf, and she was the outsider struggling to come to terms with the changes.

"We could just use your numbers for you guys." Eleanor stopped and considered her comment. "But I'm terrible at numbers. Cass would nail it. She's a statistician. Numbers are her life."

“Okay, as there are no name tags, be patient with me,” Zadie replied. She seemed to shake off whatever nerves ate at her as she grabbed a beer from the fridge and popped the cap.

I loved watching her, loved that she was not shy around the gang. Not really. Truthfully, plenty of women would be a mess surrounded by a crew of professional athletes like this one or intimidated by trying to get to know a whole new crowd.

As I fired up the grill, I kept an eye out for both her and the twins. They were currently in the pool with Mia and Joshua’s kids and Eleanor’s boy, Ryder.

They’d all be at school together, and I hoped it would help Noah and Diana feel less nervous in general. New schools were always hard. I had started at plenty back in the day.

“So. How was the first day?” Coach asked me as we loaded a mass of burgers on the steaming grill.

“It went as well as I could have hoped. I know it won’t last. The bubble will burst.”

“Grief...it’ll do that to the best of us.”

I nodded. My own grief came in waves. One moment I’d be fine, and the next, I’d remember my loss and sink again. It sucked. Zadie hadn’t mentioned any issues she had, but I thought she might feel the same way I did.

“Well, your co-parent is fucking hot,” Zach whispered in my ear. “It has to help a little, even though it’s got to be complicated.”

“We’re both adults,” I replied, turning to flip a burger because I didn’t want to meet his eyes.

Things were one hundred percent complicated, and I was not immune to the charms of Miss St. Clair. Not by any means.

“Single adults,” Luca added. “They can do what they want.”

The men grouped around me, our heads close together so that we were the gaggle of hens instead of the ladies.

“As an adult, he should *not* go there,” Liam said. “Too messy by far. You’ve got to live with one another, share the same house... not to mention you can’t just cut and run. You’re both legally responsible for the kids.”

“Never stopped *you* from making a bad mistake or two,” Tommy teased.

Liam scowled and said, “Yeah, well, there were no children involved, just two adults. Not the same thing.”

Tommy elbowed Liam but said nothing else.

He was right, and I knew it. “Don’t worry,” I told them. “She barely tolerates me a large chunk of the time. We both have way too much at stake. Not likely to misstep there. Not to mention she’d bite my dick off if I tried. Razor teeth, that one.”

The woman in question caught my eye from across the patio and gave me a wink. It was a sweet and reassuring gesture. She was surrounded by wives and girlfriends at this point. They’d have all kinds of advice for her, from where to get the best tacos to parenting hacks and everything in between.

Yes, exactly, I thought to myself. That was the real importance of this day. I needed Zadie happy here in Tucson so we could *all* be happy. Or at least try.

She grabbed me in the kitchen a couple of hours later and stopped me from going for my fourth beer of the day. Thank heavens her bikini bottom was at least covered by some cutoff shorts.

Maybe we’d be okay. If I could remind my dick to behave every time he saw Zadie. Or if she started dressing like a nun.

“This has been so fun,” she admitted. “You have nice friends.”

The way she said it...made it seem as though she’d had her doubts.

“My friends are your friends, Zadie. They like you. They’ll be here for you when you need someone.” *If I’m not around.*

She tilted her head to the side, considered me, then groaned. “I’m sorry. Okay? I’m fucking sorry I didn’t act as generously back when you moved to Huston for college.”

Whoa, talk about coming out of left field. “You mean, how you looked pissed every time I was anywhere near my sister?” My voice held no heat. “You’re sorry for that?”

“Yes. I mean it.” She huffed, her lips tweaking, looking as if regret ate at her insides.

Whatever brought about the change in her, and I wondered, I wasn’t about to blow it off. It obviously took a lot for her to admit such things to me. “Water under the bridge. I’m all about us looking forward, not back.”

“Again, very generous...”

“I’m a generous guy.” Heat passed between us, and we both took note. “Yep, there too,” I couldn’t help but add.

We both understood I spoke about the sack, and I shouldn’t go there.

Zadie narrowed her eyes and smacked me again. “Keep it tucked in, Golden Boy. This is an apology, not an invitation.”

We’d be just fine if I kept my mouth shut *and* my dick in my pants. It was a pity I’d never been great at doing either.

ZADIE

It took me two weeks until I started to feel settled. The changes were not just in location but my daily activities. It felt odd and off-putting to not go to work every day.

Did I miss it?

Hell to the no.

I didn't miss a single moment, not even a little.

I had my business plan for my Virtual Assistant business, and I kept busy working on setting up the website and other platforms I would need for launch.

Rather than working in my sitting room, I decided to set up shop in the small sunroom off the back left of the house. It gave me a better view than the house across the street, anyway.

The kids started school right on schedule and with as much kicking and complaining as I'd expect from youngsters their age.

With Colton training for October's season start literally all the time, it gave us a semblance of a routine. Kind of.

The kids, like the rest of us, had good days and bad days. Some nights Diana wanted to sleep in my bed with Mr. Moo pressed to her chest. Some nights she crawled in with Colton, and other times, she fell asleep in her own room without an issue.

Noah, on the other hand, refused to sleep with either one of us. He took to breaking things on "accident."

I didn't mind waking up with Diana in the bed, but if I was being honest...I'd rather wake up with Colton. And I needed to shut *that* down because it was the worst idea ever.

I set my mug of coffee down on the countertop and slapped myself silly like it would somehow dispel the dark and lascivious thoughts.

The things I'd considered doing to that man.

They went right into dirtbag territory and featured prominently in my wildest dreams.

It didn't help matters that Colton had been amazing for all of us.

I saw him in a very different light here.

I hated it.

Apart from his extraordinary work ethic and commitment to the Rattlesnakes, it was clear he was a family man at heart. He prioritized the kids, his friends, their families...it was amazing. No matter how bitter and jaded I'd gotten in my life, I saw and I appreciated. Maybe it was because I'd never had a dad in the picture. Or any other male role models to look up to and admire.

I found it crazy hot.

Yesterday I came into the house to find Colton reading a book aloud with Diana on one side and Noah on the other, Will's baby girl asleep on his chest. Yep, crazy hot.

Fuck me.

Which was what I had to do late at night. Take care of business on my own while thinking of him and berating myself for it after the deed was done.

And it was not just the book reading. My laundry magically appeared outside my door, maybe not folded as neatly as I would have liked but there and finished. If Colton headed out, he came back with something he knew I liked, such as a surprise coffee flavor, a book about running a small business, or even just some plants in decorative pots.

If he were my boyfriend, I'd say he was the best ever. He was not.

I slapped myself in the face again as a reminder, hard enough for my cheeks to tingle.

He was not my boyfriend, and we might be playing house, but nothing came for free. Nothing. All those sweet gestures had to mean something besides a simple sweetness. Maybe he bought me things like he bought his sister the house: to show that he had more than we did.

I had a hard time convincing myself it was true anymore.

Yesterday, Colton took the kids with him to a junior ice hockey meet at the local rink. After much convincing, where he accused me of being a workaholic and allergic to fun, I tagged alone.

His friend Joy ran the rink, and Sloan owned the place.

It was adorable and well managed. Colton took the twins into the locker rooms to get them set up with their skates while I lagged behind at the front desk, speaking to both of the women.

Wouldn't hurt, I told myself, to get to know them better.

They were both utterly gorgeous and put together. I felt like a hobo in comparison. Never quite with it and never wearing what I should.

"How's it going?" Joy asked when I finished purchasing a soda from the counter. "You settling in okay?"

"Not too bad," I admitted. "Weirdly, Colton has been great."

Joy didn't need a moment to weigh her answer, either. "He's a good guy, and he can step up if he has to, just never had to before, I guess. Not to mention he is gorgeous." She winced. "Don't tell Rico. He thinks the dark and swarthy Lothario is my type, but I've always had a weird thing for blonds."

I huffed out a laugh. "Your secret's safe with me. And to add insult to injury, Colton is great with kids. I never would

have thought.”

Sasha appeared beside her, shaking out her blond hair as though she had a point to make. “Because he’s a big kid himself. Also, he had a shitty childhood, so he knows what kids do not want,” she commented.

“We have that in common.” I sighed. Though I knew his was worse than mine. “It’s a motivator, for sure.”

“He’s not bad on the eyes either.” Sasha arched her brow suggestively. “I mean, there are a lot of good-looking guys on the Snakes; our team is lucky to be blessed that way because I’ve seen some other hockey players.” She shudders. “Not our guys. And not Colton.”

Joy elbowed Sasha. “I already said that. If you’re going to eavesdrop, then pay attention to everything.

“Agreed on the good-looking part, but I don’t shit where I eat,” I told them. “Bad idea all around. I’ve always been really good about not fucking coworkers. This is worse.”

Sasha shrugged. “We’ll see.”

I didn’t like their implications that I’d cave. If there was one thing I could say about myself, with pride, it was how I stuck to my guns once I decided on something. Call it stubbornness or old-fashioned hardheaded bullshit, but I liked myself.

“Colton and I aren’t going to sleep together. We have a lot of history, and it’s not all good.”

“People can change as they grow...believe me, I have, and so has Rico.” Joy glanced to the right at her partner, over on the ice with Colton helping the kids.

Rico and Zach taught the peewee league once or twice a week, from what Colton told me. Today he was just a bonus coach, and Noah and Diana had the benefit of learning to skate from professionals.

Joy was right, though, and I admitted readily: Colton was not the villain I always thought he was. He had great friends, a great work ethic, and he loved his niece and nephew.

I saw now, although it pained me to recognize that Cara was jealous of him and didn't spin him well to me.

He was still a handsome, arrogant jerk, but I understood why his ego was so big. He earned the right.

Golden Boy dragged himself up from nowhere to the level of a nationally recognized professional athlete. He didn't have fancy training camps or coaches. Whatever he'd achieved was all him, pure and simple.

Natural ability and a whole lot of hard work.

"It's good you're giving him a chance," Sasha said softly. "I know how hard it can be to trust someone."

"Or to give someone a chance after you've already made up your mind about them," Joy replied. Her engagement ring flashed. "Lord knows I gave Rico a hard time. We hated each other. Hardcore hate."

I considered what the girls said as I twisted my body to stare at Colton on the ice.

His hard work bought us an amazing house as well.

I'd never lived anywhere so nice. Not even close. Colton tried not to be too overbearing, and I tried not to be too surly. I set up the defense years ago with him. Not only with him but with a lot of people. Especially Golden Boy, though.

He was too hot, too *much*. He was never staying in Houston, and I wasn't going to risk losing Cara for a fling with him...

I hated to admit it, but I may have always had the hots for my best friend's brother. Ugh, it made me sick.

Too late to go back now, I reminded myself.

Admitting the desire to myself made no difference.

If I thought the stakes were high back in the day, it was nothing compared to now. Cara made me a co-guardian of her children for a reason, and it wasn't so I could fuck her brother's brains out. She did it because she trusted me to do right by the kids, and I intended to.

I had nothing to put back in my pants but a whole lot of pent-up lust and desire to handle, none of which had been helped by the backyard pool. I thought it was an asset when we first moved. Seeing Colton out there in his barely there skivvies one too many mornings had me reconsidering my proposition.

“Look at her,” Sasha whispered to Joy. “She’s a goner.”

“Wouldn’t you be?” Joy whispered back.

Once peewee practice ended and the four of us went home, I spent the morning working on my business plan. When my brain refused to do what I needed it to do, I jumped in the shower. It was always so hot here. I loved my daily cooldown ritual, not to mention a shower head I angled just so. For maximum pleasuring capacity.

I stepped out of the glass enclosure and reached for a towel that wasn’t there. Scowling, I pushed sopping wet hair out of my eyes.

“Fuck me,” I muttered.

I’d sent all the towels down the laundry chute yesterday and never replaced them. Thank god the kids were at Mia’s playing with her children, and Colton and gone off to train at the rink with his teammates.

I ducked down the hall naked and bolted for the linen closet. Round the corner.

My wet body slammed straight into the hardness of his.

Colton. In sweatpants and a tank top.

His large hands gripped my shoulders to keep me straight. “Zadie? What—”

He cut off with a strangled grunt, and I couldn’t lift my face to his. Couldn’t move, breathe, or look at him. Buck naked and quivering but not from cold.

“I was out of towels. And I thought I was alone.”

He held me at a distance, his eyes roaming down my wet body. My nipples beaded under his gaze, and heat pooled

between my legs.

This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all.

Although his hands never moved from my shoulders, he saw everything.

I forced myself to meet his eyes and jutted my chin out. "What?" I pushed.

"What did we say about clothing?" he asked. His voice came out in a low, husky growl, and goose bumps erupted over my skin. "You broke a house rule. Should I punish you?"

He was joking, right? He had to be joking. I tipped my head even further back, my chin thrusting out further yet. "You're home early. It's not my fault."

"You're supposed to follow the rules even when you don't think you'll get caught," he replied in a stern tone.

Heat grew into a low simmer in my low belly the longer he looked at me. How in the world was I supposed to keep resisting him?

"I've never been much of a rule follower," I said purposely.

"Maybe it's time you learned, St. Clair."

A shiver wound down my spine. He was serious.

My next breath exploded out as he spun me around to face away from him. Colton slid his hands down my arms from my shoulders until he reached my wrists and lifted to press my hands to the wall.

"Stay," he commanded.

I didn't have to listen to him. I didn't have to play along with whatever sick and twisted thoughts he acted on now.

I barely moved.

"Colton." I sounded shaky as I issued my warning.

A hard slap echoed down the corridor as his hand made contact with the wet globe of my ass.

Even as pleasure rippled through me from the touch, I scowled over my shoulder at him. “You did *not* just do that.”

“Didn’t I?” he asked, making contact with the other cheek before soothing it with his palm. He leaned in, so his warm breath met my ear. “I’m a very patient guy, Zadie. Until I’m not. You’ve spent every day since you got here in your goddamn swimsuit, teasing me.”

“It’s summer. And it’s hot AF here. You think I’m doing it for you?” I quivered. “Huge fucking ego, as I’ve said before.”

“*You’re* hot AF, and you’ve been teasing me. And now here you are wet and naked. I think you’re wet and naked for me.” Colton stepped closer to press his front to my backside for a brief moment.

Maybe I hadn’t been when I ran for the towel, but now I was. No man had ever spanked me before. While I didn’t think it was my kink, exactly, I throbbed with need for this man.

So, in this particular case, the spanking worked out just fine. At least, I hoped it would.

“I didn’t mean to tease you.”

His hand connected with my ass again as his teeth tugged on my earlobe. Fucking shit. Air hissed out from behind my teeth at his touch.

“Nobody likes a liar.”

He kicked my feet apart just a little and massaged my cheek with his large hand, the other, which was still around my wrist, slid down my arm, past my shoulder, and cupped my breast.

Taking the weight of it in hand.

“You haven’t exactly been innocent,” I somehow managed to get out. Arching my back so that my ass lifted. “Strutting around here in swim trunks and gray sweatpants. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you going commando now and then. I know.”

“Dirty girl, looking at my cock.”

Oh. My. Good. Fucking. God.

Hearing him say the word sent a tremor through me, and damn him, he felt it.

“You want my cock, Zadie?” Colton repeated the word because he knew it got to me.

I really did want that cock, but I wasn’t prepared to say so. Not today, when this was so unexpected.

“What do you want me to do to you?” he pressed.

What would it hurt, I wondered, to say something provocative to push him close to the edge? Golden Boy controlled this situation, and we understood it. So, what if I...

“I want to come so bad, Colton,” I sighed out.

The way I halfway hoped and halfway dreaded he would, he slid the hand from my ass over my hip bone and ran two fingers on either side of my clit. Avoiding where I needed him most.

Feeling those meaty fingers spreading my lips had my eyes crossing.

“Did you like being spanked?” he asked, pinching my nipple hard between his finger and thumb.

I tried to arch forward so his fingers would go where I wanted them, but he just kept sliding them through my heat, never entering me and never touching that tight bud. “Maybe a little. So what?”

“If things were different, then I’d spend the rest of the day edging you. You know what edging is.” He grabbed my earlobe again and tugged. “It’s when I bring you to the brink and pull back again and again. With my hand and my mouth —” He moved his hand to my other breast. “You’d be begging me for release by the end.”

I was close to that now. “See? You’re a tease too. Dirty asshole.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have all day.” He used two fingers to slap me on the clit before soothing it, just like he had on my ass. Again and again, and then I was flying, my legs shaking as I came hard on his hand.

Crap, what just happened?

The orgasm, strong and intoxicating, ripped through me before I was mentally prepared.

It took me a moment to come back to myself and realize I was still naked in the hall, Colton holding me up and his fingers playing in my wet heat, bringing me down from climax.

For the longest moment, we stood there breathing. Neither one of us daring to move.

“We can’t do that again. Keep your clothes on, even when I’m not home. Please,” Colton whispered in my ear.

And then he was gone, and I stood alone in the corridor wondering what in hell had happened. Even though he’d said we couldn’t do it again... I already wanted to.

ZADIE

Coming all over Golden Boy's hand and having to look him in the eyes the next morning took all of my internal strength to accomplish. I would have rather breezed out of the room and acted as if it was no big deal, except he'd made coffee for everyone, and I refused to back down.

Call me a sucker for a challenge.

I'd always been ubercompetitive, especially with myself. Cara never let me live it down.

"We're not staying in today," Colton began. "We're going to get out on the town and explore our new home today."

Noah moped, dragging a spoon through his cereal until all the pieces were soggy. "I don't feel like it."

"Yeah. Can't we just stay in and watch TV?" Diana said with a whine.

I shared a glance with Colton over their heads. Exactly what Harlan would have done, I knew from experience. He would have hoarded his day off and forced everyone to stay inside, no matter how nice a day it was so that he could watch television. His shows only.

From the look on Colton's face, he agreed with me, even though he had no clue what I was thinking.

Well, shit. I didn't really feel like going out, either. Remember Harlan had me determined to do whatever Colton had in mind for the principle of the thing.

"You had something in mind?" I asked him.

His eyes narrowed, heating, and I ducked away to the coffee machine before I blushed and let him know I was bothered by last night.

“I thought we could drive around for a bit, and I will show you the sights. Then we take in a show,” he answered.

“What kind of show?” Noah wanted to know.

“There’s this pretty sweet gig called the Pistoleros Wild West Show. It’s supposed to be pretty cool. I’ve never gotten over there myself, but it sounds like fun.”

Diana groaned and flopped back in her seat, her mouth open, her attention on the ceiling. “Uncle Colt, please. It’s probably for babies.”

“Then someone better get me a binkie and a nap because I’m excited to go,” he replied. His tone left no room for argument, either; he expected us all to fall in line.

A part of me chafed at being told what to do. And a juvenile part of me wanted the kids to go because they were dragging their feet about it too. What kind of crappy fill-in parent did it make me?

“It sounds like a lot of fun,” I replied with pretend excitement. I filled up a mug with coffee and when I turned around, shot both the twins a wide smile. “Let’s all finish up breakfast, and we can get dressed.”

“It’s supposed to be hot today,” Colton added. “No one wear your sweaters or else you’ll melt.”

An hour later, we dragged the twins into the car.

They weren’t punching and screaming, but they were damn close to both those things.

“Diana, why don’t you leave Mr. Moo at home?” I asked, looping the seat belt over her when she refused to buckle it herself. “We wouldn’t want you to lose him when we’re out.”

She clutched him obstinately closer to her chest. “Wherever I go, Moo goes. I’m not leaving him.” She stuck her chin out and dared me to say anything more.

The petty part of me sighed, ready to say that it would serve her right if he did get lost, but I wrangled that part back. “Okay,” I said with forced cheer. “I’m sure he’ll have just as much fun as we will, then.”

Noah kicked the back of Colton’s seat on the entire drive into the downtown area. Not even telling him to stop got him to calm down. If anything, he seemed happier to continue.

Neither one of us wanted to hurt his feelings.

Colton ended up cutting his tour of the highlights of Tucson short when the kids started complaining about being bored. He was more patient than me, for sure, I realized the longer we drove. Much more able to deal with them and their mood swings, and I’d spent more time around the twins than him.

Of course, I’d been there as the fun aunt. Their mother’s best friend. My attention had mostly been focused on Cara and helping her navigate the emotional highs and lows of her life.

Not to mention the twins were in a completely different headspace now.

They were dealing with the kind of loss no child should have to experience: not one parent gone but both of them.

We finally pulled into the parking lot of the wild west show amid a slew of other vehicles.

“It looks crowded,” I told him, dubious. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Of course, I’m sure.” Colton sounded too damn cheerful for his own good.

“We’re here?” Diana asked.

“And your lucky day, kiddo, because I called ahead to make sure they had spots for us. We’re already reserved.” He reserved the shit-eating grin for me alone. “It’s a live-action, comedy adventure show. Pretty smart of your uncle, huh?”

He’d have made sure it was family friendly too.

We joined the rest of the crowd of people making their way to the show, and I grabbed Noah's hand to keep him beside me when he wanted to run off.

Sitting on the wooden benches in the relative shade of the fake wild west buildings, we people-watched. At least, we did until Diana complained that she was thirsty, and Noah said he wanted to go to the bathroom. Then we had to divide and conquer in order to not lose our seats. We'd gotten good ones too.

By the time the show started, I was already exhausted from trying to outthink the twins. They were sly and didn't want to settle down.

Not to mention I had a hard enough time playing nice with Colton after what happened. He never brought it up, only kept a running commentary on the outfits, the ambiance, you name it.

The show was pretty cool too. Cowboys jumped through fire and made off-color jokes. I enjoyed every part of it except having to keep Diana physically in her seat when she repeatedly tried to get up.

"Do you have ants in your pants?" I hissed out during the last number.

Colton glanced our way with an eyebrow raised as if asking me if I had this handled.

I nodded once before focusing on his niece.

My adopted daughter, I had to remind myself. I wasn't the fun aunt Zadie anymore. I might have kept the name, but my duties expanded drastically.

Surrogate mom.

It wasn't a title I had ever envisioned for myself, and now it had become my existence. I thought starting a business from scratch was hard? Worry about the little tiny details that went into building something from the ground up? Raising children while we were all in the depths of grieving was another beast entirely.

Was I up for the challenge?

Something smacked me in the side of the head, and I erupted out of my thoughts with a gasp. Just in time to see Diana tuck Mr. Moo safely back under the wing of her arm.

“Did you just hit me?” I asked her softly.

The show ended with a bang. We stood up with the rest of the crowd to applaud the performers, but I kept my focus squarely on Diana.

She pretended to ignore me.

I grit my teeth, determined to let the incident go without making a big deal about it. And we were decent, fine even, through ordering food at The Saloon, the restaurant run by the show. Colton thought it would be a really nice experience for us.

And it might have been. A nice experience.

If we hadn't begun the meal with Noah knocking his cup, thankfully plastic, off the table with a yell and sulking in his seat. If Diana hadn't decided to burst into tears right at that moment.

I spared a look with Colton, and he nodded once. Divide and conquer. My own emotions were a hornet's nest as I took Diana as gently as possible by the arm and hauled her out of the restaurant.

“We have to have a talk,” I told her.

The eyes of the other patrons followed us out the front door. It wasn't that I cared about her making a scene—something was clearly bothering her, and we needed to air it before it festered and worsened.

The porch offered some shade from the sun with its patriotic American flag bunting.

I only let go of Diana once we were settled and set her with a look before crouching down to her level. “Talk to me. You're acting up a bit today.” I stopped, drew in a breath, and held it while she continued to bawl.

Too scared, I realized, of fucking this up.

We hadn't had a chance to really sit down one on one with the kids, I realized. Too many other things to do in the meantime, with the move, with me starting the business. With getting them set up with school.

Go, go, go.

Staying busy only helped us keep ahead of our feelings rather than deal with them.

“Diana, you know you can talk to me—” I began.

“No!” she screamed in my face. “I can't. You're not my mom.” Her lower lip trembled. “I don't care how much you and Uncle Colt pretend. You're not my mom and dad. They're never coming back!”

She hauled herself against one of the round barrels and bawled, Mr. Moo dropping to the floor at her side.

Shit. Right in the heart. A direct hit.

“No, you're right,” I whispered. “We're not your parents. And they aren't coming back. As much as we wish they could, it's a tragedy. It doesn't mean your uncle and I love you less or that we're not going to try our hardest to help you and your brother through this.”

Since she wasn't really paying attention, I rose on creaky knees and walked over to rub circles on her back.

Diana shuddered beneath me, but I wasn't sure getting too close to her was the right answer.

“You're probably feeling sad, lonely, and angry too.” I ran fingers through my hair with the opposite end, my skin sweaty from the heat. “I'm so angry that some days it feels hard to breathe. I'm angry with your dad and your mom for leaving us all behind. And you know what? It's okay. It's normal.”

“It is?” Diana's mumbled reply came slowly.

I nodded even though she couldn't see me. “Yup. It's normal to have these feelings and not know what to do with them. As long as we don't try to push them down until they

disappear. And as long as we take responsibility to not push our pain on other people.”

Was that a little advanced for a kid?

I had no clue.

It was all new to me, and I just muddled my way along, the same as any other person. Tears threatened to burst through my eyes as well, but when I took a moment to calm myself, to try to wrangle myself back into a semblance of control, I realized Diana’s sobs had quieted as well.

“It’s not fair,” she continued. “Our lives are different.”

“Which can be bad *and* good.”

She rose, wiping her face with the back of her arm. “Yeah. I mean...it’s cool here, I guess. But I thought about how Mom and Dad would have taken us here. It made me miss them too much.” She cast red-rimmed eyes up at me. “I’m sorry I hit you.”

Damn, little girl. She was definitely going to make me cry.

“Apology accepted.” I wiped away some of her tears as well. “You know, if there’s anything you want to talk to me, or Uncle Colt, about, then we’re here for you. Even if it’s something silly. Like how you wish the sky was green.”

It got the tiniest chuckle out of her.

“We might seem like we have it all together, but let me tell you a secret.” I dropped down to whisper in her ear. “We totally don’t.”

“Don’t worry, we know you don’t,” she replied.

“Ouch, kiddo, ouch!”

But it got her laughing. I’d take the win.

“How about we go inside and eat?” I asked her. “It’s way too hot for any decent human being to be out here, and I’m sweating in places I shouldn’t sweat again.”

Diana nodded, bending at the waist to retrieve Mr. Moo. “Okay.”

It wasn't going to be easy. I led her back inside and saw that Noah now sat at the table with his arms crossed over his chest and a thunderous look on his face. Colton happily munched on his burger.

It wasn't going to be easy, but we'd make it work because we had to make it work. Because we were the people each other had no, and what other choice did we have?

"What did we miss?" I asked brightly. I dropped into my seat with a red face but no longer crying Diana next to me.

"Too much for me to properly articulate right now," Colton said through his food.

I curled part of my lips upward in a half smile. Yeah. We might be okay.

COLTON

My leg bounced up and down as the plane taxied down the private runway. Up and down. Every part of me fidgeted, and no matter how many times I slapped a hand down on either leg, they continued to twitch.

“What the hell is your problem, man?” I asked myself in an undertone.

Except I knew.

I knew the shape and cure of my problem intimately, and I wanted to get to know them more until they were imprinted on my body. I knew the way her slick heat felt when she came around my finger, her muscles tightening as though she wanted to draw me inside of her.

Gritting my teeth, I forced my mind in any direction but the one it wanted to go in, and no matter what I tried, I kept returning to the same place.

This was my first trip away since the kids moved in with me, and I needed to get fucking laid.

Not just laid but fucked to the point where I felt limp and wrung out to dry.

I couldn't get naked Zadie coming on my hand out of my head. The memory played on repeat, the way her head tipped back on her neck with her eyes closed and a low moan rumbling through her and into me. The way her muscles twitched and her legs clenched my hand closer while she rode me.

Did she even know what she'd done? She could have stopped me at any point, told me to back the hell off, and I'd have done it. Might have taken me a while, but yeah, I would not have gone forward if it hadn't been consensual.

How would she feel on my cock?

I'd entertained the thoughts too many times to count, but the incident in the hallway brought them closer, made it real.

Will dug his elbow into my side and ripped me out of my thoughts. I growled at him on instinct, and his eyes widened.

"You better back the hell up, dude. You're looking a little feral over there," he admonished. His eyes scoured over me. "I know things are a little screwed up right now, but this is a chance to get back to normal. There's nothing like being back out on the ice."

Normal was being on the ice.

Normal was standing in the locker room listening to Coach Darren and Assistant Coach Andrew Markham give us a pep talk.

Normal was bumping my chest against Will's on our way out to the ice while we listened to the crowd scream out for us to appear.

Normal was not fingering my roommate to completion. My roommate and my dead twin's best friend.

Fuck, this wasn't right.

I scrubbed my hands over my scalp before drawing my fingers along my face and pulling the skin beneath my eyes down. "You're right, you're right. I've gotta focus," I told Will. "I'll be better. I promise. You know once I get out there, I'll do what I need to do."

He gave me the look that said if I wanted to talk about it, he was there. No way I wanted to tell him about what happened last night. I couldn't do anything with Zadie again. It had been a mistake.

A beautiful mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.

We had ground rules in place for a reason. The rules monitored how we operated, the four of us, and kept her and me at a safe distance.

Shit, I wanted her.

Knowing I shouldn't want her made the ache brighter.

The plane parked on the runway outside of a private hangar in New York, and as soon as we got the go-ahead from the captain, the boys and I filed out and into the waiting vehicles with their black-tinted windows.

We checked into our hotels, Will and I sharing a room, and when the rest of the guys went out to a bar, I stayed in. I knew exactly what I had to do.

No one gave me any shit for it, either, because they understood. They got the source of my angst without me having to say anything because they'd all been there. They got it.

It had been too long since I'd gotten to fuck a woman. Time to remedy the situation, and the sooner, the better.

There were plenty of puck bunnies who followed the Rattlesnakes while we were on the road. Plenty of women who were fans of the game itself and the guys on the team.

It took no time at all for me to find a sexy woman wearing a red wrap sweater and skin-tight jeans and invite her up to the room with me.

Ginnie was the last person I'd fucked, I thought as I laid the bunny, an adorable blonde named Lisette, down on the bed and covered her neck with long, slow kisses. Lisette was about as far from Ginnie—and Zadi—as a woman could physically get. Different coloring, different shape, different voice.

Sexy as sin, and she knew it too.

I slid the condom on and rolled on my back while she climbed on top of me and unhurriedly impaled herself on my cock. She rode me until sweat beaded between her peach-sized tits, and I moved her onto her back to fuck her harder until we both came, her legs perched on my shoulders.

I wasn't a real fan of the dirty talk, but hearing how much she liked my dick sure helped.

The hookup was fine.

The sex was good, but it wasn't what I wanted, and she wasn't Zadie.

We went for two more rounds before a text from Will alerted me that I needed to have whatever company I'd kept vacate the premises. He'd walked in on me way too many times over the years to not be cautious now.

Vice versa, of course. Before he got married to the love of his life.

Now that he and Celia found their place together, though, things changed in an imperceptible way. I tried to respect him as much as possible and get my guests gone before he returned.

The bunny knew the drill too. She stole a kiss on her way out the door and sauntered down the hallway without a look back. The NDA on my phone had been digitally signed by both parties to protect me. Job well done.

Right?

Even a few orgasms and the relaxation in my muscles from some quality sex didn't erase Zadie from my mind. I'd done my best to keep her out of it during the act itself because otherwise, I felt like a fucking asshole, but she returned with a vengeance once I was alone. Hopefully, Will would hurry up and come back to distract me.

Because alone was dangerous.

I threw my stinky ass in the shower, and by the time I got back, Will was lounging on his bed with the brightness of the television casting a warm blue glow over the dim room.

"How was the bar?" I asked.

"How was the bunny?" he tossed back.

I shot him a wry grin. "Delicious."

“Same with the bar.” Will glanced away from the screen, but he wasn’t smiling. “We share everything. Right?”

I stared at him for a long moment before I forced myself to shrug. “Of course we do.”

“Then you’d tell me if something happened. You know, before we left. Right?” He dropped down on the side of the mattress and stared me down. “You’d tell me.”

There were some things, I decided on the spot, I wasn’t comfortable telling him. “Yes,” I lied.

“You sure?”

I scoffed. “I’m positive.”

“Only fools are positive.”

We ragged on each other until well past midnight.

The next day, we headed for our first game of the season against the New York Rangers. I loved playing in Madison Square Garden because it felt like the height of success. In my pea brain, anyway.

The Snakes weren’t nearly at the level of the Rangers, but we were getting there.

Pregame, we got ready in the guest locker room with its light wood cubbies and history. The guys joked, the coaches planned, and I laced up, thinking about how far we’d come.

When I first signed on to Arizona, we’d been at the bottom in terms of stats. The rest of the league didn’t exactly laugh at us, but they weren’t excited to play. We manifested our frustrations as anger and fought on the ice like bloodthirsty heathens.

Now, we had finesse.

We had a great player when it came to Liam, and his addition brought the rest of us in line somehow. The start of a new season brought with it a lot of nerves but excitement as well.

We played against the Rangers and lost, although it wasn’t a huge deal.

Just the start of something amazing and a way for us to come together even more, or so Coach Darren tried to spin it.

My legs ached, and the rest of me wondered if I'd trained enough. Will assured me the first game was always hard.

We had a plan in place.

I couldn't wait to get home. To sleep in my own bed and to hug Noah and Diana. To smile at Zadie and have her say something snarky back to me. It was our new normal, and although the grief at losing my sister would always be there, the good times were there as well.

New normal had a lot of appeal.

I took a driving service from the airport back to my house, staring at the phone screen and wondering why Zadie hadn't been returning any of my texts.

Just landed.

Making my way home now. Should be there in a few.

How are the kids?

All of them were unread. The knot of worry tightened and grew larger the closer we got to home, and I was relieved to see her car still parked in the driveway, for some reason, as if I expected her to take off once I left.

The driver dropped me off, and I tugged the wheeled suitcase behind me on my way to the front door. The keys wedged in my pocket, and I struggled to get them out before sliding one home and letting myself in, searching for signs of life.

Zadie liked to watch those ID channel shows about murder.

They got my mind thinking the worst.

"Honey! I'm home," I called out, hoping Zadie would recognize it as a joke and not bite my head off.

Silence answered me.

Not the kind of normal silence of an empty house, either. I knew that silence intimately. This was a different kind, and the worry turned to ice in my veins. My heart clenched. Please, god, let them not be upstairs in a bloody heap.

“Hello? Diana? Noah? Where are you guys?”

I dropped the luggage with a clatter against the tile and headed for the living room. The TV blasted cartoons constantly anymore. Well, when the kids weren't in school. But this was a Saturday, and everyone was home.

They better be.

No one in the living room. The kitchen was likewise empty, and with panic making my pulse race like a horse at the finish line of the Kentucky Derby, I took the stairs two at a time.

I checked in both of the kids' rooms and then Zadie's master suite, only to come up empty. Standing in the hall, I took a beat. And the sound of retching reached me at last. I jogged into my bedroom and threw open the door to the bathroom in time to see Noah harking up a lung with Zadie behind him rubbing his back and looking green herself.

“What's going on?”

The sound of my voice startled my nephew, and he shifted to face me, only to puke on the floor.

I winced at the sound of the splatter, and all it took was one inhale for Zadie to hurl herself over the side of the tub and vomit herself.

A low groan sounded from the bed, and when I turned, I saw Diana curled up in the sheets with a plastic bucket at her side.

“I'm sorry.” Zadie sounded weak, and I could barely bring myself to turn around and face her. The stench of vomit was so strong I hurried over to the window to open it and let all of the cool air out. I didn't care.

“I don't understand what's happening? Did you guys eat something when I was gone? Is this food poisoning?” I asked.

It explained all of the unanswered texts.

“Not food poisoning. This is the stomach bug. I’ve had it enough times to know, and we all caught it. Look away.”

Looking away wasn’t really an option with all three of them sick. My heart ached for them.

“How long has it been going on?” I asked, crossing to check on Diana. Her hair stuck to her forehead with sweat, and she slowly blinked her eyes open to stare at me.

“It hit this morning,” she whispered. “Diana was the first one to fall. I held it off as long as possible, but around five, I started to feel nauseated.

Shit.

I turned around to stare at her. “If I’d known, I would have tried to get back sooner. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Zadie heaved and opened the tap to stick her entire head beneath a stream of cold water before she emptied her stomach. “Been a little busy throwing up, Colton. Sorry? What do you want me to tell you?”

“There’s no need for you to be sorry.” What did I do? “Do you guys need to go to the doctor?”

“What’s a doctor going to do? We just have to ride it out.” Zadie groaned, and the toilet flushed.

That was my cue. I rushed into the bathroom, avoiding the huge pile of vomit, and helped Noah up, holding my breath. Without thinking, I grabbed a towel off the rack and stuck it beneath the water next to Zadie’s face, using it to clean off his mouth.

“How long do these types of bugs usually last?”

“Who knows? We just have to try to stay hydrated. Not like it’s worked so far. Anything I drink comes right back up.”

It caught her too. This was ridiculous.

This was also family life.

Which meant I cleaned up the puke on the floor and helped all three of them out for the two days of sickness. Oddly enough, I didn't hate it as much as I should. For sure, I hated the puke. I'd never been good around the stuff. It turned my stomach, and the bite of bile at the back of my throat warned me I'd need to be extra careful.

I'd also have to buy gallons of bleach.

I never had kids around in my life. Not after childhood, when I'd grown out of that age myself. My dad had been a single father in his early twenties until he met my string of stepmothers. And then I became nothing but an inconvenience in his happily ever after.

The first one had no kids of her own, and her siblings all had children who were much older than me.

It made for a pretty isolating experience.

No cousins to hang out with. Nothing. Only my friends at school who grew up at the same time I did.

I didn't hate my dad for being an immature asshole when it came to raising me. But I sure didn't want to emulate him now.

Clearly, cleaning up puke wasn't my idea of fun after a long week on the road and an even longer weekend of dealing with my sick family, but there I was. There we all were. The kids smushed themselves into my bed to be closer to the bathroom and for comfort. Zadie stayed in her own room, but I knew the swirling stomach sensation didn't leave her even at night.

I bought a cow's weight in Pedialyte and Gatorade to try to keep them hydrated when no food seemed to stay down.

And when Monday loomed large and seemed to offer some relief from the puking, I sighed in relief. Exhausted, fulfilled, and a little queasy myself.

ZADIE

As much as it pained me to admit, Colton had been fantastic while we had the stomach bug. With the kids, with me. With everything that happened over two days which I wouldn't have been so wonderful about if it were me on my own.

Or would he have tossed a can of chicken noodle soup at me through my bedroom door and kept his distance?

He'd cleaned up more puke than one man should have to clean up and gotten me or the kids whatever we'd asked for. Whether it was a blanket when the cold chills shook us to the bone or a glass of water when the Gatorade suddenly seemed too sweet to drink.

Any and all of it.

It took me until Tuesday to finally feel like a human again.

To get myself out of bed and stand without getting dizzy.

I shuffled into the kitchen and automatically went for the coffee maker for the first time since Friday.

"I know you're more yourself," Colton said from his perch at the island. An old-fashioned newspaper spread in front of him, and his own steaming cup of coffee was clutched in one hand.

He liked the New York Times crossword puzzle.

Always had his pencil racing over the blank squares.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

And where was my *I Hate Mondays* mug?

“You’re going for coffee instead of Pedialyte,” he answered smartly. “Which means you’re better.”

“Well, aren’t you just a genius? You get your crossword puzzle filled out yet?” Deflection time for me. Especially since this was the first time the two of us had been alone since—

The hallway.

Me naked in the hallway, and his fingers on my pussy until I orgasmed.

“I’m halfway there. And I was thinking—”

“A first for you,” she interrupted.

When I turned around, he was smiling at me. “Sorry. I thought a little play-by-play would help you feel even more normal. I also want to say I’m taking you out. As a thank-you.”

“Taking me out for what?” I asked skeptically.

“Well, I mean, it has to wait until I get back from our next match. We’re going on the road again in a couple days, so I won’t be here for a while. But when we come home, I’m taking you out as a thank-you for everything.”

I disguised a laugh in a sip of black goodness and swooned. Thank heaven, my vomiting hadn’t ruined my taste buds. “I think you have it backwards. I’m the one taking you out.”

My offer startled me because I hadn’t been aware of thinking about it in the first place. Once the words were out of my mouth, I realized how badly I wanted to do something nice for him. To show him how much I appreciated him playing doctor.

Colton’s eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

I drew in a deep breath and prepared myself for his laughter or derision. Of course, he’d laugh at the offer. If I ever made it through this sentence, maybe. “I’m going to take you out to dinner as a thank-you when you get back. You were

great with me and Noah and Diana. It's the least I can do," I explained.

"Is this a date, Zadie?" His grin went cartoon wide.

"It's a thank-you," I corrected. "Get it through your thick head, or you'll piss me off. No date. Definitely not a date."

He'd warned me that our one-and-done surprise hallway fingering would not happen again. A date was asking for trouble. It was opening a door that neither one of us was prepared for or really wanted to walk through in the first place. Not with each other.

Right?

"Maybe you and the kids should get the stomach bug more often if it results in me getting a free dinner from a beautiful woman," he muttered.

Something in the tone of his voice brought me back to the moment before he left the last time. The stolen moment we'd had together where he fingered me to completion, and I groaned to force the thought aside. The memory aside, it wasn't going to happen again.

"No compliments," I warned with a raised hand. "It's dinner and nothing else. You are allowed to say one thing about how I look and then nothing else for the rest of the evening. Conversation will stay to the normal surface level crap and the kids."

Colton nodded slowly and set down his pencil. "Hard, but I get it. Will you let me choose the restaurant?"

I thought about it for a moment before I agreed. "Yes. It's for you, after all. You should get to decide where you want to go. But nothing too expensive. Not like I got severance pay from Twig."

"So, nothing that puts gold leaf in their ice cream or compound butter on their Kobe beef." Colton looked solemn. "I got it. I will stay in the parameters you set out because it's not like this opportunity comes around every day."

I lifted a brow. "What opportunity?"

“The day when Zadio St. Clair wants to take me out. To ‘thank me.’” He lifted his fingers for air quotes, and I reached across the island to smack him.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve. Keep up with the games, funny man, and you’re going to find yourself on the receiving end of McDonald’s instead of anything nice,” I replied.

But the tension released from my shoulders, tension that had been there for weeks.

He left the following day, and I thought I’d gotten used to having this huge house to myself when the kids were at school. I’d always appreciated the silence. I loved living on my own and having a space where I was isolated from the rest of the world. I loved having a sanctuary all to myself.

And I had one here, A cute little room all to myself and a sunroom in the back of the house where I liked to do my work on the computer during the day.

Except it almost felt too lonely. Without Colton and his larger-than-life presence, without the kids while they were getting used to their new reality in school in Arizona...

Which was the excuse I used when I dragged out my cell and fired off a quick round of texts to Colton.

I think we might need to downsize the house. Don't be surprised if you come home, and I've moved us all to a shack in the desert.

I pressed send before I thought better of it and set the phone size feeling like an idiot. He was a busy man. A professional hockey player with obligations and commercials to shoot and shit like that. He probably had a photo shoot lined up for a magazine cover where he showed off his impressive six-pack abs or something to that effect.

And there I was, making a joke about the size of his McMansion.

His response came only a few minutes later in the form of a laughing face emoji.

Followed by:

As long as we get some goats. I feel like they come with shacks in the desert. Don't you?

I smiled as I read.

What is that? Four down? Four across?

Maybe we could only get along with each other because he wasn't there. It seemed to me our relationship had evened out so much more after the puke incident. Then again, he was gone.

For the rest of the week, we texted back and forth. Mostly about the kids. I kept him apprised when Diana came home with a B on her math test and Noah got in trouble with one of the kids in his art class for drawing a penis on a canvas.

The penis comment was a mistake on my part, though. It was like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Even a grown man couldn't help themselves from going straight into a gutter when it came to dick jokes. And afterward...

It seemed as though things got a little flirtier.

Don't let me draw a dick on a piece of paper. It's going to be life sized.

I chuckled at that. *Oh, so you mean the size of a baby carrot?*

No, Zadie. I'm talking about something that will have you screaming all night and walking funny the next day.

I gulped because he wasn't joking. I'd seen him coming out of the pool with his swim trunks pressed to his body and nothing hidden. It left me thinking about his dick way too often and unable to come up with a biting response.

Which, of course, Colton realized and exploited.

I see I've left you at a loss for words. You're probably thinking about my dick right now. Aren't you?

I imagined the cocky look on his face without having to see it for myself in person. I'd noticed it too many times to count.

Rather than dignifying his response with a response, I shoved the phone in my pocket and concentrated on work.

Because he was right.

He returned to Tucson on Friday night and wasted no time before getting a babysitter lined up for Saturday.

“We’re old enough we don’t need a babysitter,” Diana insisted.

She was always the more stubborn and headstrong of the two of them. A girl after my own heart, and I really hated imposing any kind of restrictions on her. This was a different occasion, though.

I stared at myself in the mirror and slicked a coat of fuck-me-red lipstick on for emphasis. “I know you think you’re old enough, but I would really feel better with someone to watch you. This is a new place for all of us, and I know we’ve settled in, but I’m still not comfortable leaving you and Noah alone. Okay?” I had to make it seem more like it was for me than for her.

And in a lot of ways, it was. A babysitter was peace of mind while we were out.

We.

I shuddered, slipping the lipstick back into its tube and staring at my reflection.

Smokey eyes and red lips were overkill.

Normally I wouldn’t dare put the two grandiose looks together but tonight...I wanted to shine. I wanted to kill.

I wanted to give Colton a heart attack when he saw me.

The black velvet shirt left most of my cleavage on display while emphasizing my curves. I paired it with a tight red skirt the same shade as the lipstick that I thought would be appropriate for whatever place he chose. Not short enough to show any of my assets but long enough to be okay at a steakhouse.

“Are you sure you have to go?” Diana asked, her tone a bit wheedling.

I turned to her and grabbed her in a hug. “I’m going to be very careful. Okay? I’m driving because you know your uncle is a maniac when it comes to anything with four wheels. But even he would be careful. I promise we’re coming back to you.”

Her body trembled, and I held her tighter. Understanding exactly how scary this had to be for her.

“I’d walk if it was closer, but then again, I think the closest place is the taco stand, and your uncle doesn’t want to go there.”

“He’s not in the mood for tacos?” Diana asked with her face pressed to my shirt.

I opened my mouth to say something dirty and caught myself at the last second. Well, he was in the mood for tacos, but we weren’t talking about food.

The doorbell rang and saved me from this awkward position of not saying what was on my mind, a thought Cara would have appreciated. Except maybe not. We were talking about her brother.

Colton yelled for me to get the door, and Diana and I walked downstairs hand in hand. Lulu Thorne stood on the other side and flashed us a smile that was all her dad. Coach Darren was a staple at this house.

Lulu had been a natural choice.

“Hey there, Zadie. Thanks for having me,” she said before she pushed inside and stole Diana from me. “I brought makeup stuff. I know you said you wanted to practice, so I thought I could be your mannequin tonight.”

Diana squealed, and the two of them raced into the living room. She’d be a teenager soon. Having someone like Lulu to look up to was a blessing, really, and I breathed out a sigh of relief.

Right before my heart leaped into my throat, ready to choke me.

Almost better than gray sweatpants. That was my last thought before my brain turned to mush and my tongue shriveled up in my mouth. Colton stood at the top of the steps wearing black pants that hugged his hips and all but screamed sex.

He'd opted for a black top as well, the same as me, and the material stretched tight over his chest. His pecs were on display, and he'd left his hair long and flopped over to one side of his head

His eyes were dark as they scoured over me and left no inch of me unclaimed or unsee.

"You look stunning," he said as he made it to the landing.

I gawked at him. "Yeah. Thanks. Me too."

"Oh yeah? Good to know?"

I realized my mistake and shook my head, shifting into a more familiar glare. "Don't get used to this," I warned. "This is a one-off deal."

"I'm sure one of us will be getting off at some point," he said in an undertone.

Since I'd insisted on driving, Colton was forced to be the navigator for the evening. We said our goodbyes to the kids, reiterated the instructions for Lulu, and he guided me out to the car with his hand on the small of my back.

A small, possessive gesture, judging from the way his fingers lightly skimmed over the indentations above my ass.

He held the driver's side door open for me before getting comfortable in the passenger seat.

"This is a lot of machinery for a girl to handle." I ran my hands suggestively over the wheel, loving the way desire flashed hot and keen across his face.

"I'm sure if anyone is up to it, it's you, Zadie." He practically growled in my ear.

Tonight was going to be fun on multiple levels. The sexual tension skimming just below our biting and witty repartee seemed much close to being out in the open.

Parts of the evening passed in a blur. Colton took me to dinner at a middle-of-the-road steak place, the way I'd kind of thought he would, and the food was good. Not extravagant and not overpriced, but they gave you a lot for your money, which I appreciated.

Armed with leftovers and a cooler in the car, Colton slid into the driver's seat, saying he had a surprise planned.

I wasn't sure I could trust him until he pulled up in front of a dance club.

He'd remembered.

I loved to dance.

"It's just something I thought you would appreciate," he told me on our way through the door. "There's no need for you to look so horrified."

"Is that how I look?" The music from inside pulsed and drew me forward. I felt the beat in my veins. "Horrified?"

"You look gorgeous with that sex hair of yours," Colton bent close to whisper against my ear.

I shivered and somehow couldn't find it in myself to chastise him for it.

Once upon a time, so long ago I barely remembered, I'd wanted to be a dancer. It was my lifelong dream to join an ensemble and travel. Except, Mom wasn't able to keep up with any of the fees for the dance classes I took. I went from jazz, tap, ballet, and hip-hop to nothing at all.

I wanted to grab one of the small tables lining the club and have a drink first, but Colton grabbed my hand, lacing our fingers together.

We were on the floor, the bass throbbing through me and the lights overhead dim enough for me to hardly make out anyone else around the outskirts of the room. Bodies filled the dance floor, and we joined them.

Colton moved like water. More graceful than I would have thought for a man his size, and I gave him credit.

He dominated the space.

I was powerless as he wrapped my arms around the back of his neck and took hold of my waist, dragging me close. I fit against him as though I'd been born for him. A realization I loathed for the span of two seconds before he began to twist his hips and forced me to move with him.

He was Johnny.

I was Baby.

We were dirty dancing to put the rest of the room to shame, and the way he moved against me left me no doubt as to how he'd be in the bedroom. On his back with his hips circling while he thrust. On top of me and driving me into the mattress.

I forgot about everything. The rest of the club faded away, and although I was breathless, it wasn't from exertion.

It was from him.

The weight of his gaze and the possessive skimming of his hands along my skin. A brand. Like he owned me.

Except this was Colton. He was the Golden Boy.

He wasn't supposed to be attractive, and he certainly wasn't supposed to make me feel seen. Respected. Passionate and sexual.

My desires came alive as if someone had taken a blowtorch to me.

Rather than let him take the lead, I swiveled around so that my ass pressed to his groin. His cock twitched. We both knew it. He made no move to hide his desire for me, and I used it against him. I worked my body against his until we were both panting. Both ready for more, and the tension rose to such sharp peaks I wanted to cry out. My nipples hardened in anticipation.

It was no longer a question of *if* we would give in to our needs and the craving that had been brewing for longer than I wanted to admit.

It was a question of when.

When would we get out of this club and satiate ourselves?

When would we finish what we'd started? I wanted his cock in my mouth. I wanted it badly enough that I burned for him.

“Colton! Oh my goodness, it’s so good to see you! How long has it been?”

A high-pitched voice cut through the dark haze of my desires and brought me crashing down to earth. Especially when the voice was attached to a woman who threw herself at Colton with such force her lips landed on his, and she kissed the stuffing out of him.

Colton broke away from me, but it wasn’t to switch partners. It was to push the woman away and stare at her with his hands on her shoulders to keep the space between them.

“Ginnie? What are you doing here?” he barked out.

The woman slithered closer. “Aren’t you happy to see me, Coltie? It’s been so long.”

Ginnie? How did I know that name?

Who was—

But I knew. I knew who it was in the slinky silver dress with her hair done to perfection and her slender legs for days.

Virginia was Colton’s ex. And she’d shown up just in time.

COLTON

Of all the clubs in all of fucking Arizona, she chose this one.

Screw me.

Rotten luck, for sure. Zadio and I had finally gotten to a point where we were about to damn the risks and the consequences, and there came my damn ex out of the woodwork.

I hadn't been out on the town for months. Hadn't gone to restaurants or clubs or any place that wasn't considered family friendly. Until tonight. Nor had I spoken to Ginnie.

Sure, she sent me a few texts, all of which I ignored.

I might have forgiven her, again, gotten back with her again, even if it was stupid. She always seemed to have that effect on me. She crooked her finger, and I went right back to her and danced to her tune. Her no-show at the funeral and her lack of care about me when I really needed her at the time sealed the deal.

I'd never go back.

How the fuck did it work, though, her finding me tonight?

She and I had never come here. In fact, I'd never been to this club ever. I'd found out about it only this week when I'd planned the night out with Zadio. She'd beaten me to the punch, of course, but the end result was the same. We were out together.

I knew she loved to dance, and so I'd tried to find the best place for us to make that happen. Someone must have shared

my location on social media at some point because here was Ginnie.

She'd dressed in a flashy outfit designed to turn heads and capture attention. Her hair, recently blown out if I had to guess, was perfection, and her makeup and nails screamed of class and a taste for the expensive. She'd pulled out all the stops tonight.

For me?

I wondered.

The woman was like a toddler where I was concerned, and I was her toy. She didn't want me until someone else did. It had always been that way between us.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" Ginnie repeated. She pouted, her lips outlined in a darker shade than her lipstick. "You're just staring at me." Her gaze shifted subtly to Zadie. "Who is this Amazon?"

She didn't say it in a sweet, complimentary way either.

"Excuse me?" Zadie shifted forward with a finger out in warning. "Come up with something new, sweetheart. I've never heard that one before."

Ginnie had the body of a spinner. I'd never understood the term until I met her, but it fit her perfectly. Short and compact, and delicate. A spinner, for the way she'd spin around your cock while riding it. Which we'd done several times over our back-and-forth relationship.

Now, those memories soured. They shifted inside of me until they were an annoyance at best.

I gripped Zadie's hand to keep her at my side.

We'd been having fun before the interruption. Okay, it might have been a little more than harmless flirting, but it was fun. And now I recognized the anger radiating off of her in waves.

It had taken me weeks to get Zadie to trust me, and now Ginnie had fucked all that up in a couple of manipulative minutes.

Hopefully not, but I wasn't holding out much faith on the subject.

"Colton, who is this?" Ginnie asked.

I caught a flash of Zadie's furious smirk right before she opened her mouth to launch a tirade. Unfortunately, Ginnie looked to be at the same point, and Virginia loved a scene.

"We're not doing this here. Shut the fuck up until we're alone," I warned them both.

And myself, for that matter.

I dragged her and Zadie off the floor to the VIP section.

No way would I allow the situation to slip into sordid Jerry Springer territory in the middle of a dance floor.

The idea of two women fighting over me would have been awesome a while back, those teenage years before I'd filled out. I wasn't that guy anymore. And when I looked at Ginnie, I felt nothing.

Huh.

Well, I felt anger and resentment, just not lust and longing.

I maintained my death grip on Zadie as we approached a private room to the left of the dance floor. The attendant at the door nodded at me, and I vowed to slip him some money when this was over.

Once inside, I let go of Zadie and blocked the door with my body.

"What do you want?" I asked Ginnie in a low growl.

Her eyes rounded. "What do I want?" she repeated incredulously. "I want to see you, Coltie. Why else would I be here?"

"To cause trouble," I answered.

She shook her head until soft waves of hair dropped over her heart-shaped face. "I can't believe you're cheating on me. With this woman..." She offered me the pout that used to work, along with the puppy dog eyes I always loved.

One hand landed on her hip, and the other rested on my chest. She rubbed soft circles with the tips of her newly redone fake nails.

I used to love feeling those nails scratch down my chest or along my back. Now they made me cringe.

“We broke up months ago,” I reminded her. “Before the summer. You remember?”

She scoffed prettily. “We did. But you always come crawling back to me. Where you belong.”

Shoot me now.

She was right, and I hated myself for that.

I had daddy issues and mommy issues and a whole bunch of other emotional issues. I'd only scratched the surface on healing. And although I blamed my constant returns to Ginnie on those, I wanted to do better this time. I wanted to be the kind of man who stayed with a woman because I wanted to be there because we treated each other well.

There had to be respect.

I wanted someone to love me, and I never thought I deserved to be treated well. That's the fucking horrible truth. I had been the kid no one wanted, the dumb jock whose family didn't even care for him. I'd played right into Ginnie's hands with my damn insecurities while she played me for a fool.

She let me go just long enough to choke myself and then reeled me back into her trap.

I took a step back until her hand dropped.

“Not this time, honey.” Zadio stepped into the space between us. “You had your chance, and you blew it. Now step off. You're not wanted here.”

She stared down Ginnie from an intense height difference.

Angry Zadio was scary and hot. A lesser woman would have backed down under the threat in my girl's dark eyes, but not Ginnie.

“Wow. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.” Rather than tuning in to any sense of self-preservation, my ex narrowed her own eyes and tossed her hair over her shoulder. “No way he’s with a skank like you. Talk about lowbrow.”

Zadie looked like perfection. She straightened her spine, shoulders squared, her brows knitted, but her gaze filled with a mixture of pity and contempt.

“Maybe he likes skanks,” she continued. “He dated you. How many years?”

I had to stop myself from reacting when Ginnie appeared on the verge of eruption. That was an excellent burn, and I bit back a laugh as I was fairly certain laughing wouldn’t help the situation.

“Wow,” I muttered.

I appreciated the support, but I didn’t want to escalate this scene any more than I already had. So, while Ginnie stood open-mouthed in shock, I grabbed Zadie by the hand.

“Don’t contact me again,” I warned on the way to the door. “And never follow me in public, or I’ll have you served with a restraining order so fast your eyes will cross.”

We left as quickly as we could. Although she shook, she said nothing as I asked the cub attendant for the car keys. She stayed silent in the car on the ride home.

While I wasn’t a huge fan of the silence, it might be better than her letting me have it. No one did verbal tongue-lashing like Zadie.

We were home late, and the inside of the house felt way too lifeless as we stepped inside. Which meant the kids were fast asleep. Zadie kicked off her shoes and strode to the living room, where Lulu Thorn waited.

Before we made it into the room, she remembered the audience waiting and changed course. A crook of her finger over her shoulder had me following her. Desperate. Shaking on the inside where no one would see.

My arrogance took a back seat to my fear that I'd somehow screwed this up beyond repair.

We made it to the dining room, and I shoved the sliding doors closed to lock us inside.

“Are you really broken up?” Zadie began without pretense.

“Would I have made you come in the hallway if I wasn't single?” I whispered in return, so the teenage daughter of my coach wouldn't hear me.

“I'd like to think not. However, I'm not really convinced.”

No, she sounded unsure. Her mask of apathy slipped a little, allowing me to see pain along with anger.

It was like a gut punch. *I'm not that guy*. I was many things but not a cheater. I'd never juggled more than one woman at a time in my entire life, and I wouldn't disrespect Zadie that way.

She had to know.

She had to know those things about me, didn't she?

“I don't know what I ever did to make you hate me,” I began, “but I thought we'd made progress. I thought I'd done everything in my power to show you I'm not the villain in your story. You still see me that way.”

It hurt more than I wanted to admit at this point. Especially considering how far we'd come with each other. We had a date tonight, a chance to really connect. Not as Cara's brother and her best friend. Not as co-guardians for twins, either, but as a man and a woman who were interested in each other.

If seeing Ginnie tonight shattered the tentative peace we'd established, then we'd never had peace in the first place.

We'd only been tolerating each other.

Pretending.

“I never hated you,” Zadie admitted. The air went out of her, and she slumped in on herself. “Okay, Colton? I never hated you. It was just easier that way.”

I'd like to unpack her statement a little more.

Might have if Lulu hadn't knocked on the door and gestured toward the bag over her shoulder.

She needed to get home, and I'd promised to drive her.

I held up a finger, telling Zadie to hold on, hoping she wouldn't shut down while I was gone.

I drove Lulu back to Darren's place. We made small talk about the kids and some new TV show she was binging about an Australian high school and all assorted paranormal drama therein.

And on my way back to the house, I finally had time to think. Alone and undisturbed.

It might be easier, still, if Zadie hated me. She was right. It took a lot of effort and intentional thought-shifting to operate from a different state. She didn't hate me, though. She admitted it herself.

I'd never hated her.

Her childhood and friendship with Cara somehow meant that pushing me away was easier. I'd never wanted to disturb what the two of them had because they had leaned on each other the way I'd wanted my twin and I to do.

I let Zadie do and think and feel whatever she wanted to all these years because I refused to take her from my sister. She made me a little crazy, sure, and she never failed to aggravate me.

The truth, though? Zadie St. Clair was fast becoming one of my favorite people.

Pushing for more with her, or pushing her in general, wasn't the best idea.

So why couldn't I stop myself from storming into the house? I found her standing in the kitchen, staring absentmindedly out the window across the yard. She was so beautiful. Yet all the joy she'd radiated at the club had disappeared.

“Ginnie and I have been over for months,” I said, closing the space between us. “We called it quits, mutually. This time? I didn’t go back. I didn’t want to go back.”

Zadie nodded. “I know. She’d have appeared before now if not. At a game or a barbecue...I know you wouldn’t cheat, Golden Boy.”

“Thank you.” I stood behind her and wrapped my arms around her, my front to her back. I planted a kiss on her temple before I thought better of the gesture. “I’m glad you don’t hate me. So fucking glad.”

She wrapped her arms over mine, and I kissed my way down the side of her neck. She didn’t stop me. “I don’t know how I feel about you right now, Colton.”

“Except attracted.”

She laughed, and I felt her whole body shake. “Well yeah, except attracted. You’re right.”

Right *and* liked. This night might not be unsalvageable after all.

I turned her in my arms, and she stared up at me, her eyes cloudy with lust. And although I couldn’t see, I was pretty sure mine reflected the same.

I lowered my mouth to Zadie’s and plundered.

The last time I’d held her in my arms, the heat...the desire, they’d all been there, but not like this. Both those things were still present but not tempered with this kind of emotion.

We’d never kissed before. I realized it the moment our lips connected.

This was a connection.

This was hot and fast and real.

I’d thought about kissing Zadie St Clair since I was eighteen years old, and off and on through the years. Every time I’d gone back to Houston and saw her there. Usually ready to snap my head off.

Now, she melted in my arms.

Tonight, I finally got my chance. No way was I rushing this thing between us. This was a kiss over ten years in the making, so I made sure to keep it slow as I swept my tongue into her mouth. I'd never get another first kiss with her, and I wanted to be sure it was one we'd both remember.

ZADIE

That Ginnie was a piece of work, I thought distantly as Colton kissed the stuffing out of me.

Soon, I barely thought about her at all.

I'd spent the entire time while Colton was driving Lulu home just wondering how the man had ended up in a relationship with a woman like her and why it had gone on so long. Sure, she was attractive enough in a silicone cookie-cutter kind of way.

But she had *manipulator* written all over her as if a flashing neon sign was over her head. How could he not have seen it? The red flags were right out there in the open. She wasn't hiding them.

I looped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer. The taste of him intoxicated me.

I hated how Ginnie had swept in and ruined our date.

We'd been having so much fun before she appeared. I'd felt like the Zadie St. Clair of old before I realized life was nothing but shit and struggle. The one who danced and went clubbing, who wore whatever she wanted without wondering what people thought about her.

The hot one.

It occurred to me that I hadn't felt even remotely hot or carefree in a while. It wasn't just since Cara had died. Even before then; I'd been stuck in life.

Too exhausted from the daily struggle to care about myself.

If you kept pushing through, then you'd make it to the other side. Eventually.

Even though I hadn't been an old married woman, my life revolved around my best friend who was, and I'd lost myself along the way. Dead end job, not enough friends, and seriously not enough sex.

Colton changed the angle of the kiss, all hot and demanding and right, and I groaned.

The hallway orgasm he had given me was the first one I hadn't given myself in months. More than months.

So yeah, I was pissed at Ginnie and, in turn, Colton. I'd wanted the night to keep grinding on, as I had been. Our dancing had been a sexy kind of foreplay, and I'd yearned to see where it would lead, and then along she came. Landing like a proverbial bucket of iced water poured all over us.

And yet somehow, despite all that, Colton kissed me senseless. His massive hands tangled in my hair to adjust my head wherever he wanted it. His mouth, his tongue, his hard body against my chest...it was everything.

He was hard *everywhere*, from his pecs to the unmistakable press of his erection against my belly.

He wasn't the only one turned on. I'd been hot for him since we left for the date tonight, and as his tongue swept through my mouth and his one hand dropped to cup my ass, I turned into a wanton puddle of need.

"Zadie." He pulled back and rested his forehead against mine. Breathing heavily. I didn't want this to stop. I raked my nails through his hair. "Are we doing this?" he asked.

I knew what he meant.

Like I knew if we decided to go the distance, we'd make the decision together. Or maybe he just meant sex?

I paused, feeling as though my legs were about to crumple out from under me. Would I be able to live with myself if I said yes to him tonight? What if I said no?

“I think we are.” I pressed my lips against his, standing on tiptoes to do so. “I just don’t know how I’ll feel in the morning.”

“Neither do I.”

He cupped my ass harder and delved right in. He tasted amazing. Of course, he did. Why I’d denied myself Colton so long felt foolish as his tongue swirled with mine. My breasts ached, and my nipples, hard, rubbed against fabric.

“As much as I’d like to take you here, I think we need to go upstairs where we can lock a door,” he growled.

My stomach dipped and swirled at those words.

Without waiting, Colton picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder so that my shoes fell from my feet in quick succession. I let out a squeal. And then he was jogging up the stairs as if I weighed nothing.

“Fuck, Zadie, you have no idea how long I’ve wanted this,” he managed to get out.

I had a primo view of his ass and watched the way those muscles jiggled with each step.

He headed straight to my room and into the bathroom. Leaning in to turn on the rain shower before he even put me down.

“I’m sweaty,” he declared before sliding me down his body to the floor. Slowly, inch by inch, feeling everything. I dropped to stand on my own feet and stared up at him.

Never in my life had I been so happy for a tall man.

One who would dominate me rather than be intimidated by my height.

“Let’s get clean first.”

Then he kissed me again, and we leisurely began to peel off our clothes, both of us starting with our shirts. I’d seen

Colton's bare chest plenty of times since I'd moved in, but this was the first time I'd had access to it. I ran my hands down the ridges of his eight-pack.

"You don't even look real," I murmured.

He took my hand and placed it on his erection over his pants. His eyes landed on my breasts, which were barely contained by my demitasse bra, as my nipples strained against the lace. "Very real, Zadie. Very real. Now get naked. Immediately."

I obeyed without any qualms, shucking the remainder of my outfit. Watching in rapt attention as his clothes followed the way of mine and landed in a haphazard heap on the tile floor.

Chuckling as he struggled with his pants, he pulled a small pile of condoms from his pocket and tossed them onto the vanity.

My stomach swirled again. "That was optimistic of you," I teased, shimmying out of my thong.

"Fail to plan. Plan to fail. And believe me when I say: tonight, failure is not an option. On second thought—" He placed the condoms on a ledge inside the shower as he led me in by the hand before pulling me against his chest. "Just in case. Right? I don't know where to start with you. I want it all."

I shivered, but it wasn't because of the cold.

Because I wanted him so damn badly. Because I knew I'd give anything to feel his hands on me, and now they finally were. Holy shit, dream realization time. I hadn't realized that fucking Colton was my dream until right now. Until he ran his hands slowly along my spine.

He kissed me beneath the shower's gentle flow until we were both sopping wet. It was like making out in a waterfall. Not that I'd ever done anything so sexy, but a girl could imagine.

I cupped his fine ass as we kissed and pulled him firmly against me. That ass.

Now I understood why men said it about women. Colton had the ass of one of those statues made of marble. Perfect size for my hand. Perfectly squeezable in every way.

And then that dick—

Like him, I took my time, not wanting to rush. Savoring.

I was in pretty good shape, but he was *fit*. His hands roamed my body as well, exploring until I was weak with want. Unable to contain myself any longer, I reached between us and circled his cock with my hand. Thick and heavy. Soft and steely.

I want to taste him.

And the way Colton looked at me...

I'd never had another man look at me the way he did.

I broke eye contact to kiss my way down his chest, trailing my tongue in a circle around his belly button. My shower had a small bench in the back, and I sat on it before touching the tip of my tongue to the underside of his cock.

I lapped my way around the head before sliding down his shaft. Pleased beyond measure when his hands slid through my damp hair, and his breath caught.

“Zadie!”

My tongue swirled around the mushroom tip once again before I took him in my mouth and sucked him as deeply as possible. No way I could take all of him, but I would do my best. I cupped his balls as I worked him with my lips and my tongue. Worked him until he was panting, and his hips jerked with each swipe.

“Even in the shower, you’re a dirty girl,” he grunted out.

I teased, gently moving his growing erection out of my mouth.

“But this isn’t how we’re doing this. Not tonight.”

He tugged my hair and popped free of my mouth, leaving me strangely wanting and empty. I wasn’t really a fan of

giving head. Weirdly. Maybe I'd just never had a spectacular cock to work with. Not that I'd had any bad experiences.

I guessed I was a fan of Colton in every respect.

I wanted his dick back between my lips ASAP.

“Play with those tits for me,” he demanded as he helped me to my feet. “I want to watch you touch yourself.”

A saucy smile split my lips. I lifted my hands to slowly rub my breasts. I loved the way he watched me.

Just as I loved watching him grab one of those condoms and roll it down the length of him where my mouth had been.

He stepped away from the stream of water and lifted me up, one hand under each armpit, and pressed my back to the tiles.

“Now it's my turn,” he whispered against my ear.

Kissing me, he plucked at my nipples, breaking away only to suckle one. I throbbed with need. Arched my hips to bring the tip of his erection to my core instead of where it pressed against my belly.

Christ, I'd explode if he didn't fill me soon.

I groaned. “Need you. Now.”

“So greedy.” He chuckled and switched his attention to the opposite nipple.

A zip of electricity shot through my system. “Only for you,” I admitted.

“Is that so?”

I sighed, rubbing my core against him in a clear demand.

“Golden Boy—” I broke off, groaning when he slid his hand lower to circle my clit. He flicked the nub and sent me spiraling high. My legs shook, and an odd keening sound I'd never heard myself make erupted from my mouth.

“I wanted to go slow,” he replied. “I wanted to torment you until you begged me.”

“Next time,” I demanded.

I caught a flash of his own sly smile. “Right. Next time.”

His mouth found mine as he lifted my leg, giving him better access to my throbbing core. He adjusted the angle of his cock until it pressed between my lips, and he slid inside achingly slowly.

He filled me completely. It had been a long time, sure, I thought as he stretched me, but the girth of his cock—

Shit.

Colton never let up on my clit as he slid out of me, leaving only the head of him inside, then thrust back to the hilt. He fingered me through my first orgasm until he increased the pace of his thrusting, his own climax building.

He rode me through my second orgasm, too, with wave after wave hitting me until my thoughts grew distant and blurry.

There was only Colton. The smell and the feel of him. The way he seemed to brand my insides.

“I’m going to come,” he muttered as he bent forward to nip my earlobe.

I gripped his shoulders, my legs wrapped around him. He used my body for his pleasure, but the way he circled my clit, the way he seemed to instinctively know the right spot and pressure for me, he was not alone in said pleasure.

His movements quickened, and his breath erupted in a groan as he finished.

I was nothing but a speechless pile of limbs, the two of us coming down from our high.

Colton helped untangle me before he washed my body. Followed by wrapping me in a towel and carrying me to the bed. I wasn’t surprised when he slid in behind me, and those massive arms brought me fully pressed to his front.

“Next time, we’ll go slow,” he whispered.

Too worn out to speak, I only nodded, a murmur of assent sounding before I fell dead ass asleep.

I guessed I just didn't expect the next time to be a few hours later before the sun came up. I didn't expect to wake up to him kissing his way from my calf to my core or for him to slide in above me, pushing to the hilt.

His fingers took hold of my chin, and brought my attention to him, the way he stared intently as he pivoted his hips in and out, achingly slowly.

Then again, there were a lot of unexpected things about Colton; his sexual appetite was probably one of the least surprising.

I don't know what I expected as I drifted off to sleep in Colton's arms for a second time, but it wasn't that I'd wake up alone.

Sunlight streamed in through the front windows, and a pounding headache brought me out of sweet dreams real fast.

I ran a hand through my hair. It dried in all random directions at once. Well, crap. And where had Colton—

His side of the bed was cool to the touch, which meant he'd been gone for a while. Had he snuck out soon after we were done?

For some reason, that pissed me off.

My purse hadn't made it upstairs when Colton carried me up. Without my cell, I had no clue what time it was.

Note to self: time to invest in a real, honest to god clock.

I shuffled my way into the bathroom and brushed my teeth. Sore between the legs in a way I hadn't been in a long time. Actually, I wasn't sure I ever remembered being so sore or thoroughly used from sex before.

I pulled my hair into a ponytail and slipped into some shorts and a cami before opening my door. The house was so large I couldn't hear what was happening downstairs until I was halfway down.

Clatter came from the kitchen, along with the sound of Noah and Diana laughing loudly.

I smiled. They didn't do that too often. It was a welcome sound. When I finally reached the kitchen, the entire space smelled of bacon and syrup, and a shirtless Colton stood at the stove with his back to me.

When he turned around, he was actually in a frilly apron. I stifled a giggle; no wonder the kids laughed.

"Hey, Zadie." He gave me a knowing wink that had my insides doing a flip. "Have a good sleep?"

"Not bad." I glanced at the clock on the wall. Fuck, I'd really slept in. It was nine thirty. "I guess all that dancing wore me out."

He slid a plate in front of each of the kids, French toast with bacon, all of it drizzled in syrup with a generous helping of whipped cream on the side. As if they needed more sugar. "Dancing will do that," he replied easily.

We both knew we were talking about horizontal kind of dancing, but the kids did not.

Although, most of our shower activities had been vertical.

A blush crept up my cheeks as a few choice moments from the night before flashed through my brain.

Colton hit the button on the coffee machine for a new pot, just for me, and directed me to take a seat.

"You look worn out. Sit, have some coffee. Breakfast?"

"Sure," I managed to say. This was a remarkably normal scene, and I kind of hated myself for assuming he'd just ditched me. He was a better guy than I gave him credit for, *again*. When was I going to learn? "Love the apron, by the way."

"Doesn't he look funny?" Noah asked, grinning around a mouthful of his breakfast.

"He does," I agreed.

"If you mock the cook, you don't get breakfast," Colton replied, but there was no menace to the comment. He played along.

He was happy, and so were the kids. Maybe this wasn't such a catastrophe after all. I kept acting as if I expected the sky to fall, and so far, so good.

I relaxed further when he pushed my favorite mug into my waiting hands, done exactly the way I had wanted it.

Which, considering how often I changed my preferences, was a damn miracle.

Did the man read minds?

He certainly read bodies if the number of times I'd orgasmed last night was an indication.

Half an hour later, Diana clutching Mr. Moo and Noah making faces at the stuffed cow, they were out the door with Mia. The kids were heading for a playdate, full bellies and smiles on their faces.

I made small talk with Mia before shutting the door behind them and wondering how on earth things could feel this typical when so many surprising things had happened last night.

The thought immediately brought on a flash of guilt, as though forgetting about what happened to Cara was on me, purely.

It left Colton and me alone.

"Should we talk about last night? And how maybe we shouldn't have gone there with each other?" I asked on my way into the kitchen for a second cup of coffee.

Because talking about it was the sensible thing to do, right?

Colton stared me down with his blond hair askew, an arrogant grin on his face, and a single eyebrow arched.

"Really? No bra?" he asked, closing the space between us.

Apparently, he didn't want to discuss anything right now.

I gave as good as I got. Placing my hand dead center on his bare chest, I matched his smile. "Really, no shirt?" I asked. "We *should* talk."

“The apron covers a lot,” he teased, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear before leaning in for a bruising kiss. He seared me down to the bone and out the other side, stealing my breath along the way. “You taste like syrup.”

In seconds, he lifted me onto the counter and shifted to stand between my legs, his hands cupping my breasts beneath my tank. His thumbs slid lightly over my nipples as I clawed at his bare back to get him closer.

I nipped at his ear and kissed my way down his throat. Every part of me went up in flames. “Who knew a guy in an apron would be so sexy?”

“Who knew I’d still be hungry after a big breakfast?” His hands slid down my sides, and in seconds, he’d removed my shorts and panties. “Lean back, Zadie.”

I felt his voice like a physical touch along my skin.

“I guess we’re not talking right now,” I whispered, my eyes rolling back in my head.

Yeah, I didn’t want to either. What I wanted was his hands, his mouth, and his cock in any order he wanted to share them with me.

Yet I did as requested and leaned back on my elbows as two large hands pushed my thighs wide apart, and his eyes landed on my sex, wet and ready for him. He turned his head for a minute, eyeing the syrup bottle.

“Nah, you’re already sweet enough.”

And then he buried his head between my legs and feasted on me until I screamed his name so loudly I had no doubt our neighbors heard us. When he flipped me over so my chest pressed on the cool counter and my hands were pinned behind my body, he spanked my ass before entering me from behind.

I screamed again. My soreness from the night before mattered little when his cock buried home. “More. *More*, Colton.”

“You want more?” he asked, slamming into me and pulling all the way out before repeating it again and again.

“I want everything.”

And in that delicious moment, as we climaxed together, I let myself believe I *could* have it all.

COLTON

I never knew Zadio could be so addictive.

Okay, *fuck*, I had some slight idea because I'd thought about her over the years. Always after I saw her and I chalked it up to lust, pure and simple. The curve of her body, that apple-shaped ass, the smart mouth on her...I'd pictured what I'd do to that mouth so she'd be too busy to insult me.

Now?

I knew all those curves intimately. I'd had her bare ass in my hand and felt her lips wrapped around my cock, and it was magic.

I couldn't get enough.

I'd buried my face in her sweet folds and lapped at her until she made those adorable keening noises, noises she'd never make when she was in full control of herself.

Zadio gave her control to me.

Except my horniness started to affect my hockey game. My *pregame*, rather, because I laced up my skates for a few pregame drills, and the guys knew something had happened.

They always knew. Who was I kidding?

"Looks like someone had a good weekend," Zach joked with a wink. He stretched his arms over his head. "Good on you, mate."

Bates harrumphed, literally, from his position at the end of the bench. He fiddled with the laces of his vintage Tackaberry

skates. The ones he wore for practice. “Always talking about sex,” he grumbled under his breath. “Give it a break.”

“Is there anything better to talk about?” Zach tossed back.

Classic Bates and Gates.

I shook my head. “Sex is the best topic to talk about and always on my mind,” I replied. “Well, that and hockey, of course.”

Then I stopped myself.

Normally, I was the first one to hop in and give out the intimate details of my time with whoever graced my bed. It used to be Ginnie, too often to count, and I hated to admit that the guys knew way too much about her than was probably decent and right.

Except now, I didn’t want them to know about Zadie.

In fact, the less they knew about her, even though they were mostly all happily settled down, the better.

There were so many people on the team. They all talked. None of them needed to picture what my girl looked like naked, even if she wasn’t officially my girl and would probably slam her knee into my balls if I suggested such a thing.

And there I sat, in a strange locker room on the road, still thinking about her. Still feeling the way her muscles clenched around my engorged cock.

“Uh-oh. I know the look.” Will sidled closer to me, his elbow burying into my side. “And it’s not just my best friend’s intuition talking. It’s you being weirdly closed-lipped. What are you hiding from me, bro?”

“Shut up.” My voice held no ire, though.

“It’s true. Someone is in love, and I’m going to give you the same amount of shit you’ve heaped on me and Bates. And Rico. And Tommy.” Will laughed down deep in his belly. “Oh man, Colton, you are going to get so much shit from all of us! I love it.”

My expression soured. “I’m not in love.”

“Pre-love, then,” he corrected. “Is there such a thing as pre-love?” He looked to the others for support.

Tommy nodded and slicked a hand through his black hair, in desperate need of a haircut. His tattoos rippled with every movement of his muscles. “Yeah, dude. It’s a real thing. I’ve experienced it firsthand.”

“If either one of you says anything to Zadie, I am going to rip your intestines out through your assholes,” I warned with a pointed finger. “She can’t know. She’d rip me a new asshole if she thought I was getting too close.”

Tommy scoffed, and Will knocked me with his shoulder. “Sure. Whatever you say.”

He knew my threats were meaningless. They all did.

And none of the teasing compared to the crap we’d all put Liam through when he transferred to our team mid-season... fuck, how long ago was it? Too long for me to remember a time without him. He fit seamlessly.

Like Zadie and me.

There I went, thinking about her again.

We warmed up on the ice with our usual drills, and then Coach Darren and Assistant Coach Andrew drew us into the locker room to talk about our plan of attack.

We squared off against the Anaheim Ducks in California.

As the center, which was basically the quarterback of hockey, I stayed in the middle of the ice, away from the sideboards. I had more flexibility than the others, so I covered more ice surface. My long legs finally came in handy.

I took up position, staring into the mug of the opposite center and waiting for the refs to finish their instructions.

Those were things I had to remember about myself to get into the game rather than split my attention between this and Zadie. I was a great puck handler, a great passer. A strong skater and a team player.

I handled the puck more than any other player. Not that I was the top goal scorer. But I picked up a bunch of assists, so points for that.

The crowd chanted, and the fans wearing Snakes jerseys jumped up from their seats when the buzzer rang.

In that moment, I was the next Wayne Gretzky or Joe Sakic. I was the next Mario Lemieux.

I handled the puck across the ice like a feather in the wind with more speed and power, my guys at my back.

We came out ahead in the last minute, with Will saving a puck and Tommy hitting a surprise goal. A win, I thought, with the guys slapping my back and howling their victory into the air. A win and one step closer to the Cup.

Wheel, snipe, celly!

I dragged my exhausted ass back to the locker room and prepared for a long week away from home. Ice baths and saunas and having the doc go over me to make sure I hadn't strained anything.

When I finally got home from the road, I pulled into the driveway, tense with anticipation.

My heart melted when Diana ran out to greet me, waving her stuffed cow above her head wildly. Noah followed a heartbeat later, looking so much like Cara I wanted to break down.

"There are my two favorite people!" I crouched down, my knees cracking in protest, and held my arms wide to accept them both. "What are you troublemakers doing?"

Noah laughed right next to my ear. Loud enough to make me deaf. "We've been forced to clean our bathroom! Zadie said we couldn't watch cartoons until we did our homework and cleaned."

I hefted them both up until their legs dangled and, leaving my luggage in the middle of the lawn, waddled to the open front door. "She said that, huh?"

Zadie acted as if nothing had happened before I left, and although I knew it was something we'd agreed on, it still threw me for a loop.

Until the kids were in bed, and I snuck my way down the hall into her bedroom. I worshiped her the way she deserved to be worshiped, licking my way along every sweet and sensual line of her body. I buried myself in her repeatedly, in every position imaginable.

And in the morning, before the sun rose, I snuck back to my own bed.

"We're going to be home for the next little bit, but we have a game against Vegas in a few days," I told Zadie once the rest of the household woke up.

She made some low hum in the back of her throat and straightened the lopsided pigtails Diana had insisted on this morning. "No wonder you're always covered in bruises. That black eye is a thing of beauty, my friend."

I reached up and touched the sensitive area.

"Occupational hazard. Someone on the other team didn't like the way I scored, and so he decided to deck me. It turned out to be one hell...llll-heck of a fight," I corrected myself way too late. "The black eye and the bruises will fade. My dentist is kept in the lap of luxury and the life he's become accustomed to, thanks to all the work I need, and I want you and the kids to come to our home game."

"Yay!" Noah jumped up from the table and knocked his plate, still covered in scrambled eggs, to the floor.

The thing clattered, and I spared a thought of gratitude for the way Zadie insisted we switch from regular plates to plastic. Small blessings.

I bent down with a towel to grab the dregs of egg scattered across the tile and continued with, "Come on. It's going to be great. You can sit with all the others in the VIP section. Hot chocolate, kids the same age as the twins. Lulu will be there. She never misses."

The kids began to plead in tandem, but it wasn't going to be that hard to convince Zadie this time. She knew how badly I wanted them there. She caved within a few minutes, and I had a gut feeling her hesitation had more to do with principle than anything else.

"We'll be there," she said, and Diana and Noah erupted in a round of cheers again.

It was good practice for them, for the game.

Which was how I ended up smacking the glass in front of them with a giant mitt hand days later and flashing the kids a wide smile.

Noah jumped up and down while Diana clutched Mr. Moo. Zadie looked absolutely adorable in a fake fur jacket made of pure purple fluff and a black velvet hat.

I puckered my lips to her and hoped that it would result in an air kiss for me. She merely lifted a brow, shook her head, and stuck out her tongue. Yup, that made more sense.

Hopefully, this was fun for them. Mia's kids were only a little older than the twins, so it gave them plenty of friends to talk to. In fact, it seemed the VIP section was filled with kids these days. Way more than there had been when I started this gig and signed on with the Snakes.

It was a change of pace for everyone, and yet it happened smoothly enough no one realized the transition.

From bachelors to family men.

I never thought I'd be among them.

I played one of the best games of my career, and I wasn't sure whether it was my drills paying off, skating five hours a day, or the presence of my own little family. Having Zadie and the kids in the stands calling out my name and number bolstered me in a way nothing else did.

I hurried through the cooldowns and my stint in the ice bath after we won. Anxious to get back to them and ask how they liked the game. The violence had been kept to a minimum by the grace of god, not out of any collective effort.

Only a couple of fights broke out on the ice, and none of them resulted in blood.

I hoped the kids had a blast.

I hoped Zadie was proud of me.

Was that fucked up?

No, the fucked up part came on my way out into the hall to talk to them. I'd alerted several security guards to escort my family back to the locker room for a behind-the-scenes look at things.

Except I didn't see any of them on my way out the door.

Flashing lights assaulted me and blinded me at the same time. Cameras going off in tandem, and a handful of voices all speaking at the same time.

“Colton! Mr. Ramsey, over here. Look here! Mr. Ramsey!”

“Mr. Ramsey, I'm Adam from the Tucson Gazette, if you could answer a few questions for us—”

“How does it feel having to co-parent your sister's children after she died in that car accident?”

“How are you dealing with tragedy?” another asked.

“Do you really think you're the best person to raise those kids? Considering your schedule during the pro season?” another shouted.

A camera flashed way too close to my face. “How do your sponsors feel about the change?”

I lifted a hand up to my eyes to block the light, dark spots dancing in front of my vision. My mind was a step behind. I wasn't able to keep up. If Will and Coach Darren hadn't come up behind me and pushed me through the crowd of waiting journalists, I wouldn't have even understood what was happening.

“Where's Zadie?” I asked.

I barely heard myself above the din of the bodies pressing closer within the confines of the hallway.

“They’re probably up with the Harrises right now. Which is where we need to get you,” Darren muttered. “Vultures.”

The two of them took hold of me from either side and moved me toward the private elevators up to the offices, Darren using his ID card to gain us access.

“How did they get a hold of the story?” I asked in the relative quiet of the elevator.

Darren shook his head. “With those guys? Who knows. Figures they’d ambush us right after our win.”

My good mood took a back seat to my worry.

Eventually, we reached the right floor with a ding and hurried into the inner sanctum, where the team PA, Corrinne Winters, stood at her desk with Zadie. The kids were off in the glass-walled conference room playing with Mia’s son and daughter, laughing as if there was nothing going on.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Zadie looked up at my approach and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Are you all right?” I stalked toward her and held out my arms as if she’d run into them.

“Can you tell me what the hell is going on right now?” she hissed under her breath as if the twins would somehow miraculously hear her cursing.

“I’m not sure.”

Corrinne looked pained. “Somehow, the press got wind. I’m sorry, Colton. I know it’s a shitty thing, but at least we can spin this.”

I whirled on her. “There’s no way to spin tragedy,” I replied.

“Which I understand. In this case, you have to let me do my job. The team and I had a couple of things written up just in case something like this happened. We were hoping we wouldn’t have to do any damage control, of course, but prepared for any leakages or enterprising young writers who

look too closely at our players in hopes of a story to make their big break,” Corrinne continued.

“What do you mean?” Zadie asked.

“Our team suggests we spin this as a heartwarming story. You and Zadie, co-parenting, coming together to make the best of a bad situation,” Corrinne replied, glancing at Zadie from the corner of her eye. “We should get ahead of it before the press draws their own conclusions on what’s going on.”

“What would we have to do in order to get ahead of it?” I wanted to know.

The guys were still flanking me like my own personal bodyguards, and the rest of the office clattered along with their daily grind. As though this was just another normal day. Except I was tired down to the bone and hated these manipulative games.

“A few interviews with outlets chosen by us,” Corrinne said.

“What do you think?” I asked Zadie.

“Absolutely not.” She answered without hesitation and shut the idea down flat with a single turn of her nose toward the sky.

“I’m not sure we have a choice—” I started.

“I’m not interested in being on TV. I mean, look at me. I’m going to come off looking bad,” she snapped, full of fury.

“You won’t. The team knows what they’re doing. They know exactly what to do in these situations. I trust them.”

She glared at me. “You might, but I don’t. Look, Colton, no offense, but I’m unemployed. Right now, no one is going to give a shit that I’m starting my own business because you’re paying the bills. All of them.” She blew out a breath. “I’m going to come off looking like a sponge at best and a parasite at the worst.”

“You will not,” I insisted. “You’re building a business, and you’ve sacrificed everything to be here for the kids. People will see how much you’ve put in.”

“No. No matter what you think, people aren’t going to see the work. They’re going to see me as someone using you to get ahead in life. I won’t do any interviews.”

“You’re just content to let the media run wild with whatever garbage they choose to spew?” I asked.

Zadie dug her heels in, her face taking on the most obstinate set I’d ever seen.

I wasn’t happy about it. Or about being put in this situation in the first place.

“We need to let the team do their job. We have PR people in place for a reason,” I replied, doing my best to convince her.

“It’s a bad idea,” she barked back, tucking a lock of black hair behind her ear. “No, Colton. I’m not doing any interviews. Conversation closed.”

She swirled around to give me her back and talked away without waiting for me to say anything else. Just like that, conversation closed. As though I had no choice in the matter.

I turned to face Corrinne, and she shrugged as if saying, *what are you gonna do?* Fuck. This was a nightmare. And coming down from the high of a win into this cesspool? Pass.

“No interviews, I guess,” I told her. “But thank you.”

She reached out and rubbed a soothing hand down my arm. “We can still do damage control without an interview, Colton, don’t worry. We’ll just say we’re trying to respect your family’s privacy right now during a tough time. We’ve got this covered.”

I wanted to trust her, but a cold pit had opened up in the bottom of my stomach, and it felt as if all my insides were being sucked down through it.

Zadie didn’t want to do an interview, and I understood, in part. She worried she’d come off looking bad. But I couldn’t help but wonder if she was actually ashamed of herself...or of being linked to me.

ZADIE

I never realized how grueling the schedule was during hockey season. You see all the good parts on television, with the packed arenas and the announcers calling out the plays. You saw the stats on the players. Not the stress it took on them physically or the strain on their families when they were gone.

A lot of the girls went with their men for the away games, and I guessed if you had no strings keeping you at home, then you were able to do those things. Mia had to stay home with her kids, although I wasn't sure if the team owners and their wives usually traveled with the players or not. Sasha had classes, and Willa taught and wrote her music and had a baby. Eleanor had her farm and her son to take care of...

Just as I was stuck at home with Noah and Diana. Busting my ass to make my business a reality when I had no credentials and no clients willing to take a chance on me.

Colton had been gone for two days, and all was quiet on the western front.

With the twins at school, once again the house felt way too silent, and I kept myself from texting Colton about it by locking my cell in the desk drawer. Nothing good came from texting him. Okay, well, a few orgasms came from it, but that led to nothing but trouble and not anything that would get me out of the boiling oil.

I tapped my foot, staring at the row of plants lining the window of the solarium at the back of the house.

Fuck. I didn't want to think about him. Or his disappointment in me for turning down the help of his PR team. I didn't want my private life flashed across television and journals, and online blogs. Was that so wrong?

I hoped he understood.

Hadn't gotten a chance to talk to him about it, though.

He'd kept his distance from me in the days leading up to his departure, and then he was gone. In a flash. Like—

The doorbell rang and kicked me right out of my thoughts.

My brows furrowed down. Who would be coming around in the middle of the day? Not one of the girls, right?

Although I didn't pull the cell out of the drawer to check if any of them had sent me a message.

I'd been put into the text chain against my will and made it a point to only respond in gifs and only respond when I felt like it.

I wasn't looking for a new bestie. No one would be able to fill Cara's shoes.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a round of furious knocking, and I realized I'd gotten distracted again.

"I'm coming!" I yelled out. Sheesh, calm down. I wasn't exactly fit for company in my sports bra and sweats. I had been planning on working, not entertaining.

Not that the person on the other side of the door would be able to hear me. Not above the racket they were making.

I pushed away from the desk, and power walked all the way to the front door. Pulling it open without checking through the window to see who waited for me on the other side.

Big mistake.

Ginnie flashed me a smile that dripped venom around the edges of her perfectly lined, plump lips. They were pink today, as opposed to the color she'd painted them in the club.

“Well, hi there. Zadie, right?” she asked sweetly. Too sweetly as her eyes roamed my body. Yeah, she looked like a supermodel, and I looked like, well a house Frau.

Her voice gave me goosebumps in the worst possible way, and I wanted to slam the door in her face. I might have, too, if the business with the media hadn't gotten me stressed out to the max. Who knows what she might say to them to make things worse?

I flashed her an equally sweet smile that never reached my eyes and hoped it got my point across. That she was intruding and trespassing.

“Can I help you?” I asked without correcting her.

She craned her head around to the left and the right of my body before pushing past me.

“If you're looking for Colton, he's not here,” I called after her, gritting my teeth.

Fucking bitch. And who gave her the address anyway? I hoped she wasn't having us followed because no one from the Rattlesnakes would have told her.

“I know he's not,” she replied. “I'm here to talk to you.”

“I can't for the life of me understand why.” I crossed my arms across my chest.

I wanted her out of the house. But the way she looked around told me she'd been there more often than I thought. Probably more than me if we combined time over the years.

“Because you and I need to have a little chat, girl to girl.”

“If it's girl to girl, then perhaps you'd like to talk to Colton's niece,” I corrected her. “She is the only girl in this house besides you, and unfortunately, she is at school.”

As if I would let this primped-up prima donna get anywhere near Diana.

Today Virginia wore a dress made of nothing but sequins, which seemed a little ridiculous for a Tuesday morning. Her

pumps were taller than a foot-long ruler and made her legs look like they went on for years rather than days.

“I hope you’re not interrupting anything important with your little visit. Seems you’re dressed to go out,” I said. My hands itched to find their way to my hips.

“I only wanted to talk to you. I feel Colton is keeping a few things from you,” she shared.

“About what?”

“About me. Our past together. You see, he and I...we’re the type of people who can’t stay away from each other.” She smiled at me, allowing me to see the sadness in her eyes. But not for her. For me.

Sadness or pity, and I thought the two went hand in hand.

“Seems to me he’s gotten pretty good at staying away from you. Then again, I’m not his keeper. I don’t control what he does or does not do,” I replied with forced ease.

“It seems you do. He hasn’t tried to contact me since you forced yourself into the picture.”

“I didn’t force anything, honey.”

“Didn’t you? Being here, with him. Playing pretend happy family. All you’re doing is keeping the two of us apart.”

“If he wants you, then by all means.” I held my arms out to the side. “He can have you. We’re not together.”

It was a lie, of course, but she didn’t need any more ammunition.

“You’re standing in the way, whether you mean to be or not. You’re keeping us from being together whether you mean to be or not. He loves me, Zadie.” Ginnie pointed to her chest between her ample breasts. “*Me.*”

“I’m sure he’s told you that a time or two before. As much as you’d like to believe, I also don’t control his feelings.” I tried to offer her the same expression she gave to me, although it felt impossible to get my lips to cooperate.

“You’re a convenience,” she supplied. “A distraction from his real feelings because he’s afraid of what we have. The depth and the strength of how we feel for each other. It makes sense he’s running away, especially after what happened to his poor sister.”

One more word about Cara, however superfluous, and I’d snap.

“Watch what you say in this house.” My hand clenched at my sides. “What you say about her.”

Ginnie shrugged, entirely at ease. Her heels clicked on the tile floor. “It doesn’t matter what I say. It’s nothing you haven’t thought about before, I’m sure. You know the two of you are temporary. It’s a feeling in your gut. Isn’t it? Something you can’t ignore no matter how hard you try.”

“You know, it’s been lovely chatting with you, but it’s time for you to go. In case you’re a little lost, here is the door.” I stepped aside.

“I’m sure you really don’t need me to tell you what you already know. Colton and me, the two of us...it’s inevitable.”

“Whatever you say.”

Ginnie wasted no more time. She sauntered past me with a seductive swing of her hips as though she had no joints there and tapped her way down to her parked car.

“Oh,” I called out. “Whether you’re with Colton or not, just remember, I’m in his life forever because of the kids.”

“Yeah, and that’s the only reason.”

I stood in the doorway watching her until she gunned the engine in the convertible and took off down the street. It wasn’t until she turned a corner, ducking out of sight, that I felt satisfied enough to close the door and flip the deadbolts back into place.

She was wrong.

About so many things.

And it took a whole lot of fucking nerve to come to a person's house just to be nasty. I knew she was wrong. But... maybe she wasn't. I hated that she'd gotten in my head.

"No," I said out loud. "That dolled-up douche is not in my head at all. Not one bit."

Saying it out loud just to hear the sound of my own voice mattered little.

It especially didn't matter when I shucked aside my old sweats and ripped T-shirt to change for girls' night.

Not my usual scene, either, and the invitation came right before Ginnie's uninvited arrival. I'd prepared to ignore it under the guise of wanting to work but now, for some reason, even with my guard up...

I wanted the distraction.

I wanted a chance to get out of my head for a little bit and maybe listen to someone other than myself.

The kids were at an after-school program where they'd be until around eight tonight, which gave me plenty of time to be myself again. An adult. A woman.

Manicures and Mimosas was a regular occasion.

This was something different.

I wasn't the type to sit around in a circle with painted nails while we braided each other's hair. Tonight was a get-together at Eleanor's ranch because she needed some help putting away a load of hay she'd just had delivered. Physical labor?

It was a better idea for a girls' night than drinking and gossiping and shit like that.

Jess, Cara, and I had never been the type to do that type of stuff. If we had a night together, we stayed in our pajamas watching shitty B horror movies while we made root beer floats with cheap vanilla ice cream. We made jokes about bad bosses and infected toenails and all kinds of gross things.

This would not be the same, I assured myself as I followed the directions on my phone. This would be something

completely different that I needed to go into with an open mind, without expectations or judgments.

It was too hard not to judge these days, myself included. I felt like a different person than the Zadie I'd been in Houston. I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Finally, I saw the sign for the farm, and I pulled into a dirt driveway leading up to a large barn and a cute house with a wide front porch.

There were already multiple cars parked in the small lot beside a riding ring. Was I the last to get here?

Crap.

As if I needed help feeling more awkward.

I pushed out of the car and swept my hair off my shoulders, immediately regretting leaving it down. I searched my pockets for a scrunchie, followed by my purse, and found a rubber band that worked.

A round of loud laughter sounded from the barn, and I headed in that direction.

This was not what I expected from a girls' night. More like a girls' afternoon as the sun had yet to approach the ridge of mountains ringing the property.

“Zadie!”

Someone called out my name, and I glanced into the dim recesses of the barn to see Sasha waving an exuberant hand in my direction. She wore a pair of cowboy boots the same shade of pink as her button-up shirt. The same shade as Celia's hair, I noticed with a start.

Those guys.

I shook my head.

“Hey, is that Zadie?” Eleanor popped her head around from a truly massive mound of square hay bales. “Thank you so much for showing up! I know you guys were looking forward to a relaxing afternoon at Prickles, but I really needed the help,” she continued.

“There is nothing to say we can’t go to Prickles afterward as a well-earned reward,” Sasha commented. She paused to grab me in a hug and then picked a piece of straw off of my shirt, where it had transferred from her to me. “Sorry.”

“Just tell me where you need me, and I’ll hop right in,” I replied.

A light crowd today, I thought as I joined Sasha. Only she, me, Celia, Eleanor, and Elizabeth had joined in. The others were on the road with the boys or busy with life.

Life happened.

No. Ginnie happened.

And as the afternoon wore into evening and the outdoor lights flickered on to help us see where we moved the hay, I found myself telling them all about my visitor today.

“It’s not that I want sympathy or pity or anything. She just rattled me by showing up.” I tapped the side of my head, balancing the hay bale on my hip and feeling like a tough, brute chick. “You know?”

“Yeah, of course we know,” Celia assured me. “I had the displeasure of meeting Virginia on multiple occasions. She’s always been vindictive.”

“Harsh description,” I said.

She shrugged. “Sorry. Blame it on the hormones or blame it on the fact that I don’t like the woman, but as Will’s wife, I want to think I’ve gotten up close and personal with Colton’s girlfriends. The hazards of those two being best friends.” Pregnancy hormones, I couldn’t even imagine it. “Ginnie has always been a real pain in the ass, and I call it as I see it. Vindictive puts it mildly.”

“It’s true,” Sasha agreed. She winced as she continued to walk between the barn and the large three-sided shed where Eleanor stored her bales. Her boots weren’t broken in yet, apparently. “One time, she came to a game and thought that Colton waved to another woman when he took a pass by us. She went ballistic.”

“What did she do?”

“She trashed the Zamboni,” Sasha said, her voice dropping into a low confidential tone.

“That is just a rumor. Tommy told me they haven’t been able to directly link it back to anyone in particular,” Eleanor put in.

“It was her and I know it,” Sasha insisted. “And what about the time she upturned the table at one of Elizabeth’s picnics? I thought Bates was going to go ballistic on her.”

“I’d pay good money to see that,” Celia agreed with a laugh.

Bates was a mystery wrapped in an enigma and tied up with a grumpy bow. And yet his fiancé Elizabeth was an absolute doll.

“I wanted to murder her myself.” Elizabeth sighed, pushing her wild curls out of her face. “There is absolutely no reason to act like a fool in front of everyone, not to mention destroying property. And if that table had flipped a foot to the other side, then it would have damaged my honey bear’s sauna. You know how he feels about it.” She rolled her eyes. “Loves it almost more than me.”

Yikes. These tales were not complimentary, to say the least, and they painted a clear picture. The girls didn’t know about Colton and me.

Which meant they had no reason to make Ginnie look bad so that I’d feel better.

She was a natural troublemaker.

It didn’t alleviate any of my worries, though.

“Sounds like she’s someone I need to keep a healthy distance from,” I said when they finished with their stories. “Which shouldn’t be a problem since she’s out of Colton’s life.”

Eleanor patted me on the arm. “You keep doing what you’re doing, Zadie. I know it’s tough, but you’ll get through it.”

We finished with our chore and then took turns sweeping each other clear of straw and debris. Afterward, we grabbed a bite from Prickles, and Sasha spent way too long telling me which of the teas they made in-house were the best.

Still, it was interesting.

And fun in a way I hadn't really anticipated.

My good mood continued into the morning when I woke up early to get the kids ready for school and grabbed the old-fashioned newspaper I'd insisted on subscribing to from our mailbox. Until I flipped open the front page, and there, in black and white and gray for all the world to see, was a picture of Colton and Ginnie with their tongues in each other's mouths.

IS NHL GOD COLTON RAMSEY BACK WITH HIS SEXY EX?

What...were...the odds...

I saw red, and the edges of the newspaper crumbled in my fists. What were the odds of a photo of the two of them appearing in the press? Now, of all times?

It was too big of a coincidence to be that. This was fate. This was a giant slap in the back of the head from fate telling me to reassess my priorities—

I wanted to cry.

I wanted to scream and break something, and only the sound of the twins running for their school bus and calling out hasty goodbyes kept me from losing my shit entirely.

The picture made it clear to me that Colton and his psychotic ex were not in the past the way everyone claimed. Otherwise, why would the press run an article such as this?

I watched the bus disappear down the street before slamming the door with extra force. Just for the hell of it and to hear the pictures rattle on the wall.

I had no reason to be sad and every reason to be angry.

The man slept with me, for god's sake. And sure, we weren't exclusive. We weren't *anything*.

But it took a lot of guts to fuck me and tell me one thing, all the while having someone else in the picture.

I wouldn't stand for it.

The devil's ears must have been ringing because the cell in my pocket vibrated violently, and when I held the screen to my face, his name flashed. I gritted my teeth to keep from howling banshee style on principle.

Eventually, I pressed the screen to answer the call, and Colton must have heard my teeth grinding together because he lurched into speech without so much as a hello.

"It's not what it looks like," he started.

I took a moment to try to let some calm settle over me before I spoke. Too bad it never came. "Then what does it look like?" I said with enough fake sweetness to choke a camel.

"The picture is from a year ago."

"How do you even know what's going on? Are you watching me somehow? Do we have one of those video doorbells, and you just happened to see the front page of the newspaper in my hand?"

Colton sighed. "No, I don't have a video doorbell. I am not tracking your movements—"

"I never said you were tracking me," I interrupted, seething not-so-silently.

"I have an alert on my phone, and the newspaper happens to publish their articles online as well. The alert comes whenever my name pops up online, so I saw it. Okay? I saw it, and I knew you had to be freaking out."

Too late. I knew. No matter what he had to say about the situation or about him and his ex, the doubt had already settled. I'd question everything from now on. It was safer that way, I reasoned. Safer for me to keep my distance instead of getting tangled up in messy emotions like this one.

It had been a mistake to sleep with the Golden Boy, and I knew it going into the situation.

Now it was time for me to rectify the situation.

“It’s from a year ago, Zadie,” Colton continued. “I’m not sure why they got it into their tiny skulls to feature me and Ginnie, but it’s true. There is nothing going on there. There’s only one person I have my eye on. Please. Will you say something?”

I shook my head and pressed the phone closer to my ear, finally walking away from the front door and into the kitchen. More coffee, that’s what I needed. A whole new pot of coffee to give me a buzz and get me working, so I’d forget all about...everything.

“It doesn’t matter, Colton,” I replied. “Whatever you choose to do, and whomever you choose to do it with is your business entirely. Just don’t expect me to be a part of it.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Why did he sound upset?

“It means we are going back to platonic. We need to. This is just too complicated and convoluted, and I refuse to screw this up for the kids.”

“You’re telling me that one little picture in one newspaper, which is completely false, is going to scare you badly enough that you step away from this?” His voice went deadly serious, and I gulped.

“Not one picture in one newspaper. Also, a visit from your stalker ex. I need to focus on my life,” I replied. “We have no business being together. We have more important things to focus on, and their names are Diana and Noah. They take priority. We need to go back to the way things were.” I called it off with only the barest minimum regret because, damn, I’d miss him.

His cock, I mentally clarified, reminding myself there was only one thing about the man I’d think about once we went back to platonic.

I held my breath and waited for him to answer, to see things the way I did, and to insist he wasn't giving up on me.

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect him to sigh. "Fine," he caved. "If that's what you want, then that's what it will be. For the kids."

Colton hung up with a click, and I stood in the middle of the kitchen with the coffee percolating. Wondering why I wanted him to fight me on this so badly.

Wondering why it hurt even more that he had not.

COLTON

I lived with Zadie.

I ate most meals with Zadie.

I played house with Zadie.

And I could not touch her because she called us, whatever we were to each other, off. Like flipping a switch from one position to another. As if it didn't mean anything and neither of us had any feelings.

I had feelings, all right, a whole damn lot of them.

The worst part of it all? We had to be civilized for the kids. In front of them, it was a completely different scenario than what was actually happening beneath the surface.

Was I pleased about it?

No, I was not.

I was furious about the whole situation, and I had the paper print a retraction because I had a date-stamped version of that picture, and it was definitely not taken recently. Once again, a small upset managed to shift the entire trajectory of my day-to-day existence. For what? For a picture.

No matter how hard I tried to explain things, it made no difference.

None whatsoever.

Did Zadie care when I showed her the refraction or the date? No, she did not. She stuck to her guns. *Platonic*. Nothing

more. When I asked her about the future, if we might get back to more at some point, she refused to answer.

I didn't like it, but I was hardly going to force myself on a woman. I was not that guy, no matter what kind of fantasies visited me at night. In my dreams, I snuck down the hallway, and she welcomed me in her arms and her bed with open arms.

I woke up alone no matter what happened in the rest of the dream, and I remembered the line in the sand. The line I was not to cross when it came to the woman of my dreams.

Part of her reasoning was sound.

We did need to put the kids first. They were our main priority, both out of love and legally.

Yet...

I wasn't sure denying our own happiness was the best way to help the twins. They were doing the best they could dealing with the move and their own feelings of grief. Wouldn't they benefit from seeing their guardians, their role models, happy? They hadn't been unhappy while we'd been together.

I thought Zadio and I were good together, and I thought she did too, but boy had she been quick to pull the plug at the first sign of trouble. I never pegged her as the skittish sort, yet there we were, standing on opposite sides of the line.

Sure, Ginnie and her attitude were frustrating, and her leaking that picture—because who else could it be? —was low, but none of that was my fault. Part of me even admired Zadio's desire to avoid drama because my ex was a drama magnet, but still, Zadio hadn't even given us a shot.

I sprawled on the couch on one of my rare moments of downtime, my arms over the back and my legs splayed. The television belched out colorful images and loud sounds, and I paid attention to none of it.

My gaze remained on some distant point out the window, with my thoughts a million miles away.

It was way fucking hard not to be a grump. Especially now that I was cut off from sex with Zadio. It made each moment

around her tough, more so because she refused to talk about it. Or anything.

If I'd been frustrated before by her walking around in swimsuits and booty shorts before we'd gotten together, it was nothing compared to how I felt now. Now I knew what I was missing, and I hated every second.

Growling, I grabbed the remote and changed the channel to literally anything else.

I had to suck it up because we were co-parenting, and the kids needed us.

Every day I woke up wondering if today would be a good one or a bad one. Grief was funny like that. And, of course, every time something went wrong, the kids melted down and cried for their parents. It broke my heart to hear them bawl, to see them red-faced and struggling to deal with their emotions.

I didn't blame them for any of the bad behavior. It was expected while we dealt, and although I toyed with the idea of having us all go in for therapy, Zadie nixed the idea until we were on more solid ground.

Still, I hated that there was nothing I could do to make the pain go away. This was what relationships did to you; they broke your heart.

The kids were teaching me a real-life lesson, and so was Zadie.

Groaning, I dropped my head into my hands and scrubbed my fingers along my scalp.

Until now, I'd never really cared more about someone else's needs or feelings other than my own. I loved those kids, even though a huge part of me wished to go back to a time in my life when it was only me. All about me, all the time.

Did that make me selfish?

Yeah, and I felt like a huge pile of dog shit.

At some point, something would have to give.

But this was my life now—forever. The responsibilities didn't end when the twins turned eighteen. I'd train hard, play hard, and come home to the hard work of making sure Diana and Noah, and in turn, Zadie were okay.

Hell of a lot of responsibility, I thought, pulling on my earlobes to get back to the present moment.

My stomach grumbled, and I pushed off the couch to grab a snack.

These days, the electronic calendar saved my life. I couldn't keep on top of all my commitments otherwise.

I snagged a bag of chips and bent over the island, munching and scrolling at the same time.

Crap, we had parent-teacher conferences for the kids on Tuesday. The idea had me sweating in unmentionable places. Why was I nervous?

Because the damn teacher would judge us, I realized. Zadie and me. We'd both be judged on how well the kids were doing, adjusting, you name it.

“Well, shit,” Zach said three hours later. “What's got your knickers in a twist?”

He sat beside me in the locker room.

“Parent-teacher conferences,” I admitted. “We've got one tomorrow, and I'm freaking out a little bit.”

“At least you won't run into your one-night stand like Coach did,” Tommy joked with a loud guffaw. “But you're right. Those things are scary. Eleanor took me along with her last one, and Ryder's math teacher gave me hives. I swear.”

Hives?

My eyes widened and bugged out of my head. “You're shitting me.”

“I'm pretty sure those things are about the kids, not you, you narcissists.” Luca came up beside me in nothing but his towel and slapped the back of my head.

Not hard enough to get some sense into me, though.

“He does have a point,” Zach agreed.

“Nah, you feel judged,” Tommy admitted. He crooked his neck from side to side. “When I went to Ryder’s, and even though all is well with him, I felt like I wanted to puke my guts up. Like, what if I’m fucking the little dude up?” He shuddered.

“Exactly!” I held up my fist for a pump. “Neither Zadie or I really know what we’re doing, and these kids have had a lot to deal with. Every day it feels like we might be ruining them for life. And she’s put the kibosh on therapy for now.”

“Man, don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re doing a good thing, and those kids are lucky to have you. Both of you,” Zach added.

Thank fucking god he was the voice of reason here. Then again, he didn’t have kids. What did he know?

I considered that long and hard. “Maybe. I sure don’t remember my own dad stressing about my parent-teacher conference. I don’t even remember him ever going to one. Might have blocked them all out.”

“Don’t blame you there,” Bates grumbled.

He had some daddy issues too. Which sucked to admit since guys were supposed to be the tough protectors and keep it all together. But I knew I wasn’t alone in my past issues with my father.

It was a bitter pill to swallow and probably part of the reason why I was so nervous about tomorrow. I’d been a solid student. I’d kept my nose clean. Still, we’d moved around so often that I was always the new kid, just trying to fit in.

Didn’t seem as if my dad gave that a whole lot of consideration.

“You’re already a better dad than many,” Luca added, trying to be the silver lining.

“Well, it’s a pretty low bar, and if I’m honest, my brother-in-law was a pretty lazy dad as well. I feel like I need to be the best, maybe to counteract Harlan,” I admitted.

“Don’t we all?” Tommy declared. His dark eyes were bright. Probably thinking about his wife’s piece-of-shit ex-husband. “I think it’s part of our DNA, man, to compete in all areas. From one new dad to another. You have to give yourself a little grace.”

“Wow. Your woman sure has changed you, mate.” Zach raised his hands in surrender as Tommy growled at him. “Hey, it’s not an insult. It’s a change for the better.”

Tensions ran high. Seemed fatherhood was a sensitive subject for a lot of us.

“I’m still shitting myself,” I said, grabbing my bag.

“Don’t ruin another pair of pants!” Luca crowed out.

His voice and their laughter followed me down the hallway.

The following afternoon, after I’d made sure to hustle through my training early in the day, I bundled Zadie and the kids into the car to head to the school.

Not that I wanted to be alone in the car with her unless I could put my hand on her. Or lean the seat back and kiss her senseless.

What choice did I have?

I made it a point to stare straight ahead with my hands clenched around the wheel rather than look at Zadie. In turn, she made it a point to stare out the window at the scenery while Diana and Noah happily chatted and argued with each other in the back seat.

If I was going to try to be the type of father figure these kids deserved to have, then keeping my libido in check, keeping my own wants in check, was the priority.

Something my father had never learned how to do.

Zadie, as always, looked beautiful. Today she’d dressed conservatively in a pair of skinny jeans and a button-up top that left her arms bare. It had an enticing bit of lace around the hem and the neckline, and she’d lined her ears with silver and crystal studs.

Understated, for her.

She also looked anxious. She bit her lip so much she'd eaten off most of the lipstick by the time we reached the school. I parked in the nearest spot I could find and turned to her.

"It'll be okay, St. Clair. It hasn't been that long. We can't have messed them up too much yet," I teased.

Noah squawked indignantly at the comment, but he had a smile on his face.

"True. Next year, we're really in for it," she agreed, playing along.

"That's the spirit."

The twins went into the gym with the other kids who had their conferences at this time of the day. Luckily there were several teachers there who had stayed after school to watch them while their parents went into meetings.

We weren't alone.

Unluckily, my stomach took a nosedive into queasy town on our way down the hall into the kid's homeroom class.

Their teacher, an older woman by the name of Mrs. Edgeworth, peered at us over her tortoiseshell glasses as we entered the brightly decorated classroom. "Mr. Ramsey and Miss St. Clair?" she asked.

She sounded like the voice of my nightmares.

"There you are. Come in, come in, I don't bite," she finished without waiting for us to answer.

Was she sure about that? Because right now, it looked as if she was ready to take a chomp out of me, and I wasn't sure if it was out of desire or something worse. The woman eyed me up and down and practically licked her lips.

Shamefully, I stayed a step behind Zadie and let her take the lead.

"We're kind of new to all this. I'm Zadie, and this is Colton." She strode forward and extended her hand over the

teacher's desk.

When she was done shaking, I did the same, and Mrs. Edgeworth held on much longer than necessary.

I swore I heard her murmur something under her breath.

Mrs. Edgeworth waited until we'd sat down before she said, "I understand. Raising a child comes with a steep learning curve. Not to mention having to relocate and dealing with tragedy." She opened her laptop and clicked through some files. "Now, don't panic."

"Panic?" My voice came out with a puff of dust, my mouth dry.

"All in all, both Noah and Diana are doing well. They're a delight in the classroom," Mrs. Edgeworth continued.

I felt my body relax a little. "Really?"

Apparently, I could face down a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound dude on skates any day, but a sweet teacher with a silver bob had me quaking in my boots. Until she shot me some *come hither* eyes and knocked me off my game.

"Yes, really!" She smiled wider. "They're fitting in as well as can be expected and making progress. It might be a little slower than the other children. However, it's not cause to worry."

I lurched forward.

She continued. "They were a little behind the other kids here when they got here, so we're still working to make up some ground. It really is nothing to worry about; only a few issues with reading. Given everything going on in their lives, I feel they'll be able to catch up beautifully once they feel more settled."

"They were behind?" Zadio seized on that right away. "Why weren't we alerted sooner? This sounds like a problem. They're not reading at the same level as the rest of their class?"

Mrs. Edgeworth held up a hand to stop Zadio before she got too crazed. I was right with her, though.

The poor twins.

If they were having issues, then they should have come to one of us, let us know they were struggling. Neither one said anything.

“Look, this is a pretty amazing school district.” Mrs. Edgeworth sat back in her chair and steepled her fingers together on the desk in front of her. “We do a lot of things here that other districts are only starting to implement. As such, our students are in a higher percentile.”

I understood.

In other words, my sister’s neighborhood school hadn’t been great. Harlan wanted to stay close to the area where he’d grown up and refused to move. Once, when I’d been researching properties for her, I’d made mention of the school district.

Neither one of them wanted to listen to me.

I distinctly remember Harlan telling me to mind my own business because I didn’t have kids.

“The good news is that means we have loads of resources to help them, and they’ll be fine by the end of the year,” Mrs. Edgeworth finished. “I’m sure of it. Their issues are not a matter of acumen so much as opportunity, and now they have more. Once we really target a program for them, we can introduce them to even more resources.”

My smile grew until the teacher looked a little hot around the color.

Mrs. Edgeworth was my new favorite person. She could spin anything to make us feel better, even if she finished up her statement with a wink instead of punctuation. She also had a lovely maternal quality, and it was clear her years of experience were an asset to the kids and nervous adults like us.

“Well, what can *we* do? Is there anything we should be doing at home to help them?” I asked.

Because whatever it took, I knew we’d make it happen.

“They’re doing their homework.” Mrs. Edgeworth clicked through her laptop again. “Their attendance is great as well. Both signs they’re settling in even though it’s a process. You could do extra reading with them, and I’ve got some math games I can suggest. I want you to hear me—you’re both doing a fine job. We don’t want to put extra pressure on them or you right now if it’s not necessary.”

Hot damn.

Fifteen long minutes later, after Mrs. Edgeworth ran through some specifics, the meeting ended.

And the moment we stepped out of the room, Zadie and I both let out long sighs. “That went better than expected,” she admitted. “Maybe we don’t suck after all. It’s kind of a weight off my shoulders.”

“I think most of the credit goes to you, Zadie. You’ve been amazing from start to finish.”

She fell into step beside me.

“You trying to get back in my pants again?” she whispered as we moved down the corridor. “Compliments aren’t going to work on me.”

“Nope. And I’m shocked you’d even think that in these hallowed halls.”

We stepped outside into the warm Tucson air. “It’s an elementary school, not Harvard.” She drew dark glasses out of her pocket and slid them over her eyes.

“Well, either way, I was just giving credit where it’s due.” I snagged her wrist in my hand and turned her to face me, even though I’d made it a point not to touch her. Until now. “Hey. I’m really grateful to you. I know the kids are too. You’ve sacrificed a lot—”

She glanced down at her sneakers and cleared her throat to cut me off before I said more. “Thanks.”

“I’m serious,” I continued.

“It’s both of us, though, Golden Boy. Neither one of us would be able to do this on our own. I know it’s hard and

weird living together, but I'm glad we're at least doing right by the kids." She looked uncomfortable even though I couldn't see her eyes.

"We should definitely go out to celebrate." I held fast when she tugged away from me. "Come on, we deserve it! And the kids are going to love it. I know just the place!"

Shit, the kids! They were still in the gym. My mouth rounded, and I bolted back into the school to grab them.

We headed for a fifties-style diner, complete with roller skating waitresses, milkshakes bigger than the kids' heads, and all kinds of cool memorabilia. I'd been meaning to take them here, and this was the perfect occasion. It was not too stuffy, and there were lots of distractions as well.

"What are we celebrating?" Noah asked suspiciously as we entered the diner.

We hadn't had a lot to celebrate lately. That was true.

"Your teacher says you're both doing awesome in school," I informed him. "I thought it would be cool if we all went out together."

His eyes went wide at the news before he narrowed them suspiciously. As though he expected the rug to be yanked out from under him. "Yeah?"

"Absolutely!" Zadie assured him. She ruffled his hair in a way she knew he hated. "A report like the one we got calls for burgers and milkshakes." She shifted her attention to me and sniffed. "Apparently."

"And pie?" Noah asked.

"Pie, for sure."

We spent a pleasant hour choosing songs from the jukebox, playing pinball, and eating our body weight in sugar and carbs. It was a great afternoon.

Noah and I were on one side of the booth, and Zadie and Diana on the other. Noah and I weren't dissimilar looking, really, but Zadie, with her dark hair and eyes, looked nothing

like Diana, who favored her mom's pale coloring. Still, to any outsider, we looked like a family.

Fuck, we *were* a family.

For some reason...it felt more real in the moment than it had for the past few weeks.

We might be an unconventional one but a family, nonetheless. It had me wondering why Zadie and I couldn't *try* to make things work between us, and not just—as she so eloquently put it earlier—because I wanted to get in her pants.

I absolutely did. I also thought we could build a great life together. We already had.

The kids ate enough sugar to make themselves sick and spent the rest of the afternoon playing in the pool. They wore themselves out, and when they finally went to bed, that was where I found Zadie. Dangling her feet in the shallows.

She'd changed out of her fancy clothes and into short shorts and a bandeau top with her black hair spilling down her back.

"Hey," I called out in greeting.

"Hey yourself. Today was a good day." She looked up at me from beneath her dark lashes.

"It was, Miss St. Clair. It certainly was." I took a seat beside her on the water's edge, my pinkie brushing hers until she jerked away. "I'll take the win."

"You do love to win," she replied dryly.

"That I do." I nodded. "So."

She shot me a sideways glance. "So?"

Might as well jump right in. I'd never settle until I got this off my chest. "What can I do to win you back?" She scoffed and rolled her eyes, but I forged on. "This all feels right to me. Except for the bit where you're at one end of the house, and I'm at the other."

"Nothing has changed, Golden Boy."

“Really? It feels like today, we learned we’re actually not screwing these kids up. Like we’re doing a good job, and we have been together some of the time while doing that.”

“*Colton.*” She sighed.

Damn me, my eyes fell right to her chest.

“We’re both right here—” I started.

She shook her head. “I can’t just be your fuck buddy because I’m convenient.” Her voice was harsh, and I saw the Zadie of old, the one who comes out fighting as a first defense. “It’s not fair to either one of us, and I refuse to be the one who warms your sheets because I’m right down the hall.

“*Wow.*” I tried to keep my own voice calm. Is that really how she saw this? How she saw me? That I’d use her because she was convenient?

Where the fuck had she gotten that idea?

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“I am serious. You never showed any interest before we moved in together. I know how to connect the dots,” she continued.

“I never thought of you that way, and I don’t like you because you’re convenient. In fact, the way I feel about you is damned inconvenient if you ask me.”

“What do you think, that we just keep sleeping together *forever*? Or until you get bored. Or maybe until the kids go to college?” She pushed herself up, water puddling at her feet and seeping into my shorts.

My gaze tracked her movements, but I didn’t get up. “I don’t know, Zadie. I don’t have all the answers. I’m still struggling to figure it out.”

“I have one answer, and it’s *no*. I can’t be that girl. The one you use until you get bored.” She shrugged one shoulder high. “It’s not in my DNA, so I’ll have to take a pass.”

“Who said anything about using anyone?” I reached for her hand, but she crossed her arms around her waist

protectively.

“I can’t risk it. I’m not a forever girl, and for you, I can’t be the for-now girl either. Sorry.”

She walked away and left me alone by the water. Damn me, but she took a large piece of me with her when she went inside.

Somehow, I’d screwed things up spectacularly.

I wasn’t promising forever right now. That didn’t mean I cared about her any less. And why didn’t she think she was a forever girl? As far as I could see, Zadie had everything a guy could want in a partner.

I wondered what had happened to her to make her think otherwise. Because I was no genius, but her reaction was far more about herself than it was about me.

ZADIE

This time, although it didn't make me proud of myself, I backed down from the challenge of behaving normally.

I gave Colton the cold shoulder.

And I'd done so for a month. Four straight weeks of pretending in front of the kids only to shut down entirely when we were alone. I wouldn't allow myself to remain in the same room as him and threw every ounce of my energy into my online business.

Okay, it was possible I had overreacted when he talked about us getting back together. Or starting up again. Or whatever the fuck it was we'd been doing before things exploded in our faces.

Would I admit it to him? I thought about it as I typed up a paragraph for an online profile.

Nope.

Big, *fat* nope.

At least, whatever our beef with each other, we were still doing a great job with the twins. They had no clue what bubbled beneath the surface for either one of their guardians.

Below, I floundered.

I missed the shit out of Cara. I missed my old life and my freedom. All right, not the job part of things because that had been a colossal trainwreck, but everything else.

I used to sleep in on Saturdays. Whatever time I wanted, the entire day was mine to waste. Maybe I'd nurse a hangover on Sunday if I chose to go out and party the night before.

I was used to *me* time, and walking around naked, and living alone.

Now there was no such thing as alone time. I certainly wasn't around to walk around the house in anything showing too much skin. House rules. Was it any wonder I found it stifling and hard to breathe sometimes?

Every day in this place, I had to paste a smile on my face and play well with others. I was struggling. Hard. I'd be lying if I said everyone in Colton's circle hadn't welcomed me with open arms, and the women of the Rattlesnakes were amazing.

The most amazing women I'd ever met, stronger because they knew they were a unit who counted on each other. They helped with carpools and play dates and reminders about school theme days, not to mention reaching out for coffees and including me in their girls' nights. Strangers still for me because if one of them wasn't able to make it, the others stepped up and rallied.

If, for instance, Eleanor had a late riding class to teach, then Joy was there to watch Ryder. Etc.

I still felt like an outsider.

Even when the ladies assured me it was all right, that they'd love to watch the twins, I clammed up.

It wasn't on them—that was all me. I was a loner with a couple of close friends, and I'd had them since grade school. I didn't trust people easily, and quite frankly, the openness and easy welcome from the ladies of the Snakes was unnerving. Edging toward unnatural.

I'd had a lifetime of not being anyone special, and I didn't trust the fact they all seemed to feel otherwise. I paused in my furious typing, staring at the screen until my eyes blurred, and I sighed.

These women actively built each other up.

Compliments.

Encouragement.

It wasn't all about the kids, either, but about their own empowerment. *You can't pour from an empty cup*, Celia assured me.

Remembering now, I realized I hadn't watered my plants in about a week, and some of them were looking a little thirsty. Fuck. Too many little things to think about.

I rushed to get water and rectify the situation.

And as for Colton himself...I knew he wasn't happy with me, but he didn't take it out on me or make any kind of digs. I didn't know any guys like him from my old life, and I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It would.

Wouldn't it?

I caught myself as water overflowed from the small copper can Colton had bought for me. Shit! Could I do nothing right? Where was my head?

On someone it shouldn't focus on.

The best defense was offense, I knew, and so that was what I'd kept up. Truth be told? I was exhausted by it and everything else going on in our lives. And now Colton wanted to discuss the kid's birthday.

As if Christmas hadn't been a strange enough ordeal for us. Acting like a family and ignoring each other at the same time while Noah ripped into his stocking stuffers and Diana shook every box under our fake tree.

As a truce, we'd arranged to meet at Prickles after his training session, and he was waiting for me with an iced caramel macchiato when I pushed through the door.

Damn the man. He even stood up as I approached. Although, he didn't pull out my chair. I might have died of embarrassment if he tried.

“I don’t know what you had most recently, but I know you like to mix it up, so I hope this suits you,” he said, pushing the drink toward me.

Damn him again for being considerate.

“It’ll be fine,” I said. And realizing the sharpness of those three words, I did my best to tamper it when I said, “Thank you.”

Colton settled in his seat with an unnerving focus settled right between my eyes. “Okay, so we need to discuss the birthday party,” he began.

Immediately into it, then. *Can’t say I blame him.* It already felt weird being face to face after so many weeks of freezing out.

I cupped my hands around my cup of coffee, focusing on the froth instead of Colton’s face. “Do we really think this is a good idea? It might upset them,” I said.

He arched a golden brow. “You think doing nothing won’t be depressing? I’d rather they have something to look forward to.”

“I don’t know.” I groaned while taking a sip of my coffee. It was good. Damn good. “It just feels like a lot, and you have a lot of away games between now and then. Are you really sure throwing this extravagant event is going to be in the scope of what we can handle?”

If I had to do it alone, with him gone, then I knew the answer.

I ran on fumes as it was; throwing in a party with all the details would add to my stress level at the moment.

“True,” Colton agreed. “And I’m really sorry about being away so often, Zadie. I’m going to make it up to you real soon. I promise.”

Promises were weak. Promises were easily made and easily broken. I knew it from personal experience.

“Well, I don’t know that I have the energy to organize a party.” It cost me little to admit it to him. “I know it’s the sort

of thing I will handle as a VA, but I'm still trying to get my business off the ground, and I'm basically a single mom right now."

I threw it in his face, not because I wanted to be petty but because it was the truth, a truth I hadn't even faced up to myself until I said it aloud.

I glanced up at Colton in time to see him blink, surprised. Bad idea. I turned my face away just as quickly.

"I'll do the party, then. I can organize lots of things remotely." He tapped his finger on the back of my hand so I'd make eye contact again. "I know I can't help with some things, but this I can do."

I refused to be a witch about this. Especially when the twins would probably be excited about a party with all their new friends. So, I agreed. "Okay. Okay, we can throw a party for them. But nothing insane."

The line had to be drawn somewhere, and knowing Colton, he'd throw his money at this opportunity. Go over the top and hire their favorite musician or something equally big.

"I'll think of something." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "This is going to be fun. You remember fun, right, Zadie? The thing people have sometimes when they're not too busy stressing out?"

"Ha ha." I glowered at him, but the truth was, I didn't really remember fun, and I hated that about myself.

I spent so much time with my heels dug in and the rest of the time in front of my computer. It left me no time for anything else. For any other thoughts.

"Hey—" Colton began.

Warning sirens went off in my head, and I cleared my throat, lurching out of the chair before he had a chance to bring up anything personal. "I've got to run," I lied. "You'll handle the preparations for them. Let me know if you need anything."

I was out of the place with coffee in hand seconds later, faster than the wind. Thinking maybe I'd gone a little overboard in my harsh description of him. He wanted to do nice things for his niece and nephew. It felt almost wrong to shut him out the way I'd been doing.

A week later, though, I went straight back to hating him. The plan for the party somehow included a seventy-person guest list, a bounce house, carnival games, food, and a DJ.

Talking to him about it didn't matter. He'd gotten an idea in his head and blown the whole thing right out of proportion. As I'd known he would, I thought bitterly.

Then he'd had the nerve to disappear. On the road once again.

I grit my teeth, something I'd been going a lot of these days, and went down to the kitchen for a glass of water. I'd planned to be asleep by the time he got back from his latest away trip.

Wouldn't it be so much better, I thought as I filled a glass, to wait for him?

So, when he came in after midnight, I sat at the kitchen table, trying not to remember the time he'd taken me on the counter. I'd be lying to myself if I thought I succeeded in blocking that memory.

My hands clenched into fists, a vein throbbing at my temple, and my jaw clenched. So mad, so damn mad, at Colton, I could almost go for a hate fuck right now for release.

I refused to go there.

Footsteps sounded a moment later, and Colton shuffled into the kitchen, exhausted and half surprised to see me waiting for him. He wore a tight-fitting T-shirt with a V-neck in Rattlesnake colors.

It made him look way too damn good.

No wonder women threw themselves at him.

I forced those thoughts aside and, in the vacuum, wondered once again if he'd been with any puck bunnies on

the road. The idea made me sick to my stomach, even though I had no right to stop him. Or to even ask. Still, picturing him thrusting into another woman made my blood boil.

One more thing to be angry about.

Colton dropped his duffel to the floor with a thud, his face clouding over with concern. “Zadie, is something wrong? Are the kids okay?” he asked.

Now I felt like a total cow because I’d made him worried. And because his first thought went right to the kids.

It was a birthday party, after all, not an actual disaster. It made me an asshole to refuse to back down. And yet...I’d tried to wait until he got back to have this conversation, and now he was finally here.

I forced my face into an easy mask and drummed my hands on the tabletop. “The only thing wrong around here is you planning a damn backyard carnival for Diana and Noah,” I finally said.

He relaxed, his shoulders sagging. “That’s no big thing, St. Clair. I thought they deserved something really special for their first birthday without their parents around.”

Which I got. And they did deserve to feel special because no doubt they’d both be seriously missing Harlan and Cara.

Too much. My brain spiraled. *It’s too much.*

“No big thing,” I repeated. “Are you crazy? It’s a very big thing. We said ‘nothing over the top.’” I added air quotes for emphasis. “And you’ve gone and done the opposite. Without consulting me about it. It made me feel like you cut me off at the knees.”

He collapsed on a bar stool, sinking until his golden hair blotted out his features. “Is there any chance you could wait and tear me a new one tomorrow? I’m kind of exhausted.”

“You’re exhausted?” *Stop.* I had to remind myself to take a breath when my emotions wanted to race around and leave me behind. “Well, welcome to the club, buddy.” I lurched to my feet, hands on hips, as good as breathing fire. “I’m exhausted

too. We're supposed to be sharing guardianship, and I get that you're on the road for your job, but I'm—" I was drowning.

"Okay, calm down, spitfire." Colton shook his head as if my anger amused him somehow.

Big mistake. The patronizing tone threw me right over the edge.

ZADIE

“Calm down? Did you tell me to calm down?” My voice came out in a low purr of pure warning.

“Look, I know you’re exhausted,” he continued. “I see all you’re doing, and I feel like I’ve told you that a lot. I see you. I just think we can have this conversation tomorrow when we’ve both had some sleep, and we’re feeling more rational.”

When did he expect me to get more sleep? When I had to rush the kids in a thousand different places and somehow try to get them both to sleep when they refused? When I shared my bed with both of them, and Noah kicked like a prize fighter?

“Are you saying I’m irrational? I just want to clarify before I go batshit and prove you right.”

I might be amping it up big time, but the frustration inside me bubbled to an unbearable level. It needed an outlet. An outlet now chuckling under his breath in tired amusement.

“I know the right answer is no,” he replied, pushing a hand through his hair. “Of course, you’re not irrational. But honestly, you’re kind of acting like it right now. Waiting up half the night to yell at me about a birthday party I’m organizing for the kids is a little nutso.” He shrugged. “My opinion.”

My vision filled with red. Invalidated. That’s what he’d done in one breath. He’d negated my feelings, and no matter how empathetic I wanted to be toward him, no matter how

badly I wanted to make this work, I couldn't see past this moment.

“Just because you're organizing the party doesn't mean it doesn't impact me. I'm here doing all the day-to-day stuff, and you get to charge in like the Golden Boy you've always been and do the fun stuff!” I exclaimed. “It leaves me being the caretaker and the bad cop all in one. How is that fair, Colton?”

I needed him to understand.

He raked a hand through his hair to push it away from his face. “It's not, Zadie. You're right. And I'm sorry; I probably have gotten carried away. The party, well, I've never had a birthday party, and I guess I just wanted to make this one the best ever as a result.”

I was about to reply, but I let the words sink in. I took a beat and really understood what he said. “You've never had a birthday party?” I asked. “I found it doubtful.”

“Not as a kid.” He let his head tip back on his neck and let loose a low groan. “I've done drinks and stuff with friends as an adult. My dad could never be bothered. He'd let me call Cara, as if that long-distance phone call was a gift in itself, and then done. It's possible I'm overcompensating. Okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?”

It wasn't an excuse so much as a justification, one I couldn't help but understand.

My heart broke for him, then and now. Their mom always made some effort and got Cara a cake, at least. She threw together a meager party with a couple of kids from class and some cheap activities. I remembered one year when we had a shaving cream fight outside and then got hosed down.

And Colton got nothing.

A phone call.

Plus, I knew admitting that to me wasn't easy—it cost him something as well.

“That sucks.” I sucked in a loud breath. “It really sucks. I'm sorry.”

“Not your fault, St. Clair. I can tone things down a little, but the invites are out, so it kind of has to happen now,” he said. “Anything else you want to discuss while we’re in the fire?”

I sighed everything out and took a seat. “Don’t tone it down. The kids are pumped. It’s just me that doesn’t like the idea of all the work and the people. I felt like it was all sprung on me at once, and I had no say in anything, just forced to go along for the ride.”

“Lucky for you, I can pay people to do the work for us...” he trailed off. “And I don’t think a big crowd is a bad thing at a party.”

It didn’t take me long for the fire to burn out in me and leave me empty inside. Nothing else to say to Colton, and so many things it would fill a library. He was right, of course. Then again, I liked to think I was right too.

By the time we both went up to our respective separate bedrooms, I’d accepted the madness and realized it might not be a bad thing.

The day of the party arrived and loomed large.

When I saw how happy the kids were, I hoped Colton had ordered some humble pie along with the millions of other things he’d arranged for the event. Because I needed to eat a huge slice.

If not the pie, then some crow would do.

The twins were excited beyond excited about everyone coming to celebrate them.

“It must mean they like us, right?” Diana asked me as I redid her French braids for the second time because she’d changed her mind from wanting pink ribbons entwined in them to rainbow.

More fun, she told me.

“Of course, that’s what it means, honey,” I assured her. “They all want to be here for you and your brother.”

Noah wore a Rattlesnakes jersey with his name and his uncle's number on it that Colton had made specially for him and which he may wear and sleep in forever. He bounced from foot to foot. "My new friends are all pumped," he told me. "They've been excited about it for weeks."

The invitations went out to the entire private school, and I wasn't sure if that was Mia's doing or Colton's.

Outside in the yard, there were more attractions than I'd ever seen in suburbia, from a food truck with carnival food, a snow cone machine, and candy floss, to a myriad of games for everyone to play.

The noise alone was enough to have the neighborhood watch called on us.

Colton must have taken care of that, too, because no one came to bother us.

I smiled when I pictured how the Rattlesnakes guys would probably all try to win those carnival games. *Competitive* was the word that sprang to mind. I oversaw the vendors and let them in through the back gate to the property.

Aside from that and helping the kids get dressed, Colton paid someone else to handle the rest of the details.

Whoever it was must have done a great job despite my anxiety.

The man himself stuck his head into the Jack and Jill bathroom that separated the twins' rooms. "Who is ready for a birthday party?" he called out in a booming voice.

The smile on his face was a thing of beauty, and my heart executed a little stutter.

Noah jumped up and down. "Me! I'm ready!"

Diana tugged at the braid I still held in my hand, hard enough for me to lose my grip on her.

Both of them continued to cheer.

I'd asked myself several times why I didn't give in and take a chance on him, or at the very least give in to my lust. I'd

held strong no matter how hard it felt at times. In my life, I'd been pretty shit about holding my boundaries, and I'd never felt particularly strong in any other way. For some reason...I needed to hold my ground here.

Call it pride and ego.

Call it a desperate need to protect myself.

Call it whatever you want. I gave no shits.

Not today, anyway.

The kids raced out the door around Colton, who remained in place staring at me. "You coming?" he asked. "I seem to recall you being the ultimate party girl back in college."

Party girl. Oh, sure. "You remember, huh?" I cast a long look at my reflection.

"I remember everything," he said darkly. "Now come on. Let's show Tucson how to throw a kid's party. Kids of all ages." He placed a large hand on the small of my back and guided me down the stairs.

I toned it down—slightly—and wore white shorts and a red-and-white midriff T-shirt with my hair in matching French braids to Diana. I looked about twenty-one with all the piercings, but I felt *ancient*.

All week, I'd worried about the party and how the kids would deal with their first birthday without their parents. It was going to be a trigger for them, right? It was sure as shit a trigger for me.

I missed Cara desperately bad, like a constant ache inside of me. I talked to her in my head, although I knew she couldn't hear me and I'd never get a response.

Not to mention the fact that I hadn't managed to snag any clients yet. Building a business without a track record proved harder than I initially thought. There were plenty of offers on online forums for me to do free trials, but the virtual assistant message boards I frequented warned that many times those were a scam; you did several hours of work for free, and the "client" moved on.

Of course, Colton didn't ask about the business at all, but I was well aware that everything we gave Noah and Diana was from his bank account and not mine.

He followed a step behind me down the stairs toward the din of the backyard.

I'd bought them each a couple of presents, fun things I knew they'd enjoy, but the bulk of their life—and mine—was bankrolled by Colton, and I hated it.

I hated it as much as I appreciated him and hated myself for feeling ungrateful.

My life may not have been perfect in Huston, *far from it*, but it had been mine. I paid my own rent and bought my own damn birthday presents. And now...who was I?

I was a kept woman, a built-in housekeeper and chef, and babysitter, and it started to grate. That was another reason I couldn't be with Colton. The power imbalance was too great between us.

I didn't begrudge him his income, I thought as we pushed out the sliding glass doors into the melee, and I forced a smile to my face.

He worked damn hard to get where he was, and he deserved every cent in his bank account.

I wanted to be the same.

I wanted to work hard, see the payoff, and be able to get the kids something sweet if I wanted. Something just because.

I wanted to be on equal footing.

Those thoughts were shoved into a dark box in my mind as I greeted guests and mingled. The parents from school were some I paid particular attention to, rather than the Snake family, who made up the giant mass of the rest of the crowd.

"Hey, thanks for inviting us!" Lulu sidled past me, holding a tray of snow cones.

To hand out? Or to eat herself? I chuckled at her.

“This is so fun. I might have to ask my dad for a party like this for graduation,” she said with a wink.

“Of course, honey. You’re always invited,” I replied. “And thanks for all your help since you arrived. You’ve been the best babysitter ever.”

She smiled her sweet smile at me, on the cusp of maturing past her young girl phase and into a young woman. No, I corrected. Worse. A full-fledged teenager. “No problem. You’re super cool,” she said with a smile. “And even though my own mother is a little challenging, I can’t imagine losing her or my dad. So, the twins...it’s good they have you. Both of you guys.”

She was right, obviously; everyone had really stepped up for the kids because no one liked to even imagine being in their shoes.

Mia and Willa tracked me down to congratulate me on the shindig a few minutes later.

Mia clucked her tongue. “This is the best kind of madness, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Lulu says this is what she wants for her next party.” As Lulu’s stepmom, I expected Willa’s glare and laughed at it. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“This is all Golden Boy. I take no credit,” I told them.

“Oh, come on,” Willa scoffed. “Please. Lie to me a little more. I see right through you.” She forged ahead when I did nothing but blink at her. “The kids aren’t just happy because of the party. It’s all the ways you’ve stepped up that have gotten them this far.”

I was about to protest when I felt Colton’s warm breath on my ear. Knew it was him from the familiar scent of his cologne and the warmth of his massive body. It was a shame it sent sexy shivers down my spine, but my body didn’t seem quite in step with my resolve to keep my distance.

“You should listen to the smart ladies, Zadie. Party planning is easy when you have someone to execute your

desires. Showing up every day? That's where the magic lies." He squeezed my shoulder.

Tears stung my eyes when he planted a platonic kiss on my temple.

"If it is a team, you are most definitely the most valuable player," he finished.

That kindness tipped me over the edge and had me racing inside, away from the fun and the prying eyes. I didn't feel valuable at all. I felt like a shit. I felt like a failure who pretended every day to have things together when reality was a different story.

My chest tightened, my breath refusing to come easily.

"Hey, what's up? Why did you run?"

I turned to see the audience had followed me inside. Blood rushed to my cheeks. Not only Colton, but Willa. Mia. Sloan, Eleanor, and Elizabeth. I had my own cheer section, and all I wanted was to be left alone?

"You can't run away, so tell me what's going on." Colton turned me to face him, one hand on my shoulder and another tipping my chin up to meet his eyes.

"I am not the most valuable *anything*," I admitted. "I feel like a mooch. Look at everything you're providing and what I am. A glorified babysitter. I'm basically a sponge."

I couldn't look around at the others. Not yet.

"Oh my god. How can you even think that?" Colton looked genuinely dismayed by my outburst, as did the women surrounding me. "Seriously, you're the glue holding this together. Do you think I'd be able to do this on my own? I can only go off on the road because I know you're holding down the fort."

"And yet I feel like I'm falling apart." I wiped a tear from my eyes and hoped I was about to turn into a total snot monster. I was an ugly crier, make no mistake. "My business isn't off the ground. I can't get any rhythm, and I don't even know who I am right now."

“You’re Zadie Fucking St Clair, badass bitch, and all-around amazing chick.” He pinched my chin, forcing my eyes up. “A business takes time.”

“Excuse me, but how do we, your good friends, not even know anything about this business?” Mia asked, sounding a little pissed at me.

When I glanced around Colton to look at Mia, her hands were on her hips, and her blue gaze spitting fire.

“She’s starting a virtual assistant business,” Colton proudly informed them. “You didn’t know? She’s been building it from the ground up since she moved in with me. Every day, nose to the grindstone.”

“No, we did not know. She should have said something.” Elizabeth huffed, the sound so put out I had to laugh. “Did you think we wouldn’t want to help you?”

“I need to do it by myself.” I sniffed. “I don’t want to be a user. You’re all good people who aren’t afraid to pitch in when needed but I...I didn’t want to need.”

“Telling people what’s going on in your life, people who care about you, isn’t using them,” Sloan said sweetly. She was the first to approach and the first to tuck my hair behind my ear in a sweet gesture. “And for the record, I could use some help from someone I trust to help me with the rink. Not that Joy isn’t amazing, but she’s got her own stuff, and I’ve got mine, and a VA would absolutely rock.”

“Me too,” Eleanor replied. “My farm needs help. I suck at admin stuff, which is why I put it off to the last minute, but people try to get close to me because of Tommy and my ex... so I haven’t hired anyone. I haven’t trusted anyone enough to hire them and let them into my world. The spiral is real.”

Eleanor got it.

Sloan got it.

And they made it sound so easy

I did sniff a little. “I can’t work for you guys just because you feel sorry for me,” I said, pushing away from Colton.

Distinctly uncomfortable with being circled by such unwavering, unquestionable support.

“No one feels sorry for you. I will be the first one to say I get it, but it’s true.” Elizabeth waved a hand. “We’re sorry you lost your best friend. We’re sorry the adjustment period has been a struggle. But we don’t feel sorry for *you*. We’re in awe of you if you have to know. You’re kind of amazing.” She shook her head. “Plus, you can wear cute little outfits like that and look outstanding.”

“Agreed.” Mia’s response was firm. “I’ve had years to get used to being a parent, and honestly, I feel like I’m screwing it up most days, and you’ve just been thrown in the deep end. And sure, living with Colton isn’t exactly a punishment, but he’s never here during the season, and when he is, he’s with the team. And I’m not trying to start a business in a new town.”

“You have to work those contacts, and frankly, I genuinely need help. You would be doing me a favor,” Eleanor added, her eyes bright behind her glasses.

Sloan gave my arm a squeeze. “Same.”

“*See?*” Colton smiled at me. “You’ve got this. Now, how about we go cut a cake shaped like a roller coaster with Noah and Diana?”

He pulled me into a big hug. I’d missed his hugs, so I stood there a little longer than necessary, inhaling his heady scent with his big arms wrapped around me.

When he released me, Mia pulled me in for a hug as well, and the girls gave me no choice but to be part of their giant, giggly cuddle puddle. “It’s going to be fine,” Mia insisted. Her voice dropped to a whisper, and she said, “And remind me why you two aren’t a thing again?”

“Mia!”

“Well, it’s a shame to let that go to waste.” She winked at me as we both watched Colton’s fine-ass head outside.

She wasn’t wrong, but I was already drowning, and I couldn’t let Colton be the thing that took me under.

“Let’s go eat some cake,” I said, cheeks burning. All of me burning.

And all of me was grateful enough to want to cry.

COLTON

Watching Zadie work herself to the point of exhaustion caused a physical ache inside of me. A knot formed in my chest, and every day I woke up to see her shuffle into the kitchen, to see the paleness in her cheeks and the harsh set of her mouth, the dark circles beneath my eyes...the knot tightened. It twisted in on itself so many times I knew I had no chance of unraveling it.

She was on the edge.

She was doing too much at once, and if I tried to stop her and talk about it, she'd only close up more. I'd seen it too many times to count now. The woman seemed almost determined to do the exact opposite of what was good for her, especially if the suggestion came from me.

The girls were as good as their word, and all of them, well, most of them, stepped up to help her with her business.

Zadie went from having no clients to trying to balance the needs of at least six of them that I knew about. Not to mention the daily shit that went along with keeping a house and the kid's schedule. She was constantly balls-deep in her computer, trying to get everything mapped out and planned for weeks at a time.

Scheduling posts.

Scheduling lessons.

I tried to step in and tell her she needed a break, and she basically told me to go crap in my hand because she needed to get ahead.

I'd been the same way when I started playing for the Snakes. Not only because I wanted to make a good impression but because I needed, on some level, to prove myself. To justify that I was good enough to do the job.

No more mister nice guy about it, then.

"Here." I slid the paper ticket I'd printed out across the table to her.

It took her way too long to blink her focus away from her mug of coffee, and she stared at me for a long moment, not registering that I'd said anything at all. Finally, she blinked enough to clear the fuzz from her eyes and her shoulders set.

"What is this?" she asked.

Even her voice sounded dull.

"You need a break," I insisted. I'd already taken care of all the details, hoping against hope that if I put the package together, she'd have no choice but to accept and wouldn't fight me along the way. "I bought you a ticket back to Houston."

Her gaze sharpened. "You what?"

I shrugged and continued with, "You're running on fumes, St. Clair. I bought the ticket, and I already booked a reservation in a five-star hotel. Go. See your old friends and just be Zadie again. Not a mom."

She glanced down at the papers I'd slid to her, flipping from one to another. I made sure all the details were there for her to pour over and see it wasn't a trick.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would you do this?"

I heard what she didn't say. *What's the catch?*

"Because you need a break. All of this happened so suddenly for both of us. It's not like people in our situation get a chance to say goodbye to their own life. But *everyone* needs a break now and then. Take it."

It would do her good, I hoped, to spend time with her friends back in Texas. To revisit the life she'd been forced to

leave behind and get a little bit of vigor back. Or piss and vinegar, rather.

I missed it.

The acerbic back and forth that was so...us. Our hallmark.

She scoured the papers before she blew out a breath so forceful it gusted her hair and pushed it away from her eyes. "Thank you."

It was as simple as that, and her acquiescence without a fight took me by surprise. Eventually, I found my voice again. "You're welcome."

"When do I leave?" she asked.

The dates were clearly printed on the tickets, but I wasn't about to point it out.

"Two days," I clarified. "All you need to do is pack a bag. I'll have driving services set up for you and everything."

"It's more than I deserve. Plus, taking off when I'm getting started with the girls' stuff...it's not smart."

"I think it's exactly what you deserve. And I'm happy to do it for you. Okay?"

It left me with an entire week to myself once she shuttled off to the airport in two days. A week of me and my niece and nephew, handling everything from wake-up times to after-school activities.

I had to take a break from my grueling schedule to get it done.

"What do you mean Mia picked you up?" I snapped into the phone with Diana on the other line. "I'm at school! You never told me."

She groaned the way only an eight-year-old could and made you feel like you were the fucked-up one. "I did tell you, Uncle Colton. I told you two days ago that I was going home with Mia to play with her kids. You weren't listening to me?"

I pressed my foot down on the gas and shot out of the line of cars of other parents waiting to grab their kids from school.

“I would remember if you told me,” I insisted.

“I even wrote it down for you and pinned the note on the fridge like you asked me to,” Diana whined.

Fuck this. This was so fucking hard.

That was day one.

Day two grew worse when Noah threw a tantrum and meltdown of epic proportions because he missed Zadie.

“I want her back!” he screeched.

The chandelier overhead spun as if he had some kind of supersonic powers, and I tried to avoid clutching my ears. My eardrums were about to explode.

“She’s coming back in a few days.”

“I want her back now!”

Nothing I said made a bit of difference to him, and I got it. I really did. I missed Zadie, too, but she’d only been gone for two days. It wasn’t like it was the end of the world, and we hadn’t seen her for months. Years.

Except to Noah, it was the end of the world. I wasn’t cutting the mustard. Or so he told me during the midst of his meltdown.

I hate you!

You never do anything for us, not like Zadie. You’re always gone!

What did a man say to those kinds of comments? And I knew it was as much about his mom and dad as anything. People left him, and he hated that some of them never came back.

I had to remove myself from the situation and let him cry himself out in the middle of the living room floor. No coffee, I thought, heading for the fridge. Beer time, even though it was ten in the morning on a Saturday.

Tiredness slumped my shoulders. Now I saw why Cara had us as co-guardians. This was too much for one person to

handle on their own. How did single parents do it?

I also saw, clear as day, that Zadie had done most of the work until this point.

She'd been the one who kept track of schedules and made sure the kids got where they needed to go. I'd been on the road most of the time or busy with my practice, skating five to six hours a day alone. Going out with the family to dinner and thinking I was honorary dad of the year.

I gulped down the beer until it blazed a burning trail straight to my empty gut, and I realized I'd forgotten to eat breakfast.

Too busy getting Diana set up with the homework she'd refused to do all week at school.

We were on day three.

I hadn't seen any of the guys, and pride kept me from calling them and asking for advice.

Darren would know what to do.

He'd raised Lulu on his own for years after the divorce and until Willa came into the picture. Now he had two little monsters running around, a toddler and a teenager.

It sounded like a nightmare.

The twins weren't even in their preteen years, and I'd had to clean up my fair share of near tragedies and catastrophes alike.

I'd left Zadie on her own to handle most of it.

Fuck me.

On day four, all hell broke loose.

"I can't find MR. MOO!" Diana screeched to the point where I swear the house shook on its foundations, and this time, I did cover my ears with my hands.

Sunday morning was no longer my time to sleep in, then enjoy a cup of solo java on my back porch and watch the day spring to life.

Today, Sunday broke and hurled me straight into a panic.

“Calm down,” I tried to tell Diana. “Where did you last leave Mr. Moo?”

“Nowhere! He was with me!” Tears streamed down her face.

“Then he has to be in the house.” I ran my hands through my hair and pulled until pain radiated along my scalp. The pain helped me focus, get centered. Took me a step away from the edge of panic myself.

That child could not lose one more thing. Not a single one, especially not a stuffed animal that was as important to her as any real animal would be.

“Where have you looked?” I asked her.

Together with Noah, we scoured the house from top to bottom and found no trace of the stuffed cow anywhere.

Shit, it had to be somewhere. I even checked the car, underneath the seats and the trunk, and found nothing.

I sat both kids down at the table with a bawling Diana at one end and a confused Noah at the other.

“Okay, we have to think. Where did we go yesterday? No one broke into the house and took Mr. Moo. We must have lost him somewhere on the road,” I supplied.

It helped her, I figured, that I didn’t put the blame solely on her. Although if that child held her stuffed animal out the window and lost him on the road somewhere, I might flip out myself. I remembered doing the same thing as a kid with a Snoopy and my dad stubbornly refusing to turn around to go get it.

The loss broke my heart.

Yesterday was a blur for me, though. I remember having to rush to the store to get food for dinner, but where else had we gone? Groceries, gas station...had there been anywhere else?

“Come on.” I palmed the car keys and ushered both the kids to the car. “We’re going to have to retrace our steps.”

“This wouldn’t have happened with Zadie here,” Diana insisted. Her voice sounded thick, and when I stared at her, a bubble of snot burst at the front of her nostril.

The sight would have made me sick once. Now it made me sad.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. Making sure both of them were buckled up safely before backing out of the driveway. “You’re right.”

So far, I’d helped out as much as I was able. Or as much as I was willing to do and somehow thought it was enough. But Diana was right because Zadie made this house a home. Even when she was icing me out and ignoring me like I was a ghost, it was still better with her here.

I spoke to the manager of the grocery store, and they hadn’t had anyone turn in a stuffed cow, which only made Diana cry harder. Noah clutched her hand, and the two of them were so solemn, so hurt, my own sense of failure shifted into something closer to anger.

By the time we made it to the gas station, I was seething mad, and I stalked through the front door hard enough to shatter the glass in my bare hands.

Luckily for me, a good meaning citizen had found Mr. Moo on the ground and turned it in to the man behind the counter, who also happened to be the owner.

He held up the slightly dirtied, stuffed cow like a gold medal at an Olympic event.

“Is this yours?” he asked Diana with a smile and a twinkle in his brown eyes.

She lurched across the counter to take Mr. Moo from him and squeezed the stuffed cow hard enough to pop off the plastic eyes.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” she said.

Never again, I told myself. I’d have to keep an eye out from now on and make sure we always had everything we’d come with before leaving...pretty much anywhere.

Monday, I had a game I couldn't miss, no matter who had been filling in for me during my absence. And Zadie would be back tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Tuesday loomed like a bright spot on the horizon, and I clung to the idea of her landing and throwing herself into my arms, refreshed and more herself than she'd been in too long.

Not as if it would happen.

She'd more likely shake my hand and thank me cordially for what I'd done.

She hadn't texted me at all during her trip.

I didn't expect her to, but I'd still sent her a few texts of my own, keeping her up to date on the kids, minus the incident with Mr. Moo. I didn't want her to know what a fucking idiot I was when it came to these guys. Or how badly I missed her.

Noah and Diana sat with Mia and Celia during the game. They wore team jerseys with my name and number on them, and I made sure to skate by and smile at them multiple times during our warm-up rounds.

After the game, the kids ran into the locker room to talk to all their new uncles, and I turned to follow them before Celia caught the elbow of my jersey.

"What's up?" I asked her.

She gripped me tighter, her gaze searching mine. "What's up with you?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Just tired. Were the kids well-behaved for you?"

"They were fine, but they couldn't stop talking about Zadie, and it got me wondering. What's going on with the two of you?"

Right then, she reminded me of my sister. Someone who saw everything, even the dirty parts. The parts I'd rather her not see, and I wasn't sure if it was a gift that Celia possessed—and Luca, no doubt, who saw things beyond mortal

comprehension sometimes—or if it was because Celia was a mom. It was her job to be observant.

“Nothing,” I told her.

I arched my back, pressing my hands to the base of my spine, blowing out a breath. “Nothing at all. We’re focusing on the kids.”

Celia laughed in my face, and if I hadn’t grown to love the woman, I might have been insulted. “I see right through you,” she told me between laughs. “You’re plastic wrap, Colton.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I’m serious. You’ve been moping ever since she left. It’s like she’s gone away and disappeared, and you have no idea what you’re doing with yourself,” she continued. Dots of color pinked her cheeks from laughing so hard. She went so far as to wipe the corner of her eyes.

“Tears? Seriously?” I growled out.

“I am being serious.” She swallowed hard and composed herself, running a hand over her face as if she had wiped the emotions clear. “You’ve been moping, and Will hasn’t wanted to say anything to you, but I’m not holding back.” She narrowed her eyes. “After all, you were real fast to warn me about hurting him. Weren’t you?”

“So, this is my comeuppance?” I asked.

“No, this is a concerned friend who won’t pretend to not see when you’re hurting. You need to get your head on straight.”

We were alone in the hallway, and our voices echoed dangerously around us. The security guards would hear if we weren’t careful. And we didn’t want another incident with the press catching wind.

I gathered Celia closer, bending our heads together and dropping my voice before saying, “There is nothing going on, and my head is on as straight as I can make it.”

“I don’t think it is. You realize Zadie isn’t the kind of person you mess with unless you’re serious.”

“Trust me, I know Zadie.”

“You think you know Zadie. You think you’ve uncovered every hidden road inside of her, but it’s not true. She’s sensitive.”

I barked out my own laugh. “If there is one word I wouldn’t use to describe St. Clair, it’s sensitive.”

“She is,” Celia insisted, her voice hard. “She hides it because she doesn’t know any other way to protect herself, but she has a really soft heart.”

“And a gooey center?” I made the joke to try to take a little bit of the tension off of me.

Celia wasn’t amused. “Don’t mess with her unless you’re serious,” she repeated. “But if it is serious, you need to let her know. It’s not just about the kids. It’s about you and her and what you want to have between you.”

She made too good a point for me to ignore. Especially when things felt heavy, and suddenly it was too hard to breathe. A knot tightened in my chest, a knot I hadn’t felt since the news came about the car accident.

“Now nod like a big boy and tell me you understand,” Celia bid.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. “I’m not your kid, Cel.”

“I know you’re not, but I need to make sure you’re not acting like one. It’s a lot for you. I get it. And feelings complicate things.”

“Which one of us are you worried about?”

She reached out and rubbed my arm. “It can be both,” she finished.

I thought about those words for the rest of the day and on the way to the airport to pick Zadie up myself. The kids were in school for the day, and I’d never been happier to sift through traffic and wait in line for someone to appear.

It was the first time she’d texted me back all week too. If only to say she’d landed and was on her way out.

Relationships were complicated at the best of times.

Incredibly complicated.

I knew they all had their ups and downs, but how did I explain to her how badly I'd missed her without scaring her away?

Celia seemed pretty convinced Zadie was more sensitive and vulnerable than she let on, and I had a really tough time seeing it for myself. No one was as strong-willed as Zadie. She had her head screwed on straight.

Unlike myself.

My breath caught, and a lump formed in the back of my throat when she strode through the glass doors and lifted her head to the sky. With her eyes shut and her hair tucked behind her ears, she looked like a goddess.

She looked...amazing.

Refreshed.

I pushed out of the car and waved to her to get her attention. She turned to me, and a smile lit her features, as breathtaking as a sunrise.

"Hey," I called out.

"Hey yourself," she replied, tugging her wheeled luggage behind her.

"Let me help you with that." I automatically reached to help her with her bag, and she slapped my hand away.

"I got it, Golden Boy," she replied.

Shit, I'd even missed her nickname for me. How big of a sucker was I?

"Did you have a nice flight?" I asked.

"I think it's crazy you paid for first-class tickets. It's such a short flight. You know I'd be happy in coach."

I wanted to shower her with good things. I wanted to make sure she was always taken care of and in the lap of luxury,

always. She'd hate hearing me say any of those things. I'd barely gotten her to move here in the first place.

"As long as it was a nice flight," I continued. "You had legroom? Nice neighbors?"

She chuckled. "Yes, all of that. Thank you. It was actually a really nice trip in general. I guess I needed to get away more than I realized."

We barely spoke to each other besides the perfunctory bullshit stuff. Until we pulled into the development and Zadie saw the house.

"I missed this," she said.

"The house?"

"I missed us. All of us."

And her smile thawed the ice that had been in my heart since she left.

ZADIE

It felt odd to push into the front doors of the coffee shop where Cara and I used to meet every week. Weird to be back here after so many months away. A different state, and yet the interior of the cafe looked exactly the same. A pair of chattering teenage girls had snagged the wingback chairs.

I kinda wished that I'd gotten there earlier. Maybe I'd have had the chance to grab the chairs myself.

This time, I arrived before Jess and placed my order, waiting for her. Sipping on my hazelnut macchiato, I stared at the door.

Surprised when she popped up in front of me, and I hadn't noticed.

"Boo!" Jess waved a hand in front of my face and chuckled. "Girl, you've been disassociating for the past five minutes." She placed her mug down on the table and grabbed me in a hug. Close enough for me to smell her strawberry shampoo.

To match, she'd done her makeup along the same lines, with strawberries drawn along her eyelids.

"You didn't even see me come in," she finished.

I hugged her right back. "I'm sorry," I murmured. "It's so good to see you."

We held each other for a long moment before she leaned back and smacked a kiss on my cheek. She released me with a loud pop, sitting in the chair opposite me.

“It’s good to see you too,” Jess replied. “Man, girl, look at you. You’re one sexy mama, you know that?”

“I’m here to take a break from being a mom, even a surrogate one.”

Jess pursed her lips and stared me down. Her makeup was on point, even better than her normal stuff, and I wondered at her latest clientele. She’d gotten her start behind the scenes on local plays but really gained popularity once she started putting her videos up on social media. “You look good, girl, but you look different.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’ve changed,” she replied.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Or how you can see anything.”

She narrowed her gaze at me, seeing right beneath the surface in that uncanny way of hers. “You look happy and healthy.”

“What I am is stressed and overworked,” I argued, pointing my cup for emphasis. “The kids are doing well enough, but they’re having a little trouble in school.”

I had gotten a little lax in texting my friend, I realized as I talked Jess through what had been happening lately. I needed to get better at keeping her posted with life. Except I was too busy trying to keep my head about me most days. Feeling as if I had to be one step ahead constantly.

It was exhausting.

“You realize,” she said once I’d finished and finally taken a breath, “that you haven’t spoken about Colton at all.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I almost choked on my next sip of macchiato. “Golden Boy? He’s fine. He’s in the middle of his season. I’ll be surprised if I even get to see him for Christmas.” I wasn’t comfortable talking about him, but I had to play it cool.

“So, nothing happened where he’s concerned?” Jess pressed.

I glared at her. “Nothing,” I replied sharply. “I’ve been a little busy trying to figure out some plans for the kids for Christmas. Especially since Noah isn’t telling us what he wants.”

“Oh, stop. You’re going to have to spill the beans because I have ways of forcing the truth out of you. You’ve changed, Zadie, and it has something to do with Colton. Like he’s brought the *you* out of you.”

My gaze sharpened. “What?”

She wasn’t going to let me intimidate her. That was something I’d always loved about Jess. She accepted the rough pieces of me, even when they made no sense to other people.

“I’ve always been me.”

“Yes, and now you’re more you. You say you’re tired and overworked, and I get it, but—” she broke off and waved her hand in front of my face slowly. “You’re lighter. You’re the lightest you’ve been since Cara died. You’re in control of yourself, Zadie, and I don’t need to be psychic to see it.”

“Just read my aura?”

She leaned back in her chair and cradled her mug in her hands now. “Something like that. Are you in love?”

I blew the wettest raspberry of my life. “Puh-lease. Cut that shit out right now, or I’m out of here,” I replied.

“Okay, fine.” She nodded knowingly, and we didn’t bring up Colton for the rest of the time we had together.

We spoke about her career and mine. We talked about the latest gossip on the town in Houston and everything I’d been doing in Tucson. We never brought Colton up again, but regardless, I couldn’t get her comment out of my head.

MY KNEE BOBBED in the car as if I had some kind of spasm in my muscles, and I wondered why the nerves ate at me.

Houston had been really nice. Great, even. I'd hung out with Jess and the rest of my acquaintances, getting my fill of them. I'd slept in for all five days, and I'd eaten room service because it was all included on the tab, I was assured.

Mr. Ramsey has ordered us to spare no expense. He's taking care of things.

So, the front desk told me when I asked.

Yeah, of course he was.

And as lovely as it was to go back to Texas, the home I thought I'd left behind no longer felt that way to me. My home was here, and I was fucking homesick for the kids.

For Golden Boy.

"You missed us, huh?" Colton asked.

His tone of voice had me smirking. "Let's not make a big deal about it. I'm happy to be home."

He pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. I reached out before he had a chance to get out of the car, my hand on his wrist to keep him here a little longer.

I'd realized a few things while I was gone. My time away not only gave me breathing room but it showed me I couldn't just slip into the role of full-time nanny and Colton's regular sex partner.

I deserved better than both.

"What's up?" he asked, his focus on my hand.

"I need to talk to you," I started.

"So, I should be worried."

"Not exactly."

"St. Clair?" His voice was a whip of sound. "What's going on?"

"I'm going to find an office," I told him. Better to start with business. Something easy that wasn't quite as close to home as the personal stuff. It didn't carry as much weight as

the emotions seething beneath the surface that had the ability to destroy either one of us so easily.

“It will help me work more regular hours. I’d also like to consider hiring someone to babysit the kids after school. When you’re gone, and I’m at the office.”

“That’s actually a great idea.”

“I thought about it a lot for the last five days. Having a schedule like that will be a better way to draw a line.”

“Between what?” he asked.

I didn’t answer that. “I’m going to need a safe space to work. Nothing big or fancy but a room I can rent somewhere.”

Colton understood without me having to say anything. “I’ll help find you an office. Maybe we can ask around to some of the ladies, see if they know of a good place.”

“Absolutely.” I opened my mouth to say more and found the words clogged at the back of my throat and formed into a hard rock I was unable to dislodge even with a cough. I wanted to tell him more.

To tell him all of it.

Except for some reason, it was impossible to do.

“Is there anything else?” he pressed.

There was. So much more. I shook my head, and he seemed to get it. For the time being, we’d go with this.

It was a stepping stone, at the very least, to the bigger, weightier, harder conversations we’d have to have sooner than later.

Colton helped me with my luggage, and the moment we were inside the house, I retreated to my room until the kids got home from school. They were even happier to see me than he’d been. I hadn’t missed the bright smile on his face when he saw me. The same smile my heart felt, which sounded corny in my head but too true.

Colton surprised me the next morning with news.

“I spoke to Elizabeth last night. Just a couple of texts back and forth.” He pushed a cup of coffee my way in my favorite mug.

I arched a brow at him. “Oh? What did Elizabeth have to say?”

“She actually has space in the office where she works. Nothing fancy, like you said. But it will be your own private room, and it comes with a desk already. You can make it your own and everything.”

Oh, shit. Was I going to cry again?

I’d done my fair share of that while I was gone too.

“Did she say what the cost would be?” I asked.

His eyes turned flinty. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Of course, I’m going to worry about it, Golden Boy. I’m the one who is going to pay for it,” I replied.

“No, you’re not. I told you I’d handle things while you got the business started.”

I took a long sip of coffee and let the bitter liquid trail fire into my stomach, warming me from the inside out. “This is a business expense, and it’s on me. You are handling the household expenses for which I am eternally grateful.”

It was my second demand of him, and I waited for the inevitable argument to fall. Clenching my jaw, squaring my shoulders, daring him to fight me.

Finally, Colton gave in with a shrug. “Fine. It’s whatever you want. Whatever will make you the happiest.”

I nodded along with his statement. “Yes. That’s what I’m working on. My own happiness. We’re no longer having sex with each other, either, so I don’t need to press the point.”

He went downright nuclear but kept his thoughts to himself, eventually growling out, “Yes, fine.”

I hated how it felt as if I was shooting myself in the foot on that one because if there was one thing I’d thought about long and hard, it was sex. With Colton, specifically. I wanted him

like I wanted to draw my next breath, even though it was bad news.

The area between my legs throbbed in his presence, and I buried my response in another gulp of coffee.

“Anything else I need to know? Any other wrenches you want to throw my way?” Colton asked.

“Several things, and I’m going to let you know when the time is right.”

“Nothing like keeping me in suspense, then.” He pushed away from the island and moved to kiss the top of my head on his way out to the arena. The way he had taken to doing.

I shifted away and held a hand between us.

“Nope. No kisses.”

“It’s completely platonic,” he countered. “It’s only a gesture of affection.”

“I need you to keep your hands to yourself at all times. Got it? No hugs. Certainly, no forehead kisses for anyone other than the kids.” It sounded harsher coming out than I’d heard it in my head, and yet I meant every word. “I mean it.”

“There’s no need to beat it into my head. I understand, and I won’t bother you anymore with my affection.”

I waited to see what the catch would be, or rather, how long it would take him to forget all about it and go right back to his usual habits.

Two weeks later, he had not, and I drove myself to the office in my beat-up car, wondering why I missed his touch so much, especially since it was everything I’d wanted and asked him for. Colton delivered.

He delivered for the next month and through Christmas, where he went way overboard for the kids. I’d asked for nothing, so instead, he donated to a charity the kids helped him choose.

The gesture touched me more than anything.

With our matching pajamas and the kids pushing for family photos, it felt like a holiday out of a cheesy movie.

December rolled into January, and I started making other crazy demands of Colton. Things like painting the living room blue because I thought it would brighten up the house. He'd not only allowed me to choose the exact shade, but he'd bought all the rollers and tape and drop clothes so we could do it as a family and involve the kids.

The more it went on with us cohabitating and barely speaking about anything personal, I knew. I was being kind of a jerk. I didn't want to be taken care of any longer, and the vacation he'd set up for me was the final nail in that coffin. Rather than talking to him about my fears, how I felt as if I was losing myself bit by bit, I'd gone the opposite direction.

I'd not only insisted on being independent.

I'd shoved it down Colton's throat by making him jump through hoops.

In the middle of January, with the kids back in school full time after their winter break, Colton found me wrapping a silk scarf around my neck, jogging to grab me before I walked out the door.

"You've been avoiding me," he said.

I shook my head. "No, I haven't. I've been right here."

"You might be here, and I might be here, but that doesn't mean things can go on the way they have been. It was an awkward Christmas and a worse New Year's Eve. Which means we need to have a sit-down. Tonight."

"I'm busy tonight."

He saw right through my flimsy dismissal. "You have no plans because it's Tuesday, and you always come home early and take a few laps in the pool on Tuesday before reading after dinner. Which means you are going to be home, and I'm changing the plans. We're going out tonight."

"We?"

“Yes, we. You know, the two people who live in this house and are basically strangers? One of us hard and unforgiving, and the other one...me?” He looked sad.

That’s probably why I caved, the ice I’d wrapped around my heart chipping the longer I gave myself permission to stare into his eyes. Those gorgeous eyes I lost myself inside, and I wanted nothing more than to throw myself into his arms and have him assure me we were going to be okay.

The more time I spent inside my head...the more ill at ease I felt in real life.

“Dinner?” I repeated.

“Yeah, dinner. We’re going out on a date tonight. Be ready by six, and I’ll take care of everything,” he said before striding past me out the door and leaving me to lock up behind him.

“You always do,” I muttered.

I thought about the money I’d started setting aside and wondered if I had enough to pay for my half of dinner, wherever he chose for us to go. I’d have to. I wouldn’t want him to pay for the both of us. Not when I’d been so insistent on doing it myself lately.

True to his word, Colton hustled me out the door on time and drove off into the sunset, otherwise known as downtown Tucson. I thought he’d go for the steak place, one of his favorites, but he took me to the complete opposite side of town to a place that specialized in Brazilian tapas.

The casual setting caught me off guard, and I halfway wondered if he’d chosen this place because the price wasn’t out in the stratosphere.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked as soon as we were settled at the table.

Colton set me with a look and ordered a bottle of red from our server. “You can’t just have a drink first? It always has to be this way?”

“What way?”

“Down to business before we even have a chance to smile at each other.”

I flashed him a grin. “I am smiling at you.” And the grin hid a world of discomfort and anxiety.

“You look like you’re preparing to have me slit your throat right now. Relax. This isn’t going to be anything hard or rough or something that will turn your insides. This is dinner.”

“You said date.”

“Yes, it’s a date where we have dinner, and we enjoy being two adults in each other’s company. Can you not just...I don’t know.” He paused while the server opened the wine for us, and Colton held out a glass for me to try.

I was an expert by no means, but the dry red was crisp and tart, and I loved it.

“Can you not just try to enjoy yourself? A little bit? You’ve been uptight since you got back, and that wasn’t what I’d hoped for you,” he continued.

“What did you hope, then?”

“You know what I hoped. I wanted you to have a chance to unwind and feel more like yourself, but it seems like since you got home...we’ve been less on the same page than we were before.”

“I know. And I’m sorry. I haven’t made things easy on any of us lately.”

“Why?” It was a simple question.

“So many reasons.”

“Hit me with one of them, then.”

We ordered a round of different dishes. Or rather, I sat back and let Colton choose the menu since he’d been here before and he knew what was good. He knew what I liked. I considered it a step toward smoothing things over.

Being a little less hyper-independent than I’d been these past few weeks.

“I wanted to prove that I could do it on my own. That I wasn’t beholden to you for anything. For everything.”

“You could have just told me so that we could find a happy middle ground. It doesn’t have to be one way or another. And it doesn’t have to be the chill that’s come between us.”

“I know, Golden Boy. I really do apologize. It’s been a little rough trying to find my center.”

“Which I do get. It’s hard for both of us.”

I hadn’t made it any easier, either.

“What can we do?” I asked.

“Well...I’ve been doing some thinking.”

I smiled at him over the rim of the glass. “Uh-oh. I’m scared.”

“I want to try and make this work.”

“Make what work?”

“Us,” he clarified. “A relationship. I want us to be together for real, just you and me. Girlfriend and boyfriend.”

I studied him for a long moment. “This isn’t some game you’re playing?” I had to know. “This isn’t just a passing fancy?”

“Trust me when I tell you it’s not,” he insisted. “I want to be with you, Zadie. Only you. If you’ll give me a day, or a week. If you’ll give me three months or three years or three decades. I want to give us a try.”

He looked earnest, sitting across from me. Earnest and wide-eyed and hopeful in a way I hadn’t seen him before. This was not the same man I’d always considered an arrogant asshole. Or maybe he was the same, and I just hadn’t realized what he was really like.

Now, I saw him.

And I liked what I saw. It scared me how much I liked it.

He wasn’t about to back down, either.

I held my hand up to stop him from saying anything else while my head spun. “I’m scared.” I wasn’t afraid to admit it to him. “I’m scared one or both of us is going to fuck this up. Not only will we suffer, but the kids too.”

“The kids know we love them. No matter what happens with us, the two of us are strong. We’ll be there for Diana and Noah. And whatever kids might come after them,” he finished.

“Ugh, gross! Don’t even talk like that.” But I smiled at him.

He knew, then; we both knew. I was all in.

COLTON

I wanted to lean across the table and kiss the stuffing out of Zadie. Hell, I wanted to clear the table and take her on top of it.

Instead, I reached over and took her hand, lacing our fingers together. I'd missed touching her, and for now, that would have to be enough.

We had time, plenty of time, and there was no need to rush. Plus, I wanted to savor every moment of this budding relationship. For a long moment, I simply breathed her in. I focused on her smile and the way her skin felt against my own.

We were on a date, my woman and me, and nothing was going to stop us from taking over the world. But I wanted to start small.

"How is your business going?" I asked instead of asking her anything too deep.

"I worked on my vacation. Just a little bit," she said to assure me she'd relaxed as well. "I think I'm finally starting to get into a groove."

And she proceeded to share the details I'd been longing to hear. How much she liked the office in Elizabeth's building because she was around other adults. How she was making friends with some of the people there. How she was now working for Sloan and Eleanor, and how Coffee was going to get her to do the social media account for his Schnapps distillery.

How Liam wanted her to handle his social media as well.

“That’s great! You’re really getting the hang of things. Maybe you could do mine too?” I asked, half joking and half deadly serious.

“Yeah, I’m not taking your money, Golden Boy.” She said it without bitterness for once. Just a happy, matter-of-fact way. “I can help you out with your stuff, though. I’d be happy too.”

I shook my head. “You’re not doing it for free.”

“You can make me dinner on the nights I schedule your posts, and we’ll call it a trade.” She shrugged. “I don’t mind helping you. You can give me tips in kisses. Liam, however, can pay in actual cash.”

She popped a croquette between her pretty pink lips, and I watched the movement in fascination. “We’ll see. It sounds like it’s going well,” I replied.

“It is, and the building manager wants me to do some work for him as well, so that’s good. It took me a while to process everything since it went from zero to one fucking hundred in about three days, but I like it. I like being busy. And I don’t want to only work for the Rattlesnakes and their families.” She shuddered, but her eyes were chipper and bright.

“It’s probably good to diversify. It’s what my manager always tells me anyway. That’s why I have sponsorships and do speaking engagements as well now and then, why I invest in real estate and shares so I can keep growing my income when I retire.”

I toyed with my glass. Retirement always felt like such a foreign concept.

“When will that be?” Zadie asked.

“Never, I hope. I always want to be involved with the sport.” I loved hockey. Until Zadie and the kids came to Tucson, it had literally been my entire life. I had a business degree, but I’d never used it for much more than reading contracts, and even then, I paid lawyers to do that as well. “But you never know when an injury might take a guy out, and realistically, most guys retire in their thirties, which isn’t too far away.”

“You are getting so old,” she mocked me. “You’re practically a crone.”

I flicked her hand, not hard enough to hurt but enough to get her attention. “I do believe we’re about the same age,” I joked.

“That can’t be true,” she said, blinking innocently. “I look so much better than you do.”

“Well, you do have all your own teeth, which is more than I can say.”

She flicked me back. “I probably could have been nicer to you when you’ve been injured lately. Rather than spraying you with hydrogen peroxide so you’ll feel the burn.”

“You can kiss my next boo-boo better next time.” I winked at her, imagining those pink lips wrapped around something other than an appetizer.

She winked back. “Lucky me! Don’t go and injure your groin just for that.”

I barked out a laugh and said, “You’re going to kiss me there anyway, St. Clair.” And, leaning in closer to make sure only she heard me, I said, “You’re going to like it too.”

“It could well happen after dinner if you play your cards right.”

Fuck, yes.

As eager as I was for her lips around my very hard cock, the one she was now running her bare foot over underneath the table, I resisted the urge to drag her from the restaurant. Instead, I ordered us another round of drinks and an exotic dessert to share.

We took our time enjoying the evening and each other, so much so that we were the last people in the restaurant. Anticipation built the longer we spoke as we walked out of the restaurant and into the dark, warm night.

“This was fun,” she said as I took her hand and led her back to the car. “I missed this. Us. I really did.”

“Me, too, Zadie. It’s been a long, lonely winter.” I didn’t want to make her feel bad, but we needed to be open and communicate better than we had been in the past.

“I’m sorry.” She paused and pulled me to a stop, making sure I understood. Really understood. “I’m not very good at trusting people. And honestly, most people I’ve given a chance to have let me down or left me. Which is the same sob story as a billion other people, seriously, but I took my trauma out on you, and it wasn’t right.”

“Yeah, I know.” I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. I hated that for her, and even though I understood it had made her act the way she was, we needed to break that cycle. “My track record hasn’t been too great either. We’re already better parents than the ones we had, and I think together, we can be better at relationships too. Not, however, if you freeze me out whenever something gets tough. And not when I throw money at a problem like it will somehow make everything go away.”

She nibbled her lip as she thought about it. “Maybe we need a code word...so when I start down that path, you can say it. Or I can say it. A warm word like jalapeño or habanero. Something spicy.”

Mmm, spicy.

It wasn’t a bad idea, and it was hers at least, but the idea had me smiling. “You don’t think it will piss you off? If I start yelling *jalapeño* when you’re already mad at me, it won’t be annoying?”

“Of course, it will be,” she replied with a husky laugh, “but let’s try it. Sometimes I don’t even realize I’m shutting down.”

“Okay.” I leaned in and finally kissed her soft lips. Loving the way she moaned for me. “Do we need a word like that in the bedroom if I go too far?”

“You think I’m going to make you *that* crazy, Golden Boy?” Her words rushed through me and hinted at dark pleasures to come.

“I don’t think it; I know it.” I pulled her close.

“Promises, promises,” she whispered before wrapping her arms around my neck and deepening the kiss until we were making out hot and heavy like a couple of teens.

We only stopped when some actual teens yelled out their car window for us to get a room. We laughed as we walked arm in arm back to the car for the ride home.

“Our safe word can be *tuna fish*. I really don’t like tuna. I had way too much of it as a kid. So, if I don’t like anything you’re doing to me, I’ll say *tuna fish*,” she informed me.

We pulled into the driveway at home, at our house, and I stared at the wreath on our front door.

“Ain’t nothing sexy about tuna fish,” I agreed.

Even though the evening had taken kind of a weird turn, I liked the playfulness of it. I liked the outcome even better. It made me feel hopeful that we’d be okay. If we kept talking and we kept laughing, then maybe Zadio and I would keep going together.

I had no idea what to expect from the future, only that I wanted it to include her and me as a unit. Whatever came from there would be magic.

For the night, however, she didn’t need the safe word.

I laid her down on my bed and slowly peeled off every piece of her clothing until she was naked. She didn’t need a safe word when I licked her to a climax and thrust my tongue inside her channel in time to feel her clench. She was screaming my name, then, not the fish’s.

And she didn’t need it when she straddled me reverse cowgirl style, and I made her come on my mouth again as she finally wrapped her lips around my cock, or when she slid down onto me and rode me until I was the one roaring her name.

I had plans for her, big plans, and maybe one day soon, she might need it. Zadio and I both had big sexual appetites, and my girl was up for most things.

And a week later, we were *really* hitting our stride in and out of the bedroom. Working as a team where we're both on the same page for most aspects made things a lot less tense.

Coming home was a joy again for both of us.

Even the kids noticed.

"You two seem like you're friends again," Noah told me as I drove him and Diana to school one morning. He wasn't playing with his toy trains anymore. I took note of that. "I like it when you're friends."

"Me, too, buddy. Me too." I sang along, off-key, with the radio for a few bars.

"Do you think you and Zadio will get married? If you do, can I be a flower girl?" Diana asked me.

I had no doubt my eyes bugged out of my head. Holy hell. She'd gone right there, hadn't she? Skipping all the in-between steps. "We're not really at the getting married stage, kiddo. And you'd have to ask Zadio about the flower girl thing. I'm pretty sure the bride chooses those. Is that something you'd want?" I was almost too scared to ask.

A few more bars went by in the song while Diana considered what she wanted to say. She kicked her legs back and forth, her gaze pensive for a kid her age. "Sure," she said at last. "I mean, we're already a family, but if you married Zadio, then she couldn't leave us. She'd have to be there."

I swallowed over a huge lump in my throat. Yeah, I kind of got the point she made, but as a child of divorce, I wasn't sure things were cut and dry.

"Zadio isn't going to leave you regardless of what happens between us. I want you two to understand. She's always going to be here for you. Just like me," I assured them, happy we were at the school so this conversation could be done. "I'll see you all at the game tonight."

We had a home game against Liam's old team, the Minnesota Raiders, and I looked forward to having my little family there to cheer me on. Selfishly, it was one of my favorite things to look up and see them there. For years I'd had

no one except Ginnie, and even then, she'd played head games. Not showing up sometimes just to piss me off, for control, or being rude to the other girlfriends.

Even when Zadie had been barely talking to me, she'd made a point of bonding with the players and their families and making sure the kids made it to games. As if it was important for all of us to support each other. Or at least to show the kids the support.

I was looking forward to seeing all three of them there in their Rattlesnakes jerseys tonight.

And sure enough, when I skated onto the ice with my teammates, there they were, the three of them smiling and waving at me. I choked up for the umpteenth time today.

"You look happy," Liam said, skating up beside me.

"How can you tell with all this gear on?" I wondered.

"Just can. I can see your eyes crinkling, and you stand differently when you're happy."

"When did you become so observant?" Luca asked beside him. "That's my job."

"Always have been," Liam replied with a laugh. "I know you think you've cornered the market on that, Captain, but you're wrong."

And then he skated away, leaving me wondering what else I didn't know about my teammates. Not that there was time to ponder at the moment. Now was the time to win.

It wasn't so long ago we lost whenever we played against the Raiders, but we were on a streak, and I hoped today wouldn't be the end of it.

I wanted to make my family and the Rattlesnakes proud.

This was everything I'd wanted from life. This moment, right here, this little nugget of joy and support.

The crowd cheered for us.

Maybe I shouldn't have let myself end up in the penalty box after an altercation with Alexi, the Grumpy Russian

because when I made eye contact with Zadie on my way there, she looked terrified.

For me.

Or she might just be worried she'd have to go home and make out with a guy with a black eye and one less tooth.

I didn't think I was injured, but even if I was...worth it.

Alexi always pushed my buttons, and he knew it.

I hated being there, unable to help my guys, and I wasn't sad when Alexi also found himself in the penalty box just as I was coming out. If you were stupid enough to try to mess with Luca's strategy, you should know he would see you coming and outthink you.

That was his strength as a captain. He could always see things a couple of steps ahead. More than a couple.

Luca wasn't surprised by our 3-2 win, but I was.

Surprised and elated as we skated away with a win.

We'd be playing them again during our visit up to Minnesota, and by the looks on the faces of some of the Raiders, I had a feeling we were in for a tough game when it happened.

But for now, I'd take the win.

We all felt the same way, laughing and cheering in the locker room as we peeled off our sweaty gear. We had our injuries patched and showered. I came away with a butterfly clip on my eyebrow and nothing more, which was basically another win for me.

I walked on air.

Cloud nine actually meant something.

"It's a day for celebrating," I declared as I buttoned my regular shirt.

"You're very cheerful, mate," Zach replied. "You must have patched it up with Zadie. Thank goodness because we

already have enough grumpiness with Bates.” He cast our friend a sideways look and rolled his eyes.

Bates grumbled but said nothing.

“Yeah, we patched it up, and I wasn’t *that* bad.” Comparing me to Bates was insulting!

My retort earned a roar of laughter from more than one of my friends.

“Sorry, Col, you’ve been worse than *that bad*,” Zach replied. “We all appreciate how you haven’t let your emotions impact your game, but you *have* been one grumpy fucker off the ice.”

“Really?” I thought I’d been stoic.

Kind of.

“Dude, we all understood. The kids, Zadie, it’s a lot to deal with. But thank fuck you’re smiling again.” Tommy slapped me on the shoulder encouragingly. “Now, go get your girl and make sure she has a smile on her face too. Go celebrate your win.”

It was solid advice, and I had a lot of ideas about how to do just that, seeing as the kids had another sleepover tonight. Popular kids.

They were adjusting beautifully.

I whistled under my breath as I stepped outside the locker room. Until some woman threw herself at me and planted her lips on mine.

And it wasn’t Zadie.

I smelled Ginnie before my brain put the pieces together, and I pushed her off. “What the *fuck*, Ginnie?” I whispered.

Tried to push her off, anyway, as gently as possible. I couldn’t actually yell at her or shove her aside because there were fans and kids and cameras waiting only a few paces away behind a wall of security guards.

“I came to congratulate you, silly.” Her arms were well and truly clamped around my neck, and I reached behind to

release them. As I did, my eyes locked with Zadie's through the crowd.

She'd rounded the corner just in time to see Ginnie in action. The only positive was the kids weren't with her, but that didn't mean I didn't see the look of pain in her eyes.

I put the pieces together too slowly this time around. My brain refused to see the real and exact ramifications of what had just happened.

"Come on," Ginnie cooed. "Don't you want to talk to me? Do you know how hard it was to get through security with my old badge? Coltie!"

My mind was in one place and one place only.

"Zadie!" I called, but she turned tail and ran. I lost her in the crowd, and Ginnie's claws continued to dig into my skin.

"Coltie! Forget about her. She's nobody."

"Fuck," I muttered as I unhooked my ex-girlfriend from me. I took her wrists in hand and made sure I had her full attention as I said, "Ginnie, you and I are *done*. We are fucking finished. We've been done for months, and I don't know what game you're playing, but it needs to stop now. I'm not going to entertain this a second longer."

"This is what we do," she insisted with another pretty pout. "We go, we break up, and we always come back to each other. We both have our flings and our phases, Coltie—"

"Not anymore. I'm with Zadie, and that's how it's going to stay. I love her," I insisted.

Ginnie fought against me a little harder when she realized I was serious. "No," she murmured. "You can't love her. She's not me."

"Exactly."

With that, I pushed myself through the crowd and headed in the direction I thought Zadie had gone. The security guards did their job and kept most of the onlookers and press out of my way, giving me the time I desperately needed to get to my girl.

I didn't find her in the corridor or the parking lot. Not that I had a clue where she parked. I glanced down at my phone to see if she'd sent me a long, ranting text, prepared to defend myself against the mistake I hadn't seen coming.

Nothing.

So without direction, I hopped in my truck and headed home, hoping she'd gone there. But not to pack and leave. Please, God, let her be there. Let her stay with me.

Damn, Ginnie. Damn her straight to whatever purgatory or hell she'd clawed her way out of. Things had been going so well with Zadie. Why did my ex have to come back now and screw things up? I thought about it on repeat as I drove.

It was a stupid question.

That's just what she did. She said it herself. We always did what we pleased and circled around each other.

Panic had me speeding.

Zadie's car wasn't in the driveway, and she wasn't at home when I got there. She also wasn't answering her phone. I'd tried calling on my way and gone straight to voicemail.

It was hard to explain yourself to someone who would not talk to you. And even though I'd done nothing wrong, I needed to apologize because somehow I hadn't done a good enough job of convincing Zadie I was all in with her.

If I had, she would have seen straight through Ginnie, and we wouldn't have a situation on our hands.

ZADIE

“Don’t let her get away with that! Are you kidding me right now? The woman is a beast. She is an absolute beast, and she needs to be paid back for everything.” Cassidy grabbed my arm and pulled me into an office off the corridor.

Which was apparently where they kept the team mascot, as his limp body was lying on a table there.

She closed the door behind her and stood in front, blocking my escape as though she knew I’d try to bolt. I clenched and unclenched my hands at my sides, my pulse racing and my head light.

I’d seen them together. And normally, my reaction would be to fly off the handle and blame Colton.

I didn’t want to blame Colton.

I wanted some air, some space to figure out my next move, which Cassidy was not allowing me to do.

“He kissed her,” I said it out loud to make sense of it. To get my thoughts straight when they buzzed around in my head and attacked each other.

“She kissed him,” Cassidy corrected. “It’s not the same thing. He was trying to stop her. I’m sure you caught that because I sure did.”

She stared at me with understanding in her deep eyes. The woman was gorgeous and curvy, and everything I’d never be with my boyish figure. Short and made up like a classic pin-up with her giant breasts and lush hips. I towered over her like a

beanpole, shaking my head hard enough to have my teeth clacking together.

“It doesn’t matter what I saw. She’s going to keep coming for him and coming for him. She’s going to be lurking around every corner.” I tugged the hair at the sides of my head and pulled, hoping a little pain would clear things up for me.

“Of course it matters. Let’s get rid of the rubbish once and for all.” Let’s do something she’ll never forget so that she thinks twice about bothering you guys.”

I latched onto her words then.

Do something Ginnie would never forget.

The only reason she was a problem was because I made her a problem. I ran at the first sign of trouble. Right? I wasn’t going to run this time.

“There. Now you look ready. Are you with me on this, Zadie?” Cassidy held out a hand for me to take. “You ready to take the bitch down and defend your man?”

I squared my shoulders. “If I’ve got to pee on him, then I will.”

Time to fight for my boyfriend and our family.

With everything we’d already survived, there was no way I’d let my anxiety over this ex-girlfriend of his take me down. Colton and I were a team. He’d proven himself to me. Time for me to prove myself to him too. To show him I wasn’t going to break again.

Tuna fish, my ass.

Ginnie was the one who needed a safe word.

Cassidy dragged me back toward the locker room where Ginnie stood talking to Corrinne, who was telling the other woman in no uncertain terms that it was time to go.

“Have some dignity, and please leave,” Corrine said through gritted teeth. “Don’t make me call security on you again, Ginnie. This isn’t a joke, and it isn’t a game.”

Her voice echoed down the hallway, just loud enough for me to hear.

“Again?” I asked Cassidy.

“Our girl’s got form,” she said with a twist of her head. “I can say that for her.”

Ginnie had her arms crossed over her chest, pushing her breasts up to her nose. Her hair was done in a cascading fall of soft waves, her eye makeup on point, and her lipstick only a little smeared from her kiss.

With my man.

“I want to see Colton,” she insisted. “I came here to see him, and I’m not going anywhere until we talk.”

Perfect.

“He’s not here, honey,” I said, stepping up to Corrinne’s side. “But I am.”

“*You.*” Ginnie narrowed her baby blues on me. “You’re a boyfriend stealer. A no good, skinny, ugly bitch who thinks that playing house is going to win his heart.” She rounded on me, and I found it amusing how she tried to stare down her nose at me when she was so much shorter.

Even with heels, she didn’t come close.

“I can’t take him if he wasn’t yours. He was a free agent. You had your chance, and you blew it. A man like that doesn’t like drama.” I flicked my fingers at her, shooing her in the opposite direction.

The irony that I *myself* had become a little dramatic of late wasn’t lost on me.

Oh well.

I’d deal with my own stuff later. Right after I shoveled the shit out of my way.

“Colton loves me. He told me a thousand times. Just because he thinks he’s gone for you now doesn’t make a difference. He always comes back.” She gave her foot a stamp worthy of a toddler.

I'd let *this woman* get in my head? Seriously?

I really had some confidence issues then because she wasn't anything for me to worry about. She was pathetic and holding on to someone who clearly didn't want her in return. Rather than cutting her down to size, I pitied her.

Although pounding her to dust did sound pretty nice too.

Petty but nice.

"If he did have feelings for you, he wouldn't have left you in the lurch, honey. Corrinne's right. Have some pride. Take yourself home and move on," I told Ginnie, loving the way her eyes narrowed further until all I saw were fake lashes and liner.

Poor thing.

Was she really so hard up for Colton, or did she like what he could give her? What his money and his reputation did for her socially?

Not that I wanted to judge anyone, but she really gave me those impressions once I saw her clearly.

"He'll never settle for someone like you." She looked me up and down as if I was dirt on her shoe.

I hated how a part of me agreed with her.

Colton could have anyone; he wasn't going to end up with me. There were other beautiful women like Ginnie, ones who weren't a little psycho, who wanted him, and I didn't stand a chance against them.

Or so my anxiety told me.

I refused to let it drive the car, though. Or steer the ship or whatever the metaphor was.

"Maybe not," I agreed. "Who knows? Either way, he's done with you. Now shoo—" I waved her away a second time.

I let out a loud breath when, much to my surprise, Ginnie actually turned and went. She did it with a huff and ultra loud stomping, but she turned the corner and disappeared from sight without me having to resort to punching her.

Which would have been really satisfying.

“Wow,” I added once I knew I was alone. With Corrinne, with Cassidy.

The three of us.

“Don’t let her get in your head,” Cassidy said as she gave me a side hug. “You’re amazing, and Colton knows it.”

“I’m not so sure.”

I hadn’t meant to say the thought aloud, but I did, and Cassidy heard me.

“I am. Come on. We need drinks. Liam is out with his old team, so girl’s night it is.” Cassidy glanced over at Corrinne. “Impromptu. Alert the text chain.”

Corrinne shook her head with a rueful smile. “Already on it.”

And Eleanor had my kids and Mia’s tonight and was keeping them for a sleepover and a morning trail ride, so I had no reason not to go out. Before Ginnie showed up, I had planned to do something fun with Colton to celebrate his win.

I’d even bought some very racy new lingerie for the occasion, but he wasn’t seeing that tonight. Or ever. I’d yet to decide how I wanted to react, and the anxious part of me wondered if all my trust in Colton was severely misplaced.

He couldn’t help Ginnie’s behavior. Not when she’d proven to be unhinged.

Yet, he should have well and truly dealt with her after the newspaper incident. In a way that left no room for her to still think there was hope. Not to mention I was embarrassed by catching them in a lip-lock and then having to throw her out.

My legs shook as I followed the girls out to the cars.

I might seem as though I got off on confrontation, but it wasn’t me. Inside, I was weak.

And despite what Cassidy said, Ginnie was in my head. A relationship was never going to work out with Colton. I was

living in a fantasy land, and Zadie St. Clair was nothing if not a realist.

Alcohol was my friend, and so were the Snakes women who rallied around me. It didn't really matter where we went as long as they had booze for me to numb my feelings, like an adult.

The fact that we landed in an adorable tiki bar and naturally ordered their fabulous cocktails felt like a bonus.

"This place is fantastic!" I said as I started on my third cocktail. They slid down real smooth.

"Steady on, Chica," Joy replied sweetly. "I know you're mad right now, but you don't want to wake up mad *and* with a raging hangover." She swatted at me, but it was a kind gesture. Not nearly forceful enough to get me to put the drink down.

Wise words I was probably going to ignore. "I was so hopeful at the game," I moaned. "So hopeful we were past all the crap, and I wouldn't still feel like I had something to prove."

The girls were clustered around me at a giant table since there were so many of us, and although most of us were broken off into smaller groups having individual conversations, Joy and Celia were still there. Listening to me moan and get a little tipsy.

"You seriously can't believe Colton is interested in Virginia, can you?" Celia asked me. "We all see how he looks at you. Not to mention he sent you on the trip."

"And has helped you set up the business," Elizabeth added as she slid her chair closer. "And how much he's missed you while you've been freezing him out."

"I know. I know all that. Logically." I tapped the side of my brain. "Try telling the pieces of me who refuse to listen. Who only want to go with what I see in front of my face."

"He doesn't see you as a babysitter or anything else," Celia assured me. "That man has jumped through every hoop. And that's what he does. Sure, he's a bit of a man-child, but he has had no examples and no family. Even his sister never really

gave him much time. He always went to her, helped her, gave her space, and he's done the same thing with you. It's kind of sweet, really."

I think about that a bit.

I always made excuses that Cara was busy with the kids and her life, but Colton lived in Houston for four years, and she never even celebrated their joint birthday with him. Not once.

She hadn't met him halfway, not even close. She expected him to make all the effort and gave him crumbs. And I had kind of done the same.

"He really is trying," Joy told me.

I overreacted to Virginia. I knew it. We all knew it.

"Does the insecurity ever go away? It's all so hard."

"That's what she said!" Joy joked, and we all fell about laughing. Those cocktails really were kicking in. "Seriously, though, of course it's hard. It's a relationship. And of course the insecurity will be there. It's what you do with it that counts. Do you let it drag you down? Or do you spit in the face of fear and love your man?"

Damn, I liked that.

I liked it a lot.

I pushed the rest of my drink away, loopy-headed, and starving for some reason.

"Look, everything worth fighting for is hard." Cassidy shot me a warrior's look. "None of our relationships started out easy, but you have to push through the hard stuff. If you walk away every time things get hard, you're going to end up alone and full of regret."

Yeah, she was right because I already felt that way.

I didn't plan on drinking any more, but I held my glass up for a toast anyway, waiting for the other girls to do the same.

"We fight," I crowed out.

They joined me, and the clinking of glasses echoed through the crowded bar.

I was going to fight for him, for us. For my place here because I'd finally found something to build from, a solid base. And a partner.

COLTON

Thank God for Celia, who called to tell me Zadie was fine and that she was with the girls at a downtown tiki bar. I was about to blow a fucking gasket if I didn't find out where they went.

After a process of elimination, I knew she had to be with the girls. Somewhere. But finding out where they'd gathered at the last minute proved to be tricky. Especially when I wanted to lose it, and my head throbbed against the butterfly bandage.

"I think you better get your ass down here and do some groveling. Just to make sure you get yourself set up for the next few years if you know what I'm saying." She doesn't bother with much preamble. "We're at Toucans."

"I didn't do anything wrong," I insisted.

"Do you want to be right, or do you want Zadie to feel like you've got her back?" Celia asked in a tone that said she had little patience for me right then.

"*Zadie.*" Clearly. She was the only choice.

I was already in the car with the phone clenched against my head and keys in the opposite hand.

"Right, exactly. So haul ass, my friend, before she drinks too much to get what you're saying. Get me?" She clicked off, and I ran my hands through my hair, dropping into the driver's seat.

Shit. I was not great at apologies, but I better come up with one on my drive.

At least I had time.

Toucans was known as a great place to pick up women because women went there for the outstanding cocktails and the laid-back, somewhat corny atmosphere.

No man better have his eyes or, worse, his hands on Zadio. Especially Zadio when she was mad at me and possibly drunk. They might take advantage of her.

She might try a little tit-for-tat, and the thought made me want to puke. Hopefully, she would see past the stunt Ginnie tried to pull to the truth of the matter and my feelings for her.

I pulled into a parking garage a little ways down from the tiki bar, and when I finally pushed through the front door, I saw the ladies. Almost all of the ladies, shit, at a large table at the end of the room with quite a few empty glasses on the table already.

I guess they were tying one on tonight, and I didn't have to take a wild leap to know the reason. Some of them were celebrating; some of them were commiserating.

One of them was probably plotting murder.

Corrinne caught my eye and yelled for everyone to hear, "*Incoming!*"

Jeez. They were probably already too far gone.

I wasn't some bomb about to explode. Yet all the women, as a singular wave, turned toward me. Except for Zadio, who looked down at the table with her dark hair hiding her face from view.

A few of them were angry, with narrowed eyes.

I didn't think they were mad at me so much as giving me a look that begged the question: *are you going to step up?*

"Ladies. Zadio," I said in greeting. I slid my hands into my pockets and waited a beat for someone to offer me a smile.

Nope.

Not my day, but I was about to make it my day.

“I don’t count as one of the ladies?” Zadie asked as I crouched down beside her, having to resort to reaching out to hold the table for support.

“Of course, you’re one of the ladies.” I dropped my voice. “You’re the most beautiful lady in the entire room. In the entire world.”

She shook her head. “I’m really not mentally prepared to see or talk to you right now. I’m still wrapping my head around the best way to act versus how I want to act, and the confusion isn’t good for either of us.”

Her words slurred a little, but thankfully she wasn’t dismissing me outright. Or spewing venom.

“Come on, Zadie, at least talk to me.” Then I remembered the safe word. And better safe than sorry because I didn’t want to have it out. I wanted to talk. We needed to talk, honestly. “Tuna fish.” She turned and met my eyes. “I’m using it, Zadie, so don’t freeze me out because you’re mad. Tuna fish.”

“Colton.” She sighed, the sound shifting into a guttural groan. “You know I can’t—”

“Tuna fish!”

“Okay.” Unless I missed my guess, a smile flickered across her face, there and gone in the blink of an eye. “Okay, Golden Boy. Talk to me.”

“I didn’t kiss Ginnie. She kissed me, and I pushed her off. I don’t want her. I want you.” I raced over my words to get them out. To tell her exactly what was in my heart.

“Maybe I’m not enough. Maybe you deserve someone who is better able to be your partner on an equal level. I mean, I took care of her, but it got me thinking.” Zadie toyed with the napkin on the table, her fingers only inches from mine.

And what did she mean, she took *care of her*?

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” I muttered. “You might be too much for *me*. Too smart. Too kind, too sexy. Too hard working. Too good with the kids. Maybe I’m not enough. Maybe I’m not worth the hassle.”

“Please,” Zadie said with a scoff. “You’re an NHL legend and sex god. You’re a great family man, and you really show up for the people you care about.”

A few heads turned at the mention of sex god.

“Sex god, huh?” I couldn’t help the smile on my lips now. We were going to be okay. I knew it.

But in classical Zadie fashion, she enjoyed toying with me a little bit. As long as I knew the game. As long as I felt I would win.

“I bet he kneels for you in other ways too.” I thought the voice belonged to Corrinne, but I was too focused on Zadie to be sure.

“Hey.” I flicked my fingers against hers until she looked at me. “You may not believe it, but I like you for you. I liked you when I was eighteen, and Cara was giving me shit. You were giving me shit. And I like you now. You’re this amazing person, living her dreams while taking care of her kids. I like that you’re smart and funny, and independent. I like that even though it makes your own life harder than it should be, you won’t use me for money or advantage. And I like that you don’t let me get away with crap.” Knowing I was getting through to her, I kept going. “You are not a convenience, and even though we’ve been thrown together, that’s not it. Spending time with you under the same roof has just allowed me to get to know all those sides to you. I want to try this with you, but as the ladies can tell you, those puck bunnies will keep coming, and that’s just out of my control,” I finished.

“He’s right. Those women are relentless,” Cassidy mumbled across the table.

“You just have to take a leap of faith, Zadie. Do you have faith in us?” I asked.

“Shit.” She nodded, and tears shone in her eyes. Happy tears, though. “I want to try too...I love our little family and the life we’re building. And you, Golden Boy.” She huffed out a laugh as if it made her angry to feel something for me. “I love you so damn much it makes me sick.”

I'd take it.

"I love you, too, St. Clair."

I pushed forward, caging her between my arms and the chair, and kissed her. Hoping she'd feel the reality of this moment.

How much faith I had in us.

When she practically melted, I cupped her face and ran my thumbs across her cheekbones before my lips met hers one last time. It was a sweet, gentle kiss, not designed to seduce but rather to show her how precious she was to me.

"Take our girl home, Colton," Joy instructed.

I hauled Zadie to her feet, tucking her under my arm. "You don't have to tell me twice. Ladies, have a wonderful night. We'll see you soon."

"Bye and thanks," Zadie called over her shoulder. And made me the happiest man alive when she wrapped her arm around my waist, linking us together.

"You're one of us, Zadie," Cassidy shouted back. "Don't you forget it!"

Cassidy could not have said anything that would mean more to Zadie. I felt my girl shaking the entire ride home, one where we did not speak to each other, but I kept our fingers entwined with mine.

Kissed her knuckles every so often.

Exhaustion pressed down on me, and I bet she was just as tired.

The moment I got the front door unlocked, I lifted Zadie into my arms and carried her up the stairs to my room. My room. She needed to see me, to let me in all the way.

I sat her down on the edge of the bed and peeled off her clothes as she watched. Tucking her beneath the sheets before moving behind her, cradling her, settling my heart. Big spoon to little spoon.

I pushed her hair back from her neck and kissed the spot. “Sweet dreams, sweetheart.”

“You don’t want to—” She glanced at me over her shoulder.

“I want to, but you’re tired and a little tipsy. We have all the time in the world. We can take things as slowly as you like.”

Zadie pushed her back toward me, no doubt aware of my erection saying hello against her back. “Really? You just want to snuggle?”

“I do,” I forced myself to reply.

I held her tight as she drifted off to sleep, and the rhythm of her breathing changed. It took a long time for sleep to take me. I nearly lost precious ground we’d gained in our relationship today, and I didn’t care how slowly we needed to go.

Maybe Zadie and I had different ideas of slow, though, because I woke up with her kissing her way down my torso beneath the sheet. While her lips around my cock would be a great start to the day, it was not how I wanted to begin this next phase of our relationship.

I hauled her up my body and put her pretty face where I could reach it.

“Whatcha doing?” I asked, pushing her hair back from her face and planting a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth.

“If you have to ask, then I’m doing it wrong.” She shot me a sleepy smile. “I thought I’d say good morning to your dick first.”

“Not wrong at all.” Her firm breasts pressed against my chest, and I slid my hands to her back, trailing along her spine. She shifted forward, and I leaned in to suckle a nipple. “I think I need to be the one doing the work right now. Let me pleasure you.”

She laughed. “How can I resist such an offer?”

I suckled her other breast and massaged her ass, spreading her cheeks a little and running a finger down the seam. Zadio let out a little gasp. I was not going there now, but we'd get there.

Instead, I flipped her over onto her back and licked my way down the valley between her breasts.

"Whatcha doing?" she asked, mimicking me.

"Whatever I like." I slid two fingers into her tight channel and pumped them. Zadio gasped. "Play with your tits. I've got business to take care of."

I shifted down to suck her clit as I continued to pump her full of my fingers. In no time at all, she came, her body shaking. I never gave her a chance to come down before kneeling between her legs. Lifting them so that they were on either side of my head, balanced on my shoulders. I kissed each ankle before entering her in one hard thrust and filling her to the hilt.

Her eyes popped wide as she screamed my name.

"Say it again," I demanded. Repeating the move until my skin slapped against hers.

"Colton."

"Who do you belong with?"

"Colton."

"Who do you love?"

"*Colton.*"

"Who owns this body?"

"Zadio St. Clair," she replied.

I laughed at that. "Great answer." I slammed into her again. "You're your own woman, but I hope you'll be my woman too."

"Colton. Yes." She wriggled beneath me, seeking release, and I upped my pace until she panted.

“Well then, St. Clair, show me how you come on my cock.” I reached down and ran my thumb across her swollen bud, and she did just that.

A few more thrusts, and I knew my orgasm was close. Hips jerking, off my rhythm, I came into her hard enough to see stars.

Nothing and I mean nothing, not even a Stanley Cup, beat this, I thought as I collapsed beside Zadie. She snuggled herself back up to my chest where she belonged—close to my heart because she owned it.

Completely.

“That was—”

I’m lost for words.

“A great way to start a day?” she asked, her voice heavy with arousal

“A great way to restart a relationship.”

Zadie smiled against my chest. “We’ve had a lot of stops and starts, I guess.”

“No more stops. I love you, and I don’t care how slowly we go as long as we go together.”

“I love you too. You scare the crap out of me, but I love you.”

I appreciated the honesty even as I melted. “Don’t worry. I’ll be brave enough for the both of us. As long as we’re together, I’ll be invincible.”

“Why’s that?” She lifted her head off my chest to meet my eyes.

“Because I’ll have the one magic thing I’ve always been missing.” She arched her brow. “A family, Zadie. I finally have a family.”

EPILOGUE

Okay, so I hadn't gone all out like he had for the kid's birthday. But I thought Colton would be surprised by the birthday bash I managed to string together. On my own, with only a little bit—all right, a lot—of help from the rest of the girls. I swear, they knew how to put together a party like no one else I knew.

And with Will's assistance, it was going to be a surprise. Golden Boy had no idea what to expect when he got home from practice today. All of his friends and his family were going to be there. Even his dad and stepmom had made the trip.

Diana bounced on the balls of her feet in the dress she'd insisted we get for her to mark this special occasion.

"When is he going to be here?" she asked.

Mr. Moo was clutched at her side.

"Any minute now." I checked my phone again, the real-time updates from Celia coming in hot and fast. She let me know every move Colton made on the drive home, she and Will following close enough to track the drive.

He was going to shit himself.

Not that I wanted him to shit himself, but I was pretty fucking proud of the spread I'd put together. All of his favorite foods and his favorite people. His teammates were already in the backyard with the BBQ going and drinks overflowing.

I even had an ice fountain in the shape of a hockey stick.

Hopefully, he wouldn't mind that I held the party at home. I might have spent a bit of money, but I still wasn't used to the millionaire lifestyle. I probably could have set something up where we jetted off as a family to St. Croix or Europe or some kind of fancy deal but hey. Hometown goodness in the town where we'd put down roots.

I kinda liked the sound of it. I kinda liked the whole thing we had going on together, actually, and this was my way of proving it to him.

I knew Golden Boy was pretty skeptical of my turnaround. If the past several months taught me anything, it was to take a risk. To try. It was far better to go for something I wanted and to fail than to regret not going for it at all.

He's here.

The phone buzzed in my hand with the text, and I hurried to stuff it away.

"Okay, everyone!" I called out. "It's time! Places."

Noah and Diana gathered on either side of me, poised and waiting for their uncle to arrive.

I heard him yelling out our names, and Noah told him we were in the backyard. Colton rounded the corner half a second later. We all erupted, our hands in the air and cheering his name.

"For you." I strode forward and stole a kiss from his lips. "It's all for you."

"What did you do?" he whispered against me, keeping the kiss to a minimum in front of the kids.

"I put together a party for you. Although we are going to have to do one thing later." I lifted on my tiptoes to nip his chin, and his eyes darkened.

"I'm scared," he admitted with a laugh before he hugged the kids.

"It's nothing. Just a story for the media. So we can really deter those puck bunnies. We have nothing to hide." It was my idea, and I'd spoken to Corinne about it at length. It wasn't

what I'd wanted for his birthday, but we figured we'd play up the angle. A new year, a new season coming up, and a new relationship to boot. It was time for us to come out of the shadows.

I was proud to call Colton mine. We'd scrambled and fought, and we'd clawed through tragedy to get where we were today, this situation that was ours and our unique beginnings to the relationship.

"You're crazy, Zadie," he said when he came in for another kiss. "And I sure do love you."

"Ditto, big guy. I love you back."

I pushed him toward his friends, and the crowd swallowed Colton.

These were all the people who loved him, adhered in one place to celebrate his life. Not his successes on the ice, but him. The man I'd gotten to know beneath the exterior he showed to the masses.

The man who had claimed my heart for his own and refused to give it back even when I deserved it.

Later, once the kids were asleep and the two of us were alone, I crept down the hallway into his room and shut the door behind us.

His arms found me in the darkness, and he drew me to his chest with a kiss that seared me down to my bones.

"What took you so long?"

I smiled against him.

"There were people to kick out and a mess to clean up," I told him.

I wanted him.

I needed him.

Why wasn't he naked already?

God, no one turned me on quite like Golden Boy, and I wasn't sure when the realization stopped bothering me.

“The only thing you need to worry about is how many times you’re going to come while I’m gagging you with my cock?” he whispered into my ear.

Oh, shit. His voice was a rough, low grumble I felt all the way down to my core, and the area between my legs throbbed.

He pushed me back on the bed, and I bounced before he covered my body with his own, reaching between us to squeeze my breast at the same time he stole a kiss.

“I thought about you all day,” he ground out.

His hips thrust forward to give me a preview of what was to come.

“Slow down,” I urged him with a chuckle. “You’re going to rush to the main event?”

“You coming all over me is going to be the best birthday present a man could ask for.”

He kissed me again, his tongue sliding between my lips, and I knew there was no slowing down. Not when my blood was a rush of fire in my veins and my core awakening.

There was only one way for us to end the night. The perfect way. I wanted him on top of me until we were both breathless, and I couldn’t remember my own name. Until there was nothing but pleasure, hot and keen and bright.

His cock twitched against me, and I broke the kiss only to try to drag my shirt off. Needing to feel his skin on mine as badly as I needed to breathe. We fit perfectly against each other. He was so large, intimidating, and muscled in all the right ways that I felt delicate.

Delicate and ready to be used.

I flung my shirt aside and squirmed against him, demanding attention.

Colton paused in his own furious undressing to groan and latch onto my bare breasts. One hand shifted down to catch my hips and keep me in place while he rolled a nipple between his teeth.

“You belong to me,” he growled.

For once, I didn't feel the need to argue with him because I knew what he meant. I knew where I wanted to be.

“You belong to *me*, Golden Boy,” I retorted. Arching my hips to bring my core closer to his before shifting in a circle. Driving him wild. Tonight, I planned to show him exactly how true those words were.

He made me crazy and only stopped long enough to toss his shirt to the side. His pants followed closely until the head of his bare cock nestled at my entrance, and I shifted to give us space.

Not yet.

No need to rush when I wanted to savor. I was restless, though. I looped my arms over his neck and kissed him until neither one of us remembered we needed air. I nipped at his lower lip and sucked into my mouth to soothe the sting.

It no longer pained me to admit how much I admired him. Not only his sexiness but his goodness too. I yielded to no one in this life. Except Colton.

Then I lost the ability to think at all when he scraped his teeth along the sensitive skin at the side of my neck. His hips kept me in place, his erection pressing against me and the sense of urgency growing. Hunger, pure and simple, lust and love all tangled up in each other and roaring through me. I wouldn't be able to satisfy either one with anyone else.

He slid his hand between my legs and fingered me, this thumb finding my clit while I traced a palm across the muscles of his chest.

He fingered me until the orgasm built inside of me, and another breath, that's all it would take before I went over the edge. Except he wouldn't bring me to completion. Colton shifted at the last minute so that his knees were on either side of my head with his cock dangling in front of my face.

Lifting my gaze to meet his, I took him in hand, stroking his shaft before fitting him between my lips and sucking him deep. His groan was a thing of beauty.

He tasted salty and delicious, and his fingers began to slide against my slit as he worked my mouth in tandem. My orgasm roared through me in the next moment, my core clenching around the finger he slipped inside.

I wasn't about to let him go so easily, though.

Colton tried to pull out of my mouth, and I wrapped a hand around the base of his shaft to keep him there. I smiled around him. Arched my hips. Increased the tempo of my hand in time with the suction in my mouth until his eyes crossed.

Literally.

“Fuck,” he managed to get out. “You better watch. I’m going to come.”

He hardened further in my mouth. Hard and aching and ready to claim me the way I wanted him to. His hips jerked out an erratic rhythm, and I finally released him.

I wanted him between my legs. To soothe the ache in my core.

Colton shifted down, and his hands framed my face as he stole a kiss. He positioned himself between my legs and nudged against my wetness to demand entry. My breath caught in my throat.

“The things you do to me,” he whispered.

My skin was on fire, and I could not stop touching him. The smoothness of his skin, the hard ridges of his scars, his ribcage, and the hard peaks of his nipples. I flicked my fingernail against one, and he twitched.

Stunning.

Blood rushed to my head, and I felt my heartbeat in my core.

“You have no idea.”

Except I did know. Shit, I knew. I reached between us to angle him closer, my fingers tickling beneath his head until the friction between us grew impossible to ignore. I knew what he

wanted and what he liked. I knew how to deliver all of those things and more because I loved him.

Damn it, but he loved me too. The knowledge was mutual.

No one touched me like Colton.

No one knew my secret spots the way he did.

He opened his eyes, and I stared at him, working him slow and steady with my magic fingers. A playful glint grew in his eyes.

“I’m at your mercy again, Zadie,” he continued as I stroked.

I had the control, his breath warm on my skin. I pressed him to me, and he grabbed my hair to yank my head back at the same time he thrust forward. He drew me to him and filled me to the core until he was buried full tilt. I saw stars.

HE PINNED ME DOWN, shifting his hands so that he had both of my wrists above my head as he continued with slow, deep thrusts. I felt him everywhere. My muscles tightened around him, and a second orgasm built. I’d shatter. I’d erupt. Colton would always be there to catch me.

“Your body feels so damn perfect around mine.” He stole a kiss from me. “So hot and silken. The noises you make. That good fucking pussy.”

I loved how much he wanted me. How badly he ached, the same way I did, and how he would never give up until he got what he wanted.

He surged forward to bury himself again, pistoning, hardening further. Colton was everywhere. His head dropped to mine, and my hips rose to meet his.

I wrapped my legs around his hips to draw him deeper yet.

I’d never get enough, I knew. With him...I’d always want more, and it would always be him.

How could it not be him?

He was my everything, him and those kids.

“Happy Birthday, baby,” I whispered.

I kissed him, and we lost control in each other. I tightened around him as his movements grew faster, jerky, and he erupted inside of me. Continuing to thrust until he'd expended himself.

We stayed together for a long time until my breath evened out, and Colton kissed the stuffing out of me, my legs keeping him in place and my pussy gripping him tight.

“Best. Birthday. Ever,” he ground out.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eden Dunn is a joint pen name for two USA Today Bestselling authors who have combined their skills to write hockey romances hot enough to melt the ice. Together they are an indomitable force who love a good happy ending, a dirty sex scene, and strong coffee.

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