



MELTING

Hearts

LOVING THE SOUND

KAT OBIE

MELTING HEARTS

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About the Author



Petey

While waiting in the airport lounge to board the plane back to Vancouver for the summer, Petey looked down to see a text from his best friend, Maddy.

Are you still coming home tonight and who's picking you up?

Of course, that's when he saw that his flight was boarding. He wouldn't have much time to chat with her, which was a disappointment. Maddy was the best thing about going home. Going back to Vancouver meant everyone calling him Master Aaron, Aaron, or Mr. Peterson. He hated the pretentiousness of it. He'd much rather be called by his hockey nickname 24/7 like he had over the past seven years. It didn't help that he had to do law school and work for the family business, all the while keeping up and even improving his hockey skills so he was ready to play for the Cleveland Sound at the beginning of his NHL career.

He grabbed his carry-on bag and headed down the aisle, texting. *I am and it's going to be Lucas. Still have that date tonight?*

There was a part of him that hated how she had a date with Jared tonight. He hadn't seen her in months, and he wanted to spend time with her in person. She made him feel so much better about his whole break up with Aubrey.

She'd never liked Aubrey anyway. Much like he'd never liked her boyfriend. His twin brother, Lucas, swore they only hated each other's partners due to jealousy, but Petey didn't think it was that. Jared was a creep, and it seemed like he was a wee bit possessive of Maddy. She deserved better. Then again, she was right about Aubrey being petty.

Maddy: *Yeah.*

He hated that answer, but he wasn't surprised by it. She had that date arranged before he bought the flight home last

week.

Petey: *Tomorrow then? I've been missing you.*

He wanted to see her again, but he wouldn't be able to see her answer for several hours since it was time to go into airplane mode and unplug.

He settled in and started to read his latest law book, hoping to get a head start on the readings before his classes really got going. He was used to trying to get ahead and reading on his tablet as much as possible when he traveled.

The flight was long but uneventful. Just the way he liked it. He wasn't in a rush to get to the manor or deal with work stuff, so he left his phone off for a few more minutes while he went through customs and collected all his things. As he walked out the arrivals gate with his baggage, he was surprised to see Maddy standing there in front of him.

It took all his self-control not to run up and hug her, but he knew all his chicklets had to be showing. He was so stoked to see her. The only thing that could bring down his mood was the fact that Maddy looked so upset.

"Mads, what's going on? Is everything okay?" He enveloped her in a hug. He didn't even care that he couldn't see his brother at that moment. He was worried about her.

She crashed her head into his torso and just stayed silent. He didn't feel any dampness on his shirt, so he was pretty sure she wasn't crying, but he was sure she was about to. He leaned his head on hers and started to rub her back. Since she hadn't said anything yet, he got worried but just whispered, "It'll be all right."

She jutted her chin into his chest and looked up at him. "Oh, I know. Breaking up with Jared sucked, but I'm so glad you're here."

If it wasn't such an asshole move since she was upset, he would have celebrated the break up. Jared had never been right for her, and now she could find someone who was.

"So, shall we get some ice cream and head back to the manor to watch movies in our cinema? Or do you want to

make your mom mad and order lots of Chinese food as we watch movies?”

Maddy’s mom had been their family chef since Petey was born and was amazing. The one cuisine she never did well was Chinese, and she hated when they ordered in from other places. They both loved Chinese food, and after a long flight, he could go for real food rather than ice cream. But since Maddy was having a rotten night, she would get the choice of cuisine.

“Chinese sounds wonderful. But we won’t make her mad; she has the night off.”

“Perfect. Since you’ve had a rough night, you get to pick the movies.”

Petey was so glad she was smiling again and looked so much happier than even a few minutes before. They headed to her car and started to order all the Chinese food the both of them could ever want.

Maddy

Going to pick up Petey was impulsive, but she needed a friend. Breaking up with Jared was never going to be easy, but she needed to do it.

Of course, Jared accused her of cheating on him and wanting him to be Petey. Petey was her best friend and confidant. Him coming home for the off-season and being single wasn't the reason why she wanted to break up with Jared. She'd needed to do it for weeks now and had just been putting it off. But when he'd grabbed her this evening, it was the last straw.

It wasn't hard to text Lucas and see if he minded her tagging along to pick up Petey at the airport, and he was all for her coming. Hell, he even told her to make sure Petey got home okay. Lucas was either trying to give them some alone time or wanted to hook up with a girl. With Lucas, it was hard to tell.

She was so damn grateful for Petey's suggested plan for the evening. It was the perfect way to forget about an ex-boyfriend.

They ordered so much food. There were dumplings of all types, egg rolls, General Tso's chicken, beef & vegetables, and a few other dishes that were delicious—she couldn't remember what they were called. It was all spread out in front of them on the coffee table, with chopsticks in a few of the boxes.

Best of all, she got to cuddle up next to Petey. His body was so large and comforting. There was nothing that could go wrong while he was around.

The two of them were snuggled up watching *The Notebook* when Lucas came to the doorway. "Don't you two look comfortable."

The thing was, she felt comfortable being wrapped up in Petey's arms and munching on dumplings. She could forget all the accusations from earlier in the evening and just move on. It

was good to hang out with her best friend again. To outside eyes, it probably looked super romantic, but Petey was just being an awesome friend.

Petey looked up and said, “Thanks for leaving me in good hands, bro. Although, you could have warned me that you weren’t going to show up at the airport.”

Lucas grabbed one of the food containers as he flopped onto a cinema chair that was off to the side of their joint seat. “I knew you would rather spend time with her.” He looked up at the screen. “Really, *The Notebook*? Couldn’t it at least be *Miracle or Goon*?”

She didn’t expect Lucas to like her choice in movies, although she was impressed that he knew what movie it was. “Shh. It’s my favorite. Although, we were talking about watching *Slapshot* next.”

“So, all night movie fest on Aaron’s first night back?”

It was strange to hear Lucas call Petey by his actual name. He’d been going by Petey for so long that his own brother should be calling him Petey by now.

Petey said, “Yup.”

Lucas took a break from shoveling lo mien into his mouth with the chopsticks. “If I didn’t know better, I would think you two are a couple.”

Petey shot his brother a look. “Let’s not talk couples tonight. Maddy and Jared broke up.”

Lucas nearly choked on his noodles. He hopped off the chair and said, “Oh shit. I’m going to leave you two, then.” But he looked at the table and grabbed another pint of food as he stalked out of the room.

She looked up at Petey and asked, “What was that about?”

“No clue. But it’s Lucas.”

Petey was right. His brother could be as flighty as Petey was steadfast and responsible. But it was nice to be able to watch movies with Petey alone. All the stress from the early evening was completely gone.



Petey

As he packed things up from the summer to head back to Lager's house in Cleveland, one of the butlers came up and said, "Master Aaron, Miss Williams is downstairs in the parlor for you."

He nodded in acknowledgement as he set down clothing in his bag. "I'll finish this later, Charles."

He hoped he would let him pack stuff up, but he knew there was a 50/50 chance the butler would do it while Petey saw Maddy.

He plodded downstairs to see Maddy looking at the bookshelf. He stared at her from a distance for a moment before making himself known. He loved the way she would get on her tiptoes to peer up and the way her long hair flowed down her back. He smirked before he cleared his throat.

She turned and said, "Hey, Petey," as she came up to give him a hug around his broad shoulders.

One of the many reasons he loved Maddy: she was one of the few people in Vancouver that actually called him by his hockey nickname. He was probably closer to her than he was with his own twin brother, Lucas. "What are you doing here? I thought you were studying for the bar exam?"

"You're leaving soon. I wanted to spend tonight with you. Besides, you could always study for the bar with me."

She was right. He should probably be studying for the bar exam too. That was if he gave a damn about the law and if it wasn't years away. He didn't even care if he practiced law, unlike Maddy. He was only working on the degree to make his father happy and get his blessing to play hockey. That way he could take over the Peterson Consolidated Group when it was time.

He shrugged and said, "I'll worry about it closer to the time I have to take it. So, what book caught your eye?"

She clasped her hands behind her back before she looked down at her feet. It was an old song and dance. He wished she would just skip the shy bit. “It’s not that big of a deal. I can always read it later.”

He went over to where she was looking and tried to see if he could figure it out so he could just hand over the books. But there were at least six new ones on there and three related to law. “Okay, I need a clue.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s fine, Petey. I don’t need that book.”

“But you want to read it.” He laughed. Then he reassured her, “And you have my permission to read it. Just bring it back the next time you visit, or have your mom bring it back. No one will even know it was gone.”

“True. They never noticed before.”

He almost pushed her forward towards the bookshelf so she could grab the book. Instead, he teased her. “Yet you still worry, and you still have my permission. So go on, borrow it.”

Finally, Maddy grabbed two books with a wide smile on her face. “Thanks, Petey.” For a moment, he swore she was going to lean up and give him a peck, but she just gave him a side hug. “I swear I didn’t come here to borrow a book.”

“I know. So what did you have planned?” Maddy would never come there for a book. She wasn’t a transactional person. She was damn caring. If he didn’t know better, she was interested in him, but she seemed so oblivious to his flirtation.

“Come with me.”

Maddy

She was happy to spend time with Petey before he went back to Cleveland. He'd seemed so quiet this whole summer. It wasn't him. He was dealing with something but wasn't sharing much, other than that his ex was a money hungry bitch who didn't understand him. He should have known she wasn't the one when she refused to call him Petey.

Carrying the two books that he'd loaned her, they walked out to her car. As they were getting in, he asked, "Hey, any chance we could do something simple tonight?"

She started to back up the car. "Of course. What's the deal?"

"Just not in the mood to get hounded." That seemed to be his excuse for not wanting to go out all summer. But most of the time, she wanted to stay in or do something that was pretty cheap too, so it worked out perfectly. She just wished he would share what he was actually avoiding.

Petey gave few clues that he was a billionaire. Hell, he liked to live with one of his teammates in Cleveland. She could see the appeal of hanging out with his roommate and his son. He kept such a low profile. He donated to charities anonymously and never seemed to get himself in the news other than for being amazing at hockey. He was basically the exact opposite of his twin brother, the playboy heir.

"Well, it just so happens I was thinking about dinner at my place and maybe throwing on a movie in the background. I just wanted to hang out one more time before you leave me behind again."

A grin broke out on his face. She'd picked the right plans for tonight. Of course, he threw out, "Hey, just let me know. It would be fun to have my best friend with me."

"I can't just up and leave." She protested his invitations to visit every single time he offered to fly her across the country. She didn't want to take advantage of his generosity.

“Why not? What’s keeping you here?”

“Family, school, and well, everything. We aren’t all like you and willing to give up everything for a dream.” She chided herself. That was harsh. She knew it wasn’t easy for him either. He’d nearly lost his inheritance when he decided to follow his NHL dreams.

His hand covered hers that was resting on the arm rest, completely engulfing it. He gave it a gentle squeeze. “Maddy, a trip to Cleveland wouldn’t mean giving up those things. I’m talking about a visit, not to come and live there. You have to admit, it would be so much fun to have you hang out with my hockey family.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

Once they were at her apartment, he carried the two books inside for her. He always tried to be gallant but in a very quiet way. He would carry a book or bag inside and open doors. If he could get away with it, he would pull a chair out for a woman.

Once they got inside, she asked, “So, what’s with getting hounded? Is it more than the normal stuff?”

He folded his arms and looked down. He thought for a moment and then walked over to her fridge. He would always drink when he was nervous. But if he was grabbing a beer, he was more likely to tell her what he’d been avoiding all summer long.

She asked, “Get me one too?”

He nodded and grabbed two bottles. He opened them and handed her one. He took a swig and said, “A legacy from my ex.”

That was too vague. “So, things are worse now?” He nodded but was still deadly quiet. She had to probe a bit if she wanted to know more. “Are your worlds colliding?”

He nodded again. That would do it. He loved how he was fairly anonymous playing hockey. Peterson was a common name, and few people cared enough to know which twin made it into the NHL. Around here, everyone knew that he was

Aaron Peterson, the heir to the Peterson fortune. It was also slightly problematic that his father had bought the Vancouver Legacy, the local NHL club, the moment his sons showed some promise in the sport. While both Petey and Lucas loved hockey, only one of them made it to the NHL.

“She told the bunny boards that I was loaded and I was looking for some fun.”

That was the most preposterous thing ever. He wasn't easy. He was a good man. The guy willing to help out anyone. Like making sure she could read each and every book that she ever wanted from the family library. He'd dated Aubrey for years, never even looked at another girl, even when they were on a break. He was loyal.

If it was his twin, it might have made sense. They were like night and day, despite looking identical. Lucas was such a playboy. New girl every night to a different event. Nor did he ever care if people knew he was loaded.

“So, the girls want you more than ever.”

He nodded. He took another swig of his beer. “To make it worse, she also gave out my cell number earlier today. So tomorrow I have to get a new phone number.”

She shook her head in disapproval, but that explained why she couldn't reach him earlier today. She'd showed up at his house in the hopes that he was available. “That's insane.”

“Completely. I just don't get her end game on this one.”

She couldn't blame Petey for being confused. It seemed a bit of a contradictory move if the girl wanted to get back together with him. However, Petey had made it clear that this time it was really over. She shrugged. “I hate to say it. Make your life miserable.”



Petey

Pulling up to Lager's house felt weird. It had been his home for the last three years. Last year was a bit rough because Lager and his soon to be ex-wife were fighting so much. He was curious what he would be walking into this year.

Almost as soon as he entered the house, he heard the pitter patter of little feet. Klaus was running toward him, and it didn't take long for the six-year-old kid to launch himself into Petey's legs for a hug. "Uncle Petey!"

Leaning down, Petey messed up Klaus' flop of hair. "Hey kid. How's it going?"

"I've missed you." He looked up, still holding on tight to Petey's legs. He had a big hockey smile going on.

"I see. Looks like you lost a few teeth over the summer. Did the tooth fairy leave you money?" The kid nodded. He still wasn't letting go. While Petey could probably walk with him attached, he couldn't do it safely or move his suitcase inside. "Come on, Klaus. You gotta let go of my legs."

"Alright." Klaus let go of his legs and then grabbed the handle to his suitcase. "I'll help you."

Petey smiled. "Okay. I'll go get the other bag from the car, then."

There was no way the six-year-old would get the suitcase up the stairs, but Petey wasn't going to discourage him from trying. Petey would rather have the kid try and give it his all.

He was impressed that Klaus was about halfway up the staircase when he returned, but he was banging the suitcase pretty good against the stairs. Thankfully, it was just loaded with clothes and nothing breakable. "Looks like you're getting pretty strong."

"Yup," Klaus said knowingly as he continued to pull the suitcase up the stairs.

“So, where’s your dad?”

“Out back shooting.”

“And you aren’t playing with him?” Petey was a little shocked. The kid loved hockey as much as him and his dad, if not more.

“Nope. I was waiting for you to arrive. Besides, he’s hitting the puck really hard. I think he wanted some alone time.”

The kid was a lot more aware of things than people gave him credit for. His awareness was probably why he knew how to charm the pants off people. Since Klaus was so happy, he figured it was better not to ask if he had any clue as to why Lager might need some alone time.

Once they made it up the stairs and to his room, he opened up a suitcase to put his stuff into the drawers. Klaus climbed up onto his bed and stood up next to the open suitcase. “Uncle Petey, you aren’t going to leave me, right?”

He paused. That was a weird question for Klaus to ask when he knew that they had to be on the road so much, although he had a feeling that it was more about him finding his own place. He had to answer carefully. “You know me and your papa have road trips coming up.”

The kid looked up to the sky and whined, “That’s not what I meant, Uncle Petey.” This was why Petey loved messing with the little guy: he took things so seriously. He lifted his eyebrow to try and urge the kid on. “I mean, will you move out again?”

Guilt hit him. He’d moved out briefly during the fallout between Lager and Bridge after her affair was uncovered. It had been too much fighting, and he needed to focus on hockey and law school. So, it was better to crash with Corey while the dust settled.

He grabbed the kid into a hug as he sat down on the bed. “Well, I was thinking about getting my own place this season.”

“Nooooo.”

That was why he'd wanted to hold the kid—he didn't think he would take it well. He didn't want the little guy to break down in tears. He wrapped his arms around his neck.

He rubbed Klaus' back and said, "I wasn't going to look for a house right away, but it's time for me to get my own place. I can't keep living with you guys my whole career."

There were a couple of tears threatening to fall out of the kid's eyes. "Why not?"

"Well, grownups buy houses and live on their own. It's about time that I do that." It was a lame excuse, but that was the main substance of it. He wasn't going to tell the kid it was so he could have sex if he found the right woman. Seeing the look on the kid's face, he said, "Well, how about we make a deal?"

That gave the kid hope, and his eyes brightened. Best of all, no tears were actually shed. Klaus was totally just like his dad. Lager was hard pressed to turn down a deal or a bet.

"I'll hold off on finding a house until next season, but know that I will be moving out one day." Klaus' shoulders sank. That hadn't worked as well as Petey would have hoped. "And I'll still hang out with you even if I get my own place."

"Good. I need you to defend against me."

Petey nodded. He wouldn't have expected anything else. At least Klaus was super easy to defend against, so they could play hockey to the kid's content.

Klaus pulled on his t-shirt sleeve. "Can you make me some food?"

Petey gulped. Being home in Vancouver meant no cooking whatsoever. There was always Maddy's mom, the family chef. She wouldn't let him try to make a meal. As a result, he was a terrible cook. With Bridge moving out, dinner time wasn't all that great at the Lager household anymore. At least he knew how to make one thing. "How does grilled cheese sound?"

"Okay." Klaus immediately hopped off the bed.

As the two of them headed downstairs, Klaus looked up and said, “Uncle Petey, you and Papa need to take lessons from Uncle Scotty.”

He laughed. The kid was right. The team captain, Scotty Wheiland, was practically a chef with his skills. “You’re right. Although, you probably should learn with us. That way you can do it too when you’re older.”

“Okay.”

He made the two grilled cheese sandwiches.

It was nice to be back home. The only thing that Petey missed was being able to hang out with Maddy. He hoped she would actually come out to visit this year.

Maddy

Buried in a mountain of textbooks, she needed a break. She'd been studying for the past few hours, and the cases were all starting to blend together.

Standing up, she cracked her back and looked at the clock. Petey should have made it to Cleveland hours ago. She had hoped he would call to let her know he got in okay. Not wanting to wait any longer, she grabbed her cell phone and gave him a call. After two rings, she heard Petey's voice say, "Hey, you."

"Hey. How was the flight?"

"Oh, it was fine." She heard some rustling, and then there was less background noise. He must have been hanging out with either Lager or his kid. "How's the studying going?"

"Eh," she said. She wasn't holding the information like she normally did.

"Eh? What happened to the brilliant Maddy who nails all her tests?"

She needed that praise. That reminder that she was smart. "She's stressed out."

"Aw ... I wish I could give you a hug to make it better." His voice had so much warmth in it. But that was the glory that was Petey: he could make you feel better just by talking.

"Hey, this call was about you," she teased. It was true; she'd called to see how he was settling in.

He chuckled lightly and said, "Oh, really?"

"Yeah. How's it being back at Lager's place? Are you going to be looking for your own place?" She knew he was leaning towards getting a place this season after living at the same place for so long. He wanted to be on his own and have more privacy.

"I screwed up."

That made no sense. How do you screw up when you've just arrived at a house? He hadn't had time to look at a place yet, so she knew there was no way he could have even bought the first thing he saw. Which was the only reason she could think of for him to say that he screwed up. "How did you screw up?"

"You remember Klaus?"

"The little kid, right?"

"Yeah." There was a smile in his voice as he confirmed the identity. "Well, he was super excited and he was all concerned that I might move out too quickly ..."

He hated disappointing people, especially kids. He was a defender and protector in nearly everything he did. She swore it was why he bulked up—so he could defend better.

Realizing why he'd mentioned Klaus, she jumped in. "You told the little guy that you would stay around for a while."

"Yup." That was sweet. She could practically see the whole scene play out. But she wasn't expecting to hear, "No matter what, I need you to teach me how to cook next summer."

"I'm not a great cook. Not like my mom." It seemed so ridiculous that he wanted her to be the teacher. She was capable in the kitchen, but she wasn't anywhere as skilled as her mom. She was their family chef, for crying out loud, with strict standards.

Her mom was the reason she'd gotten to be friends with the Peterson twins. Her mom couldn't always afford daycare, but the family was okay with Mom bringing Maddy to the manor as long as she cooked her lavish meals. Petey and Lucas' nanny was basically her nanny. Then their dad paid for her to attend the same school as the twins.

"You are so much easier to handle than your mom. She slapped my hands so many times with her spoon this summer that I'm afraid to step foot in the kitchen, let alone take lessons from her."

She laughed. “You need to ask her to teach you. Not just go into the kitchen and try to burn the place down.” Petey had apparently tried to make himself lunch and set off the fire alarm, which drew her mother’s ire. She’d stayed to protect the kitchen. Maddy didn’t know who to believe since her mom liked to exaggerate things, but she’d made it sound like an epic fail at making salmon and she would always keep Petey away from the stove.

“I didn’t try to burn it down. There were no flames,” he said with a laugh. “It was only burnt and I set off the fire alarm. But please, Maddy, I’d rather do it with you.”

She laughed. “Alright, but what is the sudden interest in learning how to cook? Can’t you get food at the rink with the team chefs?”

“I can get lunch there, but dinner is with Lager and Klaus. I can’t keep making grilled cheese anytime the little guy is hungry.”

There was the protector again. He wanted to learn how to cook for someone else rather than himself. She didn’t realize he was capable of even the grilled cheese. “Hey, I lived on those my first year of uni.”

“I guess that it’s not that bad, then. You looked pretty good after that year.”

She wanted to point out that she’d gained several pounds that year and she was still trying to lose the excess weight. At least he thought she was looking good.

Wait, was he flirting with her? Now that he was free of his ex, he seemed to be making comments that made her feel like they weren’t completely in the friend zone.

She’d be lying if she said she didn’t hope that the two of them might get together one day. But he was on the other side of the country. Although, he didn’t mind doing long distance if it meant they could follow their dreams. He’d started dating his ex back in school, and she’d stayed in British Columbia while he was in Hamilton and then Cleveland.

But Maddy had never voiced her love for him. He was such a good man and one who was unafraid of letting her know his weaknesses.



Petey

He was beat from the game. The Jets were speedy as all hell, and his legs were spent from trying to keep them out of the net. He couldn't wait to get back to the hotel and crash. But first, he needed food.

As they were getting on the team bus, Corey asked, "Usual plan for tonight?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Petey said with a laugh.

Thank fuck Corey had found Jenna. He wasn't trying to drag Petey out to the bars anymore like he used to. Now, they could go to the closest restaurant and crash out. No more worries about missing curfew.

Corey looked behind him to where Scotty and Lager were sitting. "You guys want to join us for dinner at the hotel?"

"Sure," Scotty said with a shrug.

Lager pointed at Scotty and said, "Don't forget you owe me a drink after that last goal."

Petey shook his head. Those two always seemed to have a side bet going on with their goals. It seemed like they thrived on betting against each other. Lager loved making anyone else pay. If Petey wasn't on defense, he might try to get in on the action more often. His job was to stop goals, not start them.

It was a quick bus ride back to the hotel. He didn't pay attention to the chatter, although he was careful not to rest his eyes. Lager loved to prank the guys who liked to sleep.

At the hotel, the four of them headed to the restaurant bar and chose a table in the back.

Scotty asked, "Everyone's usual drink?"

They nodded. It was his way of paying for all their drinks, not just Lager's. As they sat down, he grabbed a menu to see what he could get to eat.

The three of them hadn't even finished sitting down before two girls who looked slutty in their miniskirts and cut up, tied up Sound t-shirts came to the table. In a syrupy voice, one of the girls said, "Good game, Petey. Can I buy you a drink?"

It was embarrassing. He was trying to hang out with his friends and relax after a hard game. He forced out a small, "No, thanks."

Lager opened up his arms. "What am I—chopped liver? I had the game-winning goal."

One of the girls moved over to Lager and practically hung off his shoulders. Petey was glad that took one of them off his hands, but the other girl was clearly still hoping he would invite her to sit down. He didn't need or want a puck bunny tonight. Well, he didn't want them most nights.

Scotty came to the table with four beers and passed them out. By some miracle of God, the two girls left as soon as Scotty arrived. Then again, he was known for being truly in love with his wife. Corey and Jenna had gotten engaged not too long ago too. So the guys were unlikely to be looking for a hookup.

Once the girls were out of earshot, Corey said, "What the hell is going on? Seems like the bunnies are coming on stronger than ever."

Petey took a swig. "Thanks to my ex, word on the street is that I'm looking for a new partner." He didn't want to talk about the fact that they thought he was loaded too. The three of them knew about his wealth, but they understood why he tried to minimize things. The only time they gave him shit about his wealth was when they played Vancouver, since his family had a stake in the team.

"You?" Corey nearly choked on his beer. He pointed his drink towards Lager. "That asshole has given more bunnies attention in the past couple months than you have in two years."

It was true. Lager had indulged in the occasional puck bunny since he separated with Bridge, while Petey hadn't.

Casual sex wasn't his thing. "I never said it was good gossip, but yeah, they think I want a new girlfriend."

"But the only girl you ever pay attention to since your breakup is Maddy," Lager said. Petey looked down and pretended that Lager didn't just insinuate that he had a thing for his best friend.

The bad thing was that Lager was right. It just wasn't going to go anywhere. He couldn't even get Maddy to come out to Cleveland for a short visit as friends. There was no way she would go for a relationship.

"You like her," Scotty said in a friendly tone.

If Petey didn't give the guys something, they would be pestering him all night about whether he liked her or not. "It's not like that. She's my best friend."

"A best friend that you can't wait to talk to every night," Corey chimed in.

Petey shot his roommate a look. He needed to shut up. They had been drafted the same year and had been close since they started. Plus, being roommates on the road both with the Sound and in Hamilton helped. Corey could be your best friend, but there were times he didn't know when to leave things alone.

Corey continued, "Just stating facts. We all know I can't wait to talk to Jenna every night, and Scotty is the same with Al."

"Well, he can't wait to talk to Klaus," Petey said, pointing at Lager. It wasn't the best example, but it worked. It showed that you could get excited to talk to someone you didn't want to bang.

A waitress came up to them and asked for their orders. They all got similar things. That wasn't too unusual. There weren't a lot of options on the hotel restaurant menu and even fewer healthy options.

Scotty smiled as he said, "You know, it's okay if you do like her."

The captain was probably right. It wasn't that big a deal. Maddy and him had been friends for a long time. The bad thing was that she didn't see him like that. Thankfully, Lager shifted the conversation to Scotty's new baby and raising kids in general.

Maddy

She was studying a few cases for her privacy law class when her mobile rang. Looking down, she smiled. It was Petey calling. She should have expected it to be him, but it still made her happy. “Hey, you. How was your game?”

She thought there had been a game tonight, but in all honesty, she had no clue if he’d played, since she’d been so caught up with school work. She was just so used to him calling her after games when he was on the road that she didn’t feel like a fool for asking.

“Oh, it was fine.” She heard him collapsing onto the bed.

“Long night?” Again, it was a dumb question, but at the same time, he seldom sounded exhausted after a game. To hear the wariness in his voice was unusual, and it worried her.

“Yeah. And I need to do some reading for my law class.”

“Did you finally tote a book with you on the road?” She’d been teasing him for years that he needed to bring his books with him on the road, but he flat out refused.

He chuckled. “No. Just my laptop.”

“Why are you so afraid of your teammates finding out that you are still taking classes?” She loved the fact that he was still taking them.

“I’m not.” He would never admit to the fact that he wanted to keep his classes a secret. At most, he would say he didn’t want to lug the law books on the road. Even though he was right—they were a pain to carry around—he was so discreet about school that most of the guys had no clue he was taking classes.

She heard in the background, “You need to get him to loosen up, Maddy. He’s become such a bore lately.”

That had to be Corey. She just giggled. If anything, she was the one encouraging Petey to be a “bore” by staying in

and studying. Before she could say anything, Petey said, “Oh, don’t listen to him. If anything, be proud.”

She giggled. “I am. It’s good that you’re studying.”

“I need to get all your notes,” he said.

That wasn’t unusual. They had been sharing notes for years, even though they were in different schools. But this term, she didn’t think it was going to work out so easily. “Didn’t you tell me that you are taking American law classes to help get a handle on that if you wanted to do the bar there too?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not taking that, silly.” It was rare that he would make a mistake like that, but she liked that she could relax with him.

His voice softened as he said, “Oh, right. My bad. But I can give you my notes when I’m done.”

She loved it when he relaxed. It was a good sign. “Still avoiding the puck bunnies like crazy?”

“Yeah. There were two that tried to get something going after the game.”

She hated hearing about how girls were throwing themselves at him, especially knowing how uncomfortable it made him. “Yuck. You would think they would stop it since you always made it clear that you aren’t interested in them.”

“You and me both. But I wanted to hear your voice.”

When he said things like that, it made her feel good. It was that glimmer of hope that their friendship could go deeper.

While it was probably ill-advised to tease him about the subtle flirting, he had opened the door. She asked, “Missing me?”

“Yeah.” That was unexpected in some ways. It seemed that lately, he would open the door or make subtle comments that things could change into something more. But more often than not, as quickly as he would flirt, he would then pretend it was nothing.

“Aww. I’ve missed you too. Your season is too long.” She’d gotten so spoiled over the summer. Since neither of them were trying to appease a crazy significant other, they’d hung out a lot. It was a little boring without him. She would never want him to give up his profession, but she did miss him while he was away.

The two of them talked a little bit longer, but then he said he wanted to focus on his studies before he turned in. At least he’d made her night and she felt like she could focus on work again.



Petey

Petey was playing with Klaus while his dad made a snack when his phone rang. It was weird to get a call this early. Sure, he would talk to Maddy a lot in the evening, but it was always after Klaus went to bed and usually when he was on the road.

When he looked at the caller ID, he was even more surprised it was Lucas. He quickly got up from the ground and went to his room upstairs for some privacy. They mostly texted. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I wanted to warn you about Dad.”

Uh-oh, that was never good. Their father was strict and wasn’t exactly a huge fan of Petey playing hockey most of the year instead of working in the family business. But at least he was placated as long as Petey pursued his law degree while he played. While he didn’t love his studies, he wasn’t shirking his responsibilities since he did want to work for the family business one day. He was in the top 10% of his classes each term. “What’s the problem?”

“Apparently, he hates all the puck bunny rumors and needs you to settle it down.”

“What the fuck?” Petey wanted the rumors to settle down too because he also hated the attention. It was pathetic how many girls would throw themselves at him, but how was he supposed to stop the bunnies? He was always told he needed to focus on being the best hockey player possible and doing well in school.

“I know. I know.” Petey could practically see Lucas grinning through the phone. “You are a good twin and haven’t done anything wrong. Although, we might have had a small incident the other night.”

“We ...” Petey pinched the bridge of his nose as he collected his thoughts. It wasn’t the first time they’d pretended to be each other. “What did you do?”

Lucas laughed. “You should have seen her. She was a ten all the way. Throwing herself at the great Petey. I couldn’t not pay attention to her. Curves in all the right spots and an ass to die for.”

Oh, he was taken in by the girl for sure. Petey never got that many details about Lucas’ love life. Lucas liked to sleep around, but most people knew it was Lucas. While Lucas and he looked alike since they were identical twins, their personalities couldn’t be more different. Lucas loved fancy cars, the high life, a penthouse, and all the easy sex he could get. Petey on the other hand, didn’t need that stuff.

It was good to hear his brother was smitten. He just wished he’d told the girl that he wasn’t Petey and was Lucas instead. It seemed so absurd that Lucas had pretended to be him when he hadn’t been in Vancouver in a couple months. “Some hockey fan, though. Wouldn’t she know that I haven’t been in Vancouver in months?”

“Um, I met her in NYC.”

Well, at least it wasn’t a complete miss. They’d been in New York for the games about week ago. “Dude, why didn’t you say anything? I would have met up with you.”

“I know. But I was only in NYC for a few hours at LaGuardia before flying to London to meet with some of dad’s business partners. There wasn’t time to leave the airport.”

That sounded like Lucas. He would totally hook up with a girl at the airport. Then again, he’d beaten Petey to the mile high club years before he did. It was crazy. “So, what’s the issue, besides the mistaken identity?”

Having sex in the airport really wasn’t that bad. Lucas would have had enough sense not to do it in the open, but he still didn’t see why their dad would be getting on Petey’s case about it. “Oh, she tried to blackmail the firm saying she’s pregnant with your kid.”

That timing was all off. The team had been in New York City only last week—there was no way in hell she could be

pregnant with his kid. Then it dawned on him, “Don’t tell me, she thought it had happened before.”

“Yes. She made it seem like she was no stranger, and I went with it.”

“Fuck man. She played you good. I haven’t slept with anyone since Aubrey.” Petey had no desire to be with anyone since finding out what a wretch she was, and that was before she decided to really mess with his life by telling the bunny boards that he was loaded and available. “Please tell me you guys did a DNA test when she came out with that insane claim.”

“Well, we tried and she panicked and dropped out of sight, leaving a note saying how it was a mistake and there was no child.”

Small miracle there. At least that got rid of one problem, but Petey still had to deal with his father. He grimaced at the thought. He really didn’t need to get lectured over something that wasn’t his fault. “Alright. So when is he calling?”

“Soon. But I wanted to get you caught up so you weren’t completely caught off guard.”

Given the situation that Lucas had gotten him in, he deserved that warning. He would have been completely flat-footed and would have angered his father if he tried to deny even knowing about the girl. “No shit. Can you do me a favor and not sleep with girls claiming that I had a good game?”

“Yeah. I know. I shouldn’t have done that, but dude, she was smoking hot.” Lucas was hung up on her. It was humorous to hear him talk that way. He probably wouldn’t settle down anytime soon, but he would fall hard for a girl one day.

“Well, thanks for the heads-up.”

“Yeah. Least I could do. I’ll see you soon.”

Petey hung up the phone and walked downstairs, shaking his head at the mess his twin had created.

Lager was playing with Klaus, but he looked up when Petey walked in. “What’s going on?”

Knowing that he wasn’t allowed to swear in front of Klaus, he was careful in what he said. “My brother did a dumb thing and now I’m in trouble.”

Of course, the kid looked up too. “How did you get in trouble when it was your brother?”

Petey leaned down and ruffled Klaus’ hair. “Remember how my brother looks just like me?”

With Klaus being a smart kid, he picked up on the situation from the simple clue that Petey had given. “Oh, right. So he pretended to be you and that’s why they think it was you.”

“Yup.”

Lager guffawed. It was a good thing that he didn’t have a twin. Nobody would have a moment’s break from the pranks. They would be constantly impersonating each other all the time.

Petey’s phone rang again. He left the room to have a little bit of privacy. “Hey, Dad. How’s business?”

“It’s good. But it’s not like you to ask about the business—Lucas must have tipped you off.” That was Dad: reading into every comment and using it as a negotiation tool.

“He did.” No need to deny it. Hopefully, it would ease things some.

“As you know, the shareholders have lots of expectations and you can’t be going hog wild with the girls.”

It was the same speech that Petey heard when he signed his junior contract. He had to focus on school as much as he did on hockey. He couldn’t bring shame to the firm.

“I know.” His voice wasn’t as even as he would have liked. It was harsh. “I’m not messing around.”

“But the rumors are there. I know they stem from Aubrey, and we have to put the kibosh on that. I don’t want any more speculation about your dating life.”

Petey nodded, despite knowing he was on the phone. Dad liked that he'd dated Aubrey since high school. There had been little issue about him being a playboy until recently. He'd been groomed to take over as CEO and even grow the company. Sure, Lucas was doing the day-to-day work more often, but Father thought he was better suited to being the president of public relations and CFO.

"Is this your way of saying that I need to be dating someone?" asked Petey.

"Ideally more than date, Aaron. I want to see you married sooner rather than later."

Petey pinched the bridge of his nose. This was the last thing he needed. He hadn't even been talking to another girl besides Maddy. "That's not an easy ask. It's not like I can just marry anyone. I haven't even been dating anyone. Keeping up with hockey and the law courses and helping out with Klaus doesn't leave much time."

"Don't make me get involved, Aaron." That wasn't an idle threat. He would either get a matchmaker involved, or he would just start meddling.

"I understand."

As he was dealing with his thoughts, Klaus came up with his jacket already on and pulled his hand. "Come on, Uncle Petey. We are going to be late for our first cooking lesson."

At least heading over to Scotty's place for a while would be a good distraction. Plus, he might be able to be more helpful in the kitchen.

Maddy

She hated going to Petey's place for events. Mainly because she was always on edge when she worked. She had to look perfect and serve her mom's food perfectly. But she needed the extra cash while she was in law school.

As she was checking in at the back room, she ran into Lucas. "Oh, Maddy. Have you talked to Aaron lately?"

It had taken her a while to get used to Aaron going by Petey all the time, but at this point, it had become his natural name in her mind. So it was weird to hear him called Aaron and that even his twin brother didn't call him Petey.

It was just as weird to see Lucas unaccompanied by a date. He normally had one, if not two, beautiful women on his arm at events like this. "No, I haven't. Been pretty busy with school lately. Everything okay?"

"Um. You better call him." Then Lucas escaped to the main hall. Most likely to network with the family's guests.

She was curious and looked up to the clock. It was already eight p.m., which meant it was already late in Cleveland, but Lucas' message was cryptic enough that she wanted to talk to Petey as soon as possible before he went to bed.

As soon as she walked into the kitchen, she approached her mom and started to look at the hors d'oeuvres that were plated. It seemed like Mom had outdone herself. Seemed like she was always finding new recipes and things to do.

She was looking at the plates when her mom came in. "Alright. What do you want? You never get in the kitchen this early."

"Would it be okay if I sneak into the pantry to call Petey? I promise I'll be quick and ready to get these out onto the floor."

Mom looked her over and then nodded. Maddy popped into the pantry and pulled out her phone.

When the phone continued to ring, she worried that she had messed up his games. She should follow his hockey schedule better, like she used to. She bit her bottom lip as she waited.

After a few rings, Petey answered with a light, airy voice. “Hey, Maddy. What’s going on?”

“Um, your brother said I should call.” She never could lie to him.

There was a dramatic sigh. That was her sign that Lucas was apparently meddling in Petey’s life and using her in the process. “It’s fine. Just Dad being Dad.”

That meant his dad was being disagreeable and demanding. Normally, he was on Petey to behave and follow through with their agreement. It was bizarre, since he never broke his commitments. Lucas was the one with the playboy persona and was known to be a bit more problematic.

She asked, “What’s the problem this time?”

“Apparently, I need to get married.” She couldn’t believe how deadpan he was. He also sounded displeased. It wasn’t a joke. It was a genuine expectation of his dad’s.

“What?” It was just so ridiculous. “Married to who and why?”

“To anyone of my choosing. Thank God on that front. I really hate puck bunnies right now.” His voice was full of disdain and quieted at the end. Then he said, “Any chance I could convince you to be my fake fiancée for a bit?”

While his voice was light and he’d probably said it in jest, she wished he was being serious. He was what she wanted in a boyfriend. It had nothing to do with his wealth. It was the way he treated people. There was something appealing about the proposition. “I wouldn’t be opposed to it. But what are you thinking?”

She pushed a tendril that fell out of her French twist behind her ears. She needed to know what he was thinking, especially since they were on opposite coasts. It might be a

hard sell. He probably would have been better served by a girl in Cleveland.

“Really, Maddy?” He seemed shocked. She would do anything for him. It wasn’t that much of a stretch. “You would do that for me?”

“Of course,” she said with a smile. It seemed so crazy, but it would work. He’d always been a sweetheart. They’d never dated, despite their closeness. He had Aubrey for a long time. Maddy was a bit of a nerd, and the guys never gave her much attention. “But we got to make it convincing.”

“Which means you need to come to Cleveland soon and I’ll see if I can come out to Vancouver before our game.” He sounded so sure. The thing was, he was right. She would need to come to Cleveland. Thankfully, her school schedule was stacked on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The biggest trick would be seeing what worked with his schedule.

“Alright.” She wasn’t able to schedule it right now. At least she had a passport, so it wouldn’t be impossible. She heard more noise coming from the kitchen area, which meant the other servers were arriving. She couldn’t be hiding in the pantry much longer, or else she would get canned for the night. That just wouldn’t do. “I’ll call you back later about setting up a trip. I’m currently hiding in your pantry.”

He chortled. “Why are you hiding there?” He had to know that she would make calls from there from time to time. Then again, it was a little silly to be hiding in a cupboard.

“Did you forget your twin said I needed to talk to you? I ran into him at the manor since I was helping to serve a big event for your dad. I was worried about you, and this is the only time to call you tonight when you would be awake.” It was completely true. She would be dealing with this event until about 4 a.m. his time.

“Well, don’t get in trouble on my account.” His statements were so unsurprising. Of course, he wouldn’t want her to get into trouble. He tacked on, “But if you do, let me know. I’ll talk to you soon.”

She hated to say it, but she would look forward to that phone call. “Sounds good.”

“Call after the party.” He sounded firm. He wanted to hear from her, but the hour would end up being ridiculous and he needed his rest.

“Are you sure it won’t be too late?”

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

No matter what he said, she probably wasn’t going to call him. It would be too late. She would just wait for the morning.



Petey

Waiting for Maddy to call back was a nightmare. He couldn't believe she'd accepted his crazy offer. He truly thought she was going to laugh it off or tell him to get lost. Instead, she seemed happy about the crazy plan. It gave him hope they could be more than friends one day. She'd be his fake girlfriend.

He didn't know why he didn't think of her the moment his father demanded he get married. It wouldn't be a stretch of the imagination for him and her to get together.

Plus, if they were to take the fake engagement route, his dad probably wouldn't insist upon getting a prenup with her. She and her mom had been working with the family forever. They all knew she wasn't in it for the money. She would earn her money for herself. But she would be willing to sign it if she needed to.

To keep his hands busy while he waited for her to call, he went down to the basement and lifted weights. It would help with his strength and conditioning anyway. He wanted to stay in the league a long time, with lots of ice time, so the more conditioning he could do, the better.

Just as he was mounting the barbell on the rack after a squat set, his phone finally rang. "Perfect timing."

He heard a laugh—it was his brother. "Nice to hear that."

Dammit. He should have looked at the caller ID before speaking. This wasn't who he wanted to hear from. He'd heard from him more this week than he had in the last four months. "So, what's up?"

"Nothing, but I saw your best friend tonight." He sounded so jovial. He might have been drinking.

"Yeah. She said she ran into you. Why are you meddling in my life?" It was so obvious he was up to something, but Petey wasn't sure what he was trying to accomplish.

“Yeah, about that. Stop denying what’s there. Yes, I got you in the mess with Dad, but you have to admit that Maddy is the perfect solution.”

It hit him: Lucas was trying to hook him and Maddy up.

He rubbed his head. Of course, Lucas would try to take all the credit for him blurting out things to Maddy. Okay, Lucas deserved some credit because he did tell her to call. “Why are you taking such an interest?”

“Cause you wouldn’t have said a damn thing unless I told her to call you. I’m just glad she called so quickly. She was always too smart for you.”

He shook his head. He couldn’t keep up with Lucas when he was like this. His ideas were off the wall, and it was always tough to comprehend his thought patterns when he got excited. Even with their twin intuition. One minute, he was saying Maddy was perfect for him and the next, that she was too good for him. “You’re crazy.”

“I know, and you love me for it. Stop overthinking. I just gave you guys the push that you needed.”

Maybe Lucas was right. Petey needed a push to even consider the idea of dating Maddy. Thinking out loud, he said, “How did you even know that I would ask her to be my fake girlfriend? I did it as a joke, thinking that she would laugh at me.”

Lucas chuckled at that. “Sometimes, I swear that you forget I’m your twin. I understand the way you think. You were too chicken shit to even think about dating her.”

“I’m not afraid to date Maddy. She’s my best friend. It would be weird to date my best friend.”

“You’re off base again. What does Mom always tell us about growing up?”

“That you want to marry someone whom you love and see as a best friend. If you don’t, you will never make it through the tough times, and there will be tough times,” Petey said from memory. They heard it all the time, especially when she was missing Dad.

“Exactly, and you always had that with Maddy. But you listened to Dad’s advice instead of Mom’s. It never made sense.”

It was true. Dad thought Aubrey made good business sense. Aubrey’s dad owned several businesses that would have complemented their family’s. So when Petey showed interest in her, Dad was all for it. His dad saw it as a way to get a business merger. Damn shame that she wanted the merger as well. That way, she could be extremely wealthy and never work a day in her life. She never understood his passion for hockey. She thought he was silly for playing hockey and he should go work with his father sooner rather than later.

Maddy was always special to him, but she’d had that creep of a boyfriend. Thank God they broke up over the summer. The only thing Petey hated was the fact that she had been hurt in the process.

“Alright. Maybe it’s not so crazy to date Maddy.”

“You know I’m right. Glad I didn’t have to push you too hard to see the light.” Lucas hung up the phone.

Maddy

By the end of the party, she was exhausted but hopeful. She'd worked hard, and Mr. Peterson had made a point of introducing her to a few of his business associates, which felt weird since she was just a caterer. She was so used to working and trying to avoid getting noticed at parties, it was refreshing and gave her hope for landing a great legal internship.

She needed to call Petey and discuss his crazy idea about dating in order to make things okay with his dad. She was going to skip the call, but she got a text from Petey saying, *Call at any time tonight. Missing you!*

She wasn't sure what to think about the last part of the message. But that first part was clear; he wanted to talk more. She didn't want to disappoint him.

As she stripped out of the white shirt and black skirt of her uniform, she dialed Petey's number.

He almost immediately picked up the phone. He sounded so sleepy as he said, "Hey, Maddy."

"Hey." She pulled on a comfy sweatshirt to sleep in. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"I know you were working, and it gave me a chance to get ahead with my readings and homework. Make it home okay?"

"Yup." She collapsed onto her bed. "So, are you sure you want me to be your fake girlfriend?"

"Of course, I want you. I'm the one who feels like an asshole for asking you to be my fake fiancée, especially since you wanted a break from dating after Jared."

"It's fine. I'm happy to help, but what prompted the need for a fake fiancée in the first place?"

"Pressure from my dad." His voice went gruff. She could imagine him rubbing the back of his head as he said that. He always did that when he was stressed or frustrated. Maddy wasn't going to pressure him into saying more, but he

continued, “While he didn’t say it in so many words, it’s for the sake of the company and my inheritance.”

“That inheritance that you don’t really want,” she teased. It was why she loved Petey. He could have anything he wanted, and yet he wanted to make his own money by playing the sport that he loved. She respected the hell out of that.

“I know, but I still have that responsibility. Besides, I can’t play hockey forever.”

“But you’ll try.”

“Yeah. Seriously, Mads, I’m so glad you’re okay with this. Other than some events together in BC, I promise it’ll be low stress. I’ll make it as easy as possible for you.”

Of course he would make it easy on her. That’s why he was her best friend in the first place. Knowing how caring Petey truly was, she always wondered what it would be like to date him. He was sweet and would pay attention. She was jealous of Aubrey when they started dating, especially since Petey was damn caring and let Aubrey do her own thing, while Jared only tried to control her.

“I know. It’s why it’s so easy to say yes.” She pulled out her laptop and her schedule book. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Well, we have to hang out at the Vancouver game. Most likely, we’ll do a meal with the family in addition to you rooting me on as your boyfriend. Since I’m so tied to Cleveland, I can’t visit you nearly enough. Would it be okay if I fly you out for a weekend here and there? Then for your spring break, you can spend the week with me?”

“That should be doable. Are you sure this will work and your roommates won’t mind?”

“I think it will work. Neither of us have tried something like this, and we already have a great bond. People will just see it as a natural progression. As for the Lagers, I know they would love for you to visit. Are you ready for them, though?”

She knew that Lager and his son could be a handful but in a good way. They would keep them laughing, and she would have to stay alert. However, when she met them for Petey’s

Stanley Cup party, they were both harmless. “Of course. They were fun when I met them.”

“I know. But I have a feeling they would want to prank you. I never quite know what to expect with those two. But other than one or two public dates, I promise the trips to Cleveland will be such that we can just hang out and be us. Well, that’s after we work around my hockey schedule.”

“Petey. Relax. It’ll be nice to hang out together. I’m going to be bringing some books, and I might have to raid your library.”

“You might have to settle for raiding my Kindle or the five textbooks that I couldn’t get a digital copy of.” He snickered. “But if you give me a book list, I’ll get them for you.”

She smiled to herself. She should have known he didn’t have a big library at Lager’s place. She knew all too well that Petey never traveled with his books. He might do things on his laptop or Kindle, but that was about it when he was on the road. She wasn’t going to give him that book list, though. She could buy her own books for the trip. “Alright.”

Petey muffled a yawn. It was super late for him, so she wasn’t too surprised when he said, “Okay. My body needs sleep, but if you don’t tell me at least three weekends that you can come and visit, I’ll be pissed.”

She giggled. He’d obviously realized he wasn’t going to get a book wish list from her. If she could afford the flights, she might try to book one or two herself. But alas, she probably couldn’t quite swing the fare on her own. She would have to rely on him for the flights, and she would give him the weekend dates as he asked. “Will do. Don’t want you to be pissed at me. But get some rest.”

“You too, Maddy. Don’t stay up too late studying. You already worked a banquet tonight. So go to bed.”

“You do the same.”

“Dude, I’m in bed. So all I have to do is close my eyes. But don’t forget to text me those weekends and the dates for

your spring break. Thanks again, Maddy. You're amazing for doing this with me."



Petey

As he came downstairs, he heard Lager's laughter fill the house. That wasn't too unusual. Well, it was less common than it had been when he first moved in with the Lagers.

It didn't take a genius to know that Dr. Leah had spent the night after their date and she was the source of his happiness.

In the kitchen, Petey got himself a meal going with almond butter and bananas on toast. He looked in the living room and saw Lager and his son eating breakfast. While Lager himself was on the oversized couch, his son was standing beside him. They were in sync, even down to turning the spoon upside down when the yogurt hit their mouth.

"He's really your mini-me. It's scary how much you two are alike."

Lager beamed with pride when he looked down at his son. He loved being a dad more than anything, and he'd needed a little help lately to keep things running smoothly at his house. Petey also loved the kid.

Klaus looked over to Petey and said, "That's 'cause I want to be like Papa when I grow up."

"Do you?" he asked in mock astonishment. The kid was constantly playing hockey, down to the same position and style as his dad. "I would have never guessed."

"Yup." Then Klaus changed the subject. "You need a girlfriend, Uncle Petey."

Lager chuckled, but Petey was dumbfounded. How did the little kid come to the conclusion he needed a girlfriend? It was bad enough that the guys on the team kept teasing him about the sudden bunny interest and the lack of a girlfriend. Add in the pressure from his father and it was enough to get a complex.

It was one of the few times Petey needed to know how Klaus had actually come to that conclusion. “Why do you say that?”

In between bites of yogurt, the kid recited, “Cause Uncle Scotty has Aunt Alice, Uncle Corey has Jenna, Mutti has Toli, and Papa has Dr. Leah.”

It seemed like the little one understood what his dad was up to with Leah. It was so silly how both he and his dad called her Dr. Leah rather than just Leah. It just seemed so proper, and she was too much fun for such a serious title all the time.

Although knowing that Klaus should be more or less oblivious to the true nature of why people coupled up, Petey asked, “What about you?”

The kid had gumption and said, “I have Lexi. She’s a girl and my friend.”

Petey had to stick a hand to his face to keep the kid from seeing him laughing. Of course, he would talk about Scotty’s baby girl. Klaus was infatuated with the baby.

Lager didn’t even try to hide the fact that he was laughing at his son’s choice of girlfriend as he said, “Sounds like he has you there.”

Petey leaned down to look Klaus in the eyes. “What if I told you I might have a girlfriend too?”

The kid’s eyes grew wide. “Really? Who is she?”

Petey was so tempted to tell him to take a guess. Klaus had heard him talk to her before. But Petey opted to just give him the answer he was hoping for. It was as good a time as any to announce that Madison was going to be visiting. “Her name is Maddy, and she’s coming to visit before the end of the season.”

“Yay! I’ll get to meet her, right?” the little kid said as he jumped around with arms raised. Klaus was probably more excited than him.

While Maddy and he had decided she would come to visit to help sell the situation to everyone, they hadn’t decided if

she needed her own room or if she was going to share his room. Lager wouldn't really care if we slept together or not. "Of course, you will. She's going to stay here."

"So, she is your girlfriend if she's spending the night."

That got the two hockey players laughing. He clearly knew there was a difference between the two types of girlfriends.

Between chuckles, Petey said, "If you say so, kid."

Before he knew it, Lager was getting Klaus ready for pre-school. Petey went downstairs to do some weight-lifting as they got dressed.

After they dropped Klaus off at pre-school, Lager looked Petey's way. "You and Maddy are going to finally give it a go?"

That question was bound to be coming Petey's way. Petey had thought he might try to ask about it prior to dropping off Klaus. He was one of the few people that Petey would confide in. Lager had a bad reputation for telling secrets, especially if it was a gift or a bet—he would get too excited to hold it in. But if it was personal, he could keep it in.

"Um, kinda, but also not really." Lager arched an eyebrow, and Petey continued, "It's the perfect solution until I find a real girlfriend. It will be nice just to have her come over."

"So she's coming to the house. Do we need a guest room for her, or is she good to stay in your room?"

"No clue."

Lager shook his head. "Well, I guess we will find out soon enough. When is that going to happen?"

"In a couple weeks."

Maddy

Coming out of class, she saw Jared waiting in the lobby. He stared at her like he wanted to eat her for dinner. It was creepy.

She had a bad feeling about this. He shouldn't be here. She clutched her books tighter.

“Madison, we need to talk.” His words came out like ice. It was better than anger, but it was still far from comforting.

Her knuckles turned white. She couldn't show fear or weakness. “I don't have time, Jared.”

He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him. “Please. I want to get back together.”

Her eyes went wide. It was so completely insane. There was no way they were getting back together. She was glad to be out of the toxic relationship once she got over him. Even if she wasn't “engaged” to Petey, it was never going to happen. But Petey was in the picture now. “No!” It was loud and sharp. “I have a boyfriend.”

He had to know she meant business. He'd already love-bombed her once and she went back to him after they broke up the first time. She wouldn't buy his crap again. She knew that for all his grand gestures of love, the moment they were dating again, he would become such a creep and way too possessive. Those gestures were meaningless. Thankfully, Professor McMartin came out of the room. “Is there a problem, Ms. Hyland?”

Thankfully, Jared realized what her teacher was up to. He quickly let go and said, “No, sir. I was just leaving.” Although before actually leaving, he did say, “We should talk when it's more convenient.”

Relief set in. Her arm throbbed from where Jared had grabbed her. Thankfully, it was cold out and no one would be able to see the bruises that would be there tomorrow. She stopped clutching her books. “Thanks for checking on me, Professor.”

“No problem. I’ve seen it happen enough times.” He’d been a criminal attorney for years, so he probably had seen plenty of abusive partners in his lifetime. “Let me walk you to the car.”

She nodded. She was glad to have someone take her to the car. That way, Jared wouldn’t try to approach her again. She should start to think about a buddy system or an escort to her car.

Once she was in the car, she started to shiver. She wasn’t going to cry, but her confidence was shattered. Jared never should have showed up at her school.

After the run-in with Jared, she was shaken. She bundled herself into a blanket and made herself a hot chocolate. She hoped that Petey would give her a call, but she didn’t want to call him. It didn’t make sense. His voice would calm her. But she didn’t want to sound weak in front of him.

Right as she was getting settled in, her cell rang. Seeing Petey’s name on the caller ID, she accepted the call and said, “Hey, you. How was your game?”

“You didn’t watch it?”

“No. I just got home from class.” She laid her head on her knees and tried to calm down.

Petey’s tone shifted big time. It went from jovial to concerned. “What happened, Mads?”

“It’s nothing.” She tried to pretend it hadn’t happened.

“I don’t believe you. Should I fly out there to get it out of you?”

She laughed. “No.” It was so ridiculous that he’d just offered to fly so many hours, just to find out what was going on. But he would do it if she was that shaken up. “You don’t need to fly out.”

“So, why so glum?”

“I had a run-in with Jared after class.”

“I really hate that guy,” Petey said immediately. He’d never liked her ex. His tone softened. “So, you okay? Did he do anything?”

She took a sip of the chocolaty mixture to help coat her throat. “I’m okay. He did grab my arm and was insistent upon wanting to talk with me alone.”

“Please tell me that you didn’t go with him.”

“I didn’t go, and I told him that I have a boyfriend.”

He chuckled at that. “I like that I gave you the perfect excuse to blow the guy off. I guess it’s not such a bad thing that we are fake dating.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, even you got to admit I’d make a better boyfriend than he ever did.”

Oh, that wasn’t even close. Petey was an amazing friend. He actually listened and cared for her. Jared only cared about her looking beautiful and being a trophy girlfriend. He was obsessive and delusional. She hated how Jared would get so jealous of her friendship with Petey. “True.”

“Do you need to get away?”

“What?”

“Do you want a mini vacation? I know we talked about you coming out to visit me over spring break, in part for appearance’s sake. Do you want to go to Cleveland or somewhere else? You could go to the south of France like you always wanted.”

“What the hell? You would fly me to the south of France all because I had a bad day with my ex?”

“Well, I would much prefer for you to come here. I miss you, Mads, but yeah. If you are having a tough go of things, why not?”

“Cause that’s insanely expensive and unnecessary. I don’t want your money, Aaron Peterson. How often do I need to tell you?”

The snicker was what she needed to hear. They were on the same page. It had been an old thing between them. “I know you don’t want the money. Besides, I make out better by having you come to Cleveland. I’ve missed seeing you.”

She loved hearing that he missed her. Making sure she didn’t sound desperate, she said, “At least I’ll be able to see you next week.”



Petey

Playing in Vancouver was always interesting. The guys all knew Petey was from there, so they would tease him about the amount of friends and family cheering him on.

He always felt the pressure to perform and live up to expectations. Nothing like Dad having a majority stake in the opposing team's ownership to add to that pressure. Even more so, this was supposed to be his and Maddy's coming out party.

Maddy coming to the Vancouver games wasn't all that unusual. She had always been a fan and supported his love of hockey, so she came to most of his games when they were in town, as long as she didn't have class.

While waiting in the tunnel, Corey was calling everyone by a nickname and just being silly. It was his way of keeping the team loose and ready for the game. He'd been doing it since he came back from his cancer treatment, but tonight Petey relied on his humor. Petey nearly lost it when he called Lager "Beer Man."

Lager didn't seem to care for the nickname and just shook his head as he did his high fives with the guys. But since Scotty was laughing his ass off, Petey had a feeling they would be hearing "Beer Man" for a while.

After the last of the high fives were given out by Scotty and Lager, they all filtered onto the ice for warmups. First was a few circles to get the legs going. Then it would be the shooting drills, but he would peel away to stretch out in center ice before grabbing a puck.

As he was bouncing the puck on his blade, Corey punched his shoulder. "Relax. Have some fun tonight."

"That obvious?"

"Not as bad as I expected, but you don't need to have a stick up your ass every time we play here."

Petey scoffed. Corey had no idea what it was like to have the pressure of family on his plate. His parents had always been so chill about his hockey career. He didn't need to prove that he wanted to play hockey each and every game.

"Come on. You know you want to show off for your new girlfriend," he said with a wide smile. Of course he would mention Maddy. He'd been on Petey's case about not minding any attention from the puck bunnies and talking to her all the time.

Instead of acknowledging him, Petey squatted down to do a few hip openers and quad stretches. He figured Corey would leave him alone. But as he arched his back to help deepen the stretch, Corey had a mischievous look on his face. He was up to no good.

Next thing he knew, he was spun around in a huge circle. Everything was just a blur. He stuck out his leg to slow the momentum. As he got off his knees, he laughed. The spin was actually fun, and he mocked himself since he should have expected a trick or two.

Almost immediately, Corey said, "That got you smiling."

"You did." It was easy to concede to him. Petey needed to come up with a payback plan, but first it was back to warming up.

Petey got in line to do a few of the shooting drills. He wanted to warm up his slapshot. There were big expectations that he would score a few points tonight. Between wanting to impress his dad and trying to justify his play, Petey scored every time he played in Vancouver. His dad would be disappointed if he didn't do that again.

He fired a great shot on to Smithy, the rookie goalie who was beginning to steal the starting position from Crestor. It snuck into the net. As Petey skated back towards the center, Lager came up to him laughing. "Seems like Cor is in rare form tonight."

"Yeah. Hopefully, he puts that energy into his game."

“Both of you guys will.” He wasn’t expecting that from Lager. Lager knew how much pressure he put on himself. “Try to have some fun tonight.”

Maddy

Coming to Petey's games was usually fun, but there was a lot of pressure this time. It wasn't just hanging out with the friends and family like normal. It was their coming out party as a couple.

She walked into the Peterson box like usual. Front and center was Petey's lookalike and his dad. There were a bunch of other people in the box too that she'd seen at various parties at the Peterson mansion. So his dad was going to be doing business during the game, which wasn't that surprising.

She went up to the balcony so she could watch warmups. Almost immediately, she saw both Petey and Corey spinning on their knees. She smiled at seeing the silliness. That's when Lucas came up to her and said, "I should have known you would be watching him."

She nodded. She wasn't a hundred percent sure what to say to him. That's when Petey's dad approached the two of them with a smile on his face. "Madison. It's so good that you are here. Lucas was just telling me about the latest news between you and Aaron."

He always called her Madison. Just like Petey was always Aaron. He liked the formal names. To him, those names were strong and they should always be projecting power and strength.

Her eyes went towards Lucas. He'd been meddling so much lately. Why did he have to tell Mr. Peterson about her and Petey? Lucas liked to stir the pot. But she couldn't throw Lucas under the bus or say anything about the meddling. "It's good to see the two of you. What news were you talking about?"

Lucas smiled. "How it's about time that you and Aaron finally made it official."

She forced a smile. It felt so awkward. She didn't want to lie to Mr. Peterson. She and Petey were going to give a good

show to prove that they weren't completely faking it. Tonight, they were supposed to spend the night together. Petey had hoped they could do a family meal with them as a couple, but he wasn't able to get anything booked until tomorrow night because of his team obligations.

Lucas had the same reaction to the news as her mom. Did that mean people saw their relationship as being closer than friends when they couldn't? Had everyone expected them to get together? "I didn't expect it to be that big a deal."

Mr. Peterson pulled her into a hug. It was probably the first hug she'd ever received from him. He then whispered, "Your mom and I have been waiting for this moment. I'm glad that you two have finally sorted things out."

"Thanks." It was the best result possible, and it would be a relief to Petey. That was probably the biggest hurdle.

The game would be starting soon. Mr. Peterson retreated. "Sorry. I'll let you two chat. I need to have a discussion with a few investors."

"Of course. Good luck with the investors." She paid attention to the ice surface. Petey looked so stiff on the bench. He always put so much pressure on himself. She wished she could give him a hug.

Lucas wrapped an arm around her. "I'm so glad my little idea is all working out."

She tucked her hands under her armpits and arched an eyebrow. It was an unbelievable statement even from Lucas. "Your idea?"

"Oh. You're as bad as my brother. You two would never have entered into this little arrangement if I didn't tell you to call Petey."

He was so damn confident in his assessment, but it was so damn laughable. "Like me and him don't talk all the time. I would have called him on my own."

His eyes sparkled in delight. That was usually his tell tale sign that he was up to no good. When they were kids, it also meant he'd had a terrible idea. Her eyes grew wide as the truth

dawned on her. He'd purposefully slept with the bunny and got Petey in trouble. Petey said it was a pregnancy scare, even though it was ridiculous. But Lucas had set them up.

She punched Lucas' arm. "What the hell did you do that for? How were you so sure he would come to me about it?"

He continued to smile knowingly. He was such an asshole. He was actually proud of himself for this little stunt. "'Cause he's my brother."

Shaking her head in disbelief, she said, "You're crazy. You had to know he didn't need any more pressure on him."

"Which is why I knew you would come to the rescue. You always bail him out." He was still smiling. "Besides, you guys should be together. Just have some fun with it all. Now if you don't mind me, I'm going to go find my next conquest."

It was crazy. The double standards between the two brothers were insane. Why did Petey have to have the upstanding reputation, when he worked his ass off for the Sound, but Lucas could do whatever he liked, even though he worked for his dad already?

"Fine, go find your next lady. Just don't ever pretend to be Petey when you're doing it."

Lucas chuckled as he walked away. She watched her best friend intently down on the ice.



Petey

Petey fiddled with his suit. It had to be perfect when he met up with his father, but the damn tie wouldn't lie flat. He was so consumed with trying to get things perfect that he didn't see Maddy walk in.

She came up to him and said, "Let me." She retied it. It was a subtle move but something that a girlfriend would do. "There you go."

He loved having her so close. She smelt so good with her perfume. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and kiss her, but he couldn't. Well, rather he shouldn't. She was only his fake girlfriend. Not his real one. "Thanks. Are you sure you want to go through with this? We don't need to have dinner with my dad."

She placed a finger on his lips, which stopped him from speaking. "Hush. I knew what I was agreeing to. It's not like we are engaged or planning a wedding. I'm not seeing anyone. You aren't seeing anyone. It's fine."

Those were the words he needed to hear. He still hated the fact that his dad had forced them into this situation. It was just for looks. "Alright. I still owe you big time. But we better get going or else we will be in trouble with my dad."

He wished that his dad had picked out a restaurant that wasn't so fancy, but then again, it was his dad. There was very little chance he would pick out a restaurant that didn't have a valet and wasn't the very best.

When they pulled up to the restaurant, Maddy stiffened. It was so unlike her. Once Petey handed his keys over to the valet who'd opened his car door, he realized why she was on edge. The valet was her ex.

Jared was such a creep in high school. He would leer at Maddy all the time and was absolutely obsessed with her. When they hooked up, Petey was happy for Maddy since she

deserved someone who made her happy, but he was always a bit leary of Jared.

Jared said, “You look beautiful, Maddy.”

She was beautiful today. Petey should have said something sooner. Her makeup highlighted her green eyes. It was a perfect dress for dinner with his dad: conservative up top with a skirt that showed off her lithe, long legs.

Petey went into protective mode by slinging an arm around her shoulders. He whispered to her, “I should have told you, but you’re beautiful, Mads.”

She relaxed, but only a little bit. She always took compliments well, so the problem had to be Jared. Before they reached the maître d’, Petey stopped the two of them and asked, “Everything okay, Maddy?”

She tucked some hair behind her ear, a tell that she was stressed. “I just didn’t expect him to be here.”

He wondered if there was something she wasn’t saying about the relationship with Jared. They’d broken up, and it was her decision to do so. She wasn’t devastated by that decision. He just wondered if she was hiding something about the reason for the break up, other than that it didn’t work out.

“You and me both. If you are uncomfortable at any point today, just squeeze my hand. I promise that I’ll take care of you.”

She nodded and forced a smile. He wished it was more genuine. He hated seeing her rigid and stiff. “We shouldn’t keep Mr. Peterson waiting.”

It was weird how she would always call his dad Mr. Peterson. She was damn formal with him. It wasn’t like he was a stranger. But she was right, he would get a tongue lashing from his dad for being late. His dad wouldn’t chastise Maddy. He loved her.

They were quickly directed to the table where his mother and father were already seated. The maître d’ pulled out a chair for Maddy next to his dad and laid down the menu. It was cozy and secluded since they were the only ones in the

room. His dad had probably rented out the room so they could have a private meal. “You played well last night, Aaron.”

He never expected his dad to praise him for his game play. His dad was always his toughest critic. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Are sure you don’t want to play here in Vancouver?”

Petey fought back the urge to roll his eyes and was just grateful that his dad had little say with the team’s acquisitions department, despite holding a majority stake in the team and his threats to get him traded to the Legacy. His dad had been trying to get Petey to play for the Legacy since he bought a stake in them. It was an old conversation, but Petey gave his usual reply. “I’m happy with the Sound. Even if we weren’t in the running for another cup, you know I’d rather work for it on my own.”

Petey felt Maddy’s hand on his thigh. It was so reassuring and felt so right. It made things feel real and natural, like they weren’t just pretending to date.

Thankfully, his dad laughed. “I know, but I have to ask. We need some help on the defensive side of things, and you would be a good fit.”

Maddy spoke up. “Not really, Mr. Peterson. It’s the lack of scoring and the right side of the d-pairings making the most mistakes. You know he’s best on the left side.”

His dad chuckled in disbelief. “Why, Madison, I had no idea you were such a hockey fan.”

Petey loved how much she knew about the sport and how she defended him the best way possible, the conversation moved on, but it felt good. Maddy had his side, and his dad wasn’t even hard on him.

Maddy

The dinner with Petey and his family made things feel so much more real, although she wasn't ready to run into Jared. It seemed like the guy was great at finding a ton of part-time jobs but never held on to them for very long. At least he didn't make a scene.

Jared always thought that she would end up with Petey. For so long, Petey was her best friend and she didn't see him in the sexual sense. Even now, everything they did was just a continuation of two very close friends who were close to crossing the line between platonic and sexual. But she knew, other than the stage kisses and holding hands, it was just a platonic relationship.

The only downside of the dinner was that it convinced her that ending this fake relationship was going to end badly for Petey and her. They shouldn't be fooling his family in this manner. They were too close.

As they walked out of the restaurant, Petey wrapped an arm around her. She felt so protected by his large frame that she didn't need to fear anything with Jared. Petey would take care of her.

By the time they were done with dinner, Jared wasn't at the valet anymore. That saved them some consternation. Even the car was brought up by a different person.

After they were secure in their car, Petey looked over his shoulder and said, "See, that wasn't so bad. Thanks for saying to Dad that I'm not a good fit for the team here. There are some days I'm convinced he will renege on the idea of me having my own hockey career and will make a deal to send me to the Legacy."

It wasn't a crazy fear. With his dad being the owner, he could force a trade if he really wanted Petey on the team. It was probably why Petey was so quick to appease his father on certain things, like having a serious girlfriend to help shut

down the bunny rumors. The fear of not inheriting billions of dollars didn't exist.

“You know your dad is all bark and very little bite on that front. He won't ever tell you, but he's proud of how you're making your own way.”

Petey looked at her. “I know he's proud of me, but I don't know ... I still feel the need to prove to him that I'm serious about things.”

“Is that why you have a stick up your ass when you play here?”

“Not you too. Corey's been on my case about that,” he said with a laugh, which meant he wasn't exasperated with her. “Am I really that bad when I play here?”

“More you are tense and I don't see you smile. Not like when you play in other places like Cleveland. It doesn't take a genius to see you put pressure on yourself when you don't need to.”

“Like I'm the only one putting pressure on themselves. 'Cause pot, meet kettle.”

That got Maddy laughing. “Do you blame me for being worried about how this whole relationship will shake out? This could go bad in so many different ways. You had to see how pleased your family was tonight. They like our match. So when we break up, it's not going to be easy to be around them.”

“It'll be fine. Again, I'll be the one to break it off. They will still love you. I promise.”



Petey

Getting back to Cleveland after Vancouver, Petey was tired. The long flight always drained him. Thankfully, they didn't have practice in the morning. Lager would likely have to get up early and care for Klaus. Hell, Petey was just as likely to play with the little guy so Lager could relax a little bit in the morning.

As he crashed out onto the bed and plugged in his phone, he noticed he had a message from Maddy waiting for him. He thumbed it open.

Maddy: *Thinking of you, hope the flight wasn't too bad. Let me know you got in ok.*

He automatically grinned like a teenager. The whole arrangement of fake dating seemed to have ignited hidden feelings for her. It was more than just hanging out in a casual sense. If he was honest with himself, he'd probably always had those feelings but didn't want to torture himself by pining for her when they dated other people.

He dialed her number. As per usual, she picked up quickly.

"Hey, Maddy."

"I take it you landed."

"Yup. Even back at Lager's house." He looked at the time; it was insanely late for the west coast. "What are you still doing up? It's like 1 a.m. your time."

"Studying."

He should have known she'd be up studying. She was far more studious than he was. He didn't shirk his homework, but he also wasn't obsessed with getting the best grades possible for the course. There were times he thought he should have gotten the MBA instead, especially when he had to slog through particularly dense case law.

"Shouldn't you sleep some too?" he asked.

“I know. But I wanted to see if you got in okay and if you heard anything from your family.”

He smashed a pillow and threw it under his arm. “The dinner was perfect. They love that we are dating. I think Lucas knows the truth and wants us to do it for real, but other than that, it’s all good. Hell, my father even sent a text asking how serious we were. Apparently, he wants us to get engaged sooner rather than later.”

She snorted at that last comment. “So, are you going to appease him, or are we just going to do the dating charade?”

“What do you want, Mads? I’m already asking so much of you.”

“Will it help to get engaged?”

“Yeah.” He hated asking her about a fake proposal. That should be one of the most romantic days in a girl’s life, and he knew he was going to under-deliver and make it even harder for her to date when the time came. “But don’t say yes because of that. I promise it would just be a long engagement and then we can quietly break it off.”

“Petey, relax. It’s not that big a deal. I agreed that we could do an engagement for the time being. It will be fine. Do you have a time frame in mind?”

“Well, besides the All-Star break, I can’t come and visit. There’s a small chance I could get voted in, but it won’t happen. But I know my father would want to have a society engagement, which means I would have to come to Vancouver for a party. It will be a whole pre-planned affair.” He was already dreading the idea. Those events were always so stuffy. More about business, the connections, and less about the people. It would also be a fancy suit affair. “Ugh, and with that party, please invite a couple of your friends so you aren’t bored senseless. I’ll be asking Scotty, Corey, and Lager to come since I want to have a little fun.”

“Petey, relax. I know it’ll be like your family’s Christmas party or a charity event that they host. I’ll just be happy not to work the party.”

He chuckled under his breath. She'd seen more parties than he'd been to over the past few years. "True. I didn't really think of how many more parties you have been to than me. I'm just worried about all the pressure this whole arrangement is on you."

"I'm fine. I love it. If guys on the street ask if I'm dating, I can say yes. They leave me alone if they think I have a boyfriend and you know I wanted a break after Jared. There's literally nothing to worry about. Let's get that engagement party set up. Make your father happy."

"Alright." Then Petey realized there was something else needed. The damn ring. "How do you want to do the engagement ring? Would I be an asshole if I just gave you a ring when I get to Vancouver?"

"No. It's fine. We just need to get a story together for how we did it. But we have some time for that."

He smiled to himself. She was making things way too easy on him. He wanted to tell her to sell the ring when the engagement finally ended, but it didn't seem right.

He stifled a yawn. "I hate to say this, Mads, but I need some sleep."

"I know. It's four in the morning for you. Get some sleep."

"Thanks, Maddy."

He disconnected the call and curled up on his pillow. He passed out quickly and dreamt about what it would be like if him and Maddy were living together as a couple.

Maddy

When she arrived home, things just seemed wrong. Like someone had been inside her apartment, but at the same time, there was nothing actually out of place. It just seemed off.

She tried to push the whole thought out of her mind when she heard her phone ring. She smiled because the only person who would be calling at this hour would be Petey.

He immediately said, "Hey, you."

"Hey," she said quietly.

When she didn't mimic his jovial tone, it must have raised his suspicions. "Long night?"

It wasn't a bad guess. There had been plenty of long nights, but this one hadn't been so bad. She was worried over nothing. If it was something, things would be missing or obviously moved about. "No."

"Come on, Maddy. Tell me what's going on." His voice was warm. He wanted to fix things.

She sighed. "I'm being dumb. It's nothing."

"You're worried over something. Talk it through with me. Sometimes it helps ..."

Petey was a hundred percent right. The two of them had talked through the various cases they were struggling with, and it usually helped. Plus, it saved time in really understanding what was going on with the case.

"Alright." She took a deep breath. "Something feels off at my place. I don't know why. Everything is pretty much how I left it."

"But nothing was taken or anything like that?"

"Exactly."

"What about your ex? Have you had any more issues with him?"

“Nothing. I figured he was finally moving on.” His suggestion made a lot of sense, though. Petey was so angry when he found out that Jared had come to her school, even offering to take a vacation with her to make her forget the whole situation. She was afraid of Jared. He was crazy enough to do something, but she wasn’t sure what he would attempt. She chided herself for not thinking that it could have been him.

She hadn’t heard a peep from him since she and Petey became ‘official’, though. He finally seemed to have given up on trying to get her back.

“I don’t trust him,” Petey said. She couldn’t blame Petey—she didn’t trust Jared either. There was some rustling around, as if Petey was moving. “Um ... What’s the security at your place like?”

That was a strange question from Petey. He’d been to her place dozens of times. He should have known what the security was like. “You’ve been here. Standard security door to get into the building. I have a deadbolt and chain locks.”

“But you don’t have anything else?” His tone was disapproving. She realized he was hoping she had better security features. But she lived in a safe part of Vancouver and didn’t have anything super valuable to warrant hard security.

“What were you hoping for? Security cameras or a tripwire?”

He chuckled. “You don’t need a tripwire or booby traps, but I was hoping to hear you had a couple of security cameras installed.”

Hearing him laugh made her relax, which she needed. If he was with her, he’d probably be rubbing her shoulders and neck to get her to relax. “Yeah, I don’t. I probably should, but I don’t have the budget for any.”

“Let me get a couple for you. That way, we can both relax.”

It wasn’t lost on her that he’d said they could both relax. He worried about her safety too. She wasn’t the only one that

was worried. Normally, she would say no due to the expense, but this time, she couldn't.

“I don't know. It's too much.” She bit her lip. It was too expensive, and she'd never wanted his money to support her. She wasn't a charity project.

“Mads. Come on. You're nervous. I know you. You have a reason to be afraid. Let's find out what's going on.”

“Fine. You can get some cameras and whatnot. Just let me know what they cost you.”



Petey

As he knotted his tie for tonight's game suit, his phone went off. He groaned. The upcoming conversation was likely to cause a headache. "Hey, Dad. Everything okay?"

"Yes. I wanted to say thank you for taking my request seriously."

He wanted to take the compliment for what it was worth. His dad so seldom gave them. "So, the family honor is back in good hands and the investors remembered that I'm goal focused?"

The idea of family honor and trying to protect it from negative press through a girlfriend still seemed absurd. But that was the world they lived in. Reputation and consistency mattered. That's what PR loved to remind him when it came to social media.

"Yes, son. When I heard that you and Madison were dating, I thought you might have only been together per my request. I'm glad I was wrong."

Petey thought about denying it, but he couldn't lie to his dad either. He just hoped he wasn't in the doghouse afterwards.

The more they hung out together, the more he realized he wanted Maddy as a real girlfriend. There'd been so many times he wanted to kiss her or hold her close, but he always pulled back.

"Um, about that." He rubbed his free hand over the back of his head. "We did start off that way."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"I hope you aren't mad."

"Mad? Heavens, no. She's always been one of the most respectable young ladies you boys knew. Much better than that awful Aubrey. I know that was a business match made in

heaven. But after seeing the way she behaved, I could tell she's no lady."

It all seemed so unreal. His dad was the one who'd always pushed the two of them together. In some ways, Petey thought his ultimatum was a ploy to get them back together. Petey would never get back together with Aubrey. "You can say that again."

"So, what's the real state of your relationship with Madison?"

"The same as it's always been, Dad. I love her more than anyone else in the world. She's one of my best friends. It's been torture to remain a gentleman around her."

Damn it. Petey never should have said that to his father. He didn't want his father knowing anything about his sexual urges, and it was just awkward as all hell. But it was too late now; he'd already stuck his foot in his mouth.

He heard his dad laugh. That was strange. His father barely ever laughed. He wasn't the warm, fuzzy type. He was all business, all the time. "Do you know about me and your mother?"

That was a weird question, and of course, he knew the basics, but he didn't have any real insight into how his mother and father got together. They could seem so different from each other. His mom loved to laugh and take care of your problems. "Not all the details. Just that you guys were friends growing up."

"That's right. We weren't that different from you and Madison. Always close friends growing up. Then I was brave one day and asked her out on a proper date. It was the best decision I ever made. I hope you will be so bold as to do the same thing."

Well, that was a kick to the crotch. Petey made a living trying to be bold on the ice. But in his dating life, he wasn't bold. Maybe he should listen to his father and take it to the next level. "Why do I feel like I'm some sort of failure in your eyes?"

“Oh, Aaron. That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”
Actually, Petey didn’t. The family pressure was always so high, and he wanted to live up to that pressure. “I’m just saying make sure you do what you need to with Madison to make it a real relationship.”

“So, you approve, then?”

“I do. She’s a wonderful choice, but more importantly, she makes you happy. I have a meeting to get to. Give my best to Madison, and do me proud.”

The line went dead. He stared at the phone for a few moments as he processed everything. That wasn’t a normal conversation with his dad. He didn’t get chewed out for not living up to standards. Instead, it was all praise and wanting to see him happy. It was refreshing.

Now he had to figure out how to tell Maddy he wanted to take their relationship to the next level. That seemed like the most insurmountable step.

Maddy

Maddy drove up to the Peterson manor. It was time to do some party planning with Petey's mom, Lorelai, but her mom, Mary, had asked if Maddy could stop by the kitchen first so they could catch up with all the latest.

Maddy walked into the kitchen. Her mother was busy making lunch, and there was an aroma of roasted potatoes and vegetables in the air. Maddy was tempted to offer to help, but her mom would shoo her away, so she just greeted, "Hi, Mom," and leaned over the island.

Her mom breaded chicken cutlets. "Hi. Seems like things are moving quickly with you and Aaron."

She laughed. "Not if you think about how long we have been friends."

"I know. It's actually really sweet to see you guys getting together for real now that you are all grown up." She was probably remembering how Maddy and Petey would play house as kids. Maddy couldn't remember for sure if Lucas had been there or where he was at. It seemed like it was just Petey and herself.

She couldn't tell her mother that their romantic relationship wasn't any more real than childhood games. They were as they ever were: best friends for years. Yet he was the type of guy she wanted to be with.

Hell, she'd thought Jared was like him until she realized he was possessive and controlling. For so long, Jared's caring side was all she saw. She realized too late he wasn't the same kind of man as Petey.

She just nodded. "Seems a little surreal, but it's been wonderful. I just wish it was easier to see him on a daily basis."

Her mother paused her procedure of coating the chicken. "But you knew that boy has always loved hockey and being in Cleveland has brought him so much joy."

“I know.” She plucked a few grapes off the counter. “It’s why we were always going to have a long engagement. He wants me to finish school here, and I know his career is there. He’s been planning to fly me out to Cleveland a few times over the term. But no pressure.”

Her mom actually beamed at that statement. “Oh. I knew he was such a good boy. I was so afraid he would try to bring you out to Cleveland just to keep you close by.”

While her mother was too kind to say it, they both knew she was also taking a dig at Jared. He’d pitched such a fit when she applied to schools outside of British Columbia. She ended up going to the University of British Columbia to keep the peace, even though she’d always thought about studying in another province.

“That’s just not his style, Mom. I’ve thought about switching to Petey’s program so I could have some freedom but not due to any pressure from him. Hell, he might yell at me for considering the idea.”

“Why would he do that? It seems counterintuitive to think he would yell if he’s okay with you staying here.” Her mom’s tact dropped. “That’s something Jared would do.”

Maddy nodded. It was conversations like these that reminded her how much of a toxic relationship it had been. “Deep down, I know that Petey wouldn’t do that. I’m still trying to rid myself of those toxic seeds that Jared planted in me.”

“That was the only reason I was curious if you guys were rushing into an engagement. It wasn’t that long ago that you got out of that relationship.”

Petey would never be a rebound. He wasn’t even her boyfriend. She was close to admitting that the quick engagement was more at the behest of his father. But then Lorelei walked into the kitchen with a smile on her face. “I thought I heard voices in here.” She looked like a grand dame. She was sophisticated and chic while looking like she was unafraid of aging gracefully.

Lorelei looked Maddy's mom. "I do expect you at this meeting, Mary. You aren't making anything too complicated that will interfere with the party planning, right?"

"Yes. I was just going to put the chicken in. I'll have about twenty minutes to chat. Then I'll do the plating and re-join you."

"Splendid. We'll meet in the salon, but I'm borrowing your daughter now." Petey's mom guided her to the cozy room with a desk, books, and a sofa. They passed the dining room table, which was already set up for four.

There was a woman already seated on one of the sofas with a notepad in hand. She must have been the party planner. Maddy had seen the woman at various family functions but always thought she was a guest by the way that she would mingle with the other invitees.

Petey's mom sat next to the party planner while Maddy sat across from them. The open seat next to her would be for her mother to sit in.

Lorelei went into work mode. "Let me say, I'm so happy we get to do this, Madison. Your mother and I were always hoping this day would come."

"Thanks." She never imagined she would get so much support from everyone. It had been so easy to fool everyone into thinking they were a couple. But that led to another realization. When she and Petey broke it off, she would disappoint their families. That was the last thing she wanted to do.

The woman next to Petey's mom spoke up. "Hello. I'm Judy. I don't think we have formally met yet, but I'm going to help to make sure everything is planned to the tee for your engagement party. It'll be elegant and set the right tone. Let me make sure I understand the brief correctly. You're doing a long engagement with no wedding specifics in sight. This will be one of the few events here at the manor where Mary won't be cooking."

“Oh no ... That would never do. There’s no way I’m going to let any of your crazy caterers step foot into my kitchen.”

Both Maddy and Petey’s mom tried to hide their giggles. Maddy’s mom was predictable. She loved to shoo away anyone who could potentially usurp her or move around anything in her kitchen.

Petey’s mom said with a smile, “Now, Mary, I thought we went over this. This is a big night for the children, and you shouldn’t have to stress about a thing.”

“Which is why I don’t want anyone in there. No yahoos in the kitchen. Period. I’ll do both. It’s no different than any holiday feast when they were kids.”

Judy immediately replied, “Alright. No catering at this time. Now, do you have any wedding colors picked out or a theme?”

Maddy’s eyes went wide. This was an engagement party, not the wedding. Why would she have themes or wedding colors?

“That’s fine if you don’t,” said Judy. “I know most couples try to use the engagement party to set the tone for the wedding. We’ll just keep things simple.”

Maddy nodded, and Petey’s mom spoke up. “But I think it’s safe to have burgundy and gold with highlights of white for the flowers. Just make sure you don’t have too much filler. Last time, there was too much of that green stuff.”

That made Maddy smile. She loved dark flowers, and they were the perfect colors to celebrate Petey’s hockey career without being too overt.

With that decision made, the rest of the planning was easy. While the party was bound to be a grand affair, it was a bit more understated than the usual Peterson event and would suit their personalities, even if the guest list wasn’t a hundred percent in line with Petey and Maddy’s friend group. At least she could make sure Petey’s guests were invited.



Maddy

She waited for Petey at the airport. Both of them had been stressed out lately. He was coming out to Vancouver for the engagement party.

It was easy to see Petey with his broad shoulders. He had a grey toque on his head and a wool jacket. The only thing out of place was the look of concern on his face, but the moment he saw her, it changed to a happier expression. His pace quickened, and he pulled her into a hug. “I’m sorry to have gotten you into this. Are you sure you’re okay to do this big stupid party?”

She leaned up to give him a subtle kiss on his chin. Sure, they were getting sucked into it, but it was okay. Petey was her best friend. She could stand by his side and pretend to be his fiancée. “It’s totally fine.”

“You don’t have to sell it just yet,” he said, but there was a little grin on his face.

“I know. But I wanted to put you at ease.” That put a real smile on his face. He had such a lovely smile. What he didn’t realize was that this little arrangement was giving her more protection from Jared. Now that he was starting to rear his ugly head, it had been good to show that she wasn’t available or interested in going back to him this time.

“You look pretty, Maddy. You didn’t need to dress up so much.”

“Sure I did,” she said with a smile. They were going straight to the manor to do their walk through of all the party events. She had to look nice there. But it wasn’t special like tomorrow’s dress. Tonight was just a simple little black cocktail dress.

She felt a hug from behind. Petey didn’t look thrilled; he actually looked jealous, but it couldn’t be. He’d never been the jealous type, and they were only friends. She looked over her shoulder and saw it was Petey’s best friend, Corey. They’d met

a couple of summers ago for Petey's Stanley Cup win, and he came out to BC each summer for a weekend.

"Hey, Mads."

"How's married life treating you?"

"It's great." He let go of her and pulled someone to his side. He planted a sweet kiss on her lips. The look of sheer bliss on his face told Maddy this was the mysterious Jenna. She'd heard a lot about her, but she'd never met her. It was great to place a face to the name. "Jenna, meet Petey's girlfriend, Maddy."

Jenna gave a little wave. The love the two of them shared was obvious. It was sweet.

She felt Petey's arm snake around her waist. He said, "You remember Scotty, right?"

She nodded upon seeing Petey's captain. He stood out with his bright red hair and was older than the other two guys. It was a shame Alice and their baby weren't here too. They had debated making the journey, but it was a lot with a baby, so they were staying home and Scotty was only popping in for today and tomorrow. He didn't want to miss it, especially when it was announced that Lager couldn't make it. Lager and his son had gone to the All-Star game since that was more important than a fake engagement party.

"Glad you guys were able to come," said Maddy.

They headed towards the baggage claim. It was pretty easy going between everyone.

The first stop was at the manor. As Petey's friends were able to get settled in, her and Petey got commandeered by Judy. They did a walkthrough of the party with Judy, which was pretty simple. It was basically just, "This is where this table will be and this is where Petey will do a speech." It seemed so unnecessary.

Then it was time to go to dinner. She assumed that his friends were going to join especially since they were all hanging out for a cocktail hour. Everyone but Petey was

drinking since he was going to drive. But when it was time to go, they all said they were tired and wanted to go to bed early.

“Thanks for making this easy,” he said as he hopped into her car. “I know that I said this earlier, but you look great tonight. I feel like I should have gotten you flowers or books for tonight’s date.”

Maddy was touched that he’d even thought about getting her books as a romantic gesture. She loved how Petey always let her borrow books from the house and nurtured her love of books, even though he wasn’t a reader like she was. “Petey, you’re getting me a diamond ring. I think that’s plenty for tonight.”

He smiled. “I just hope the ring is okay. I didn’t get a chance to see it yet.”

“It’ll be fine.” She reached from the driver’s seat to hold his hand. “Don’t worry so much. The only thing that might be tricky is our exit plan.”

“Why?” He looked so confused by that statement.

“Cause both of our families love the idea of us getting together. I don’t want your family to hate me when we break up. I already owe them so much.”

“How could they hate you? I’m the one who would call off the engagement, which would make me look like the idiot and jackass.” His tone was serious. “You don’t owe us anything. You’re practically family, and if you’d let me, I would have spoiled you more.”

There were times he’d offered to purchase things for her like more books, but her pride wouldn’t let her get pampered. She’d rather work for it and earn it on her own. It was another thing entirely to accept a scholarship from Petey’s father, especially since if she ever failed the course, the scholarship money could be rescinded.

It was a short drive to the restaurant that Petey picked out. They both liked sushi, and he said he was missing their favorite place. It was a bit of a drive but had some of the best sushi in the city. They had been going to the place for years.

As soon as they got out of the car, Petey's easygoing nature evaporated. His posture stiffened, almost as if he expected cameras to be following his every move. She hated that for him.

They were seated in a booth in the back. Neither of them looked at the menu. Instead, Petey pulled a small box out of his pocket. She figured it would be the infamous ring that she'd be wearing for the foreseeable future, but she wasn't sure. It was wrapped in elegant white paper and a burgundy-colored ribbon. She'd never heard of a wrapped proposal ring.

"Alright, I think I messed up by having Lucas help to get this ring. I can't believe he wrapped the box. So, it's a surprise for both of us. But will you make it official and be my fake fiancée?"

She giggled. She loved his honesty. As she accepted the gift, she said, "Why did you ask Lucas to get the ring?"

"You said you wanted a ring that was designed in Vancouver if it wasn't an antique. So I needed someone local to get it designed, someone I trusted. I turned to Lucas."

Maddy couldn't believe he'd thought about that. She'd said it over a year ago and never thought he would remember. She untied the ribbon first and then used her finger to rip the tape on the wrapping. It was easy to open the nondescript box inside.

The ring was modern with some architectural touches and some geometric edges to the metal holding a huge diamond—a beautiful but flashy ring. It was a little obvious that Lucas helped to pick it out. If Petey had remembered that she wanted something locally made, there is no way he would have picked out such an outrageous ring. It wasn't her taste, even though she saw the beauty in the ring.

He bit his bottom lip as he waited for her reaction.

"It's great." Her voice faltered as she attempted to slide the ring onto her finger. It was too small, and she couldn't get it past her first knuckle.

“Mads, you hate it.” Of course, he’d picked up on that fact. He sounded so disappointed. Then again, she knew that the ring had to have cost a fair amount of money since the diamond was so clear and large. “On the plus side, when this is all over, you could sell that diamond for a pretty penny and the band itself is something you would wear.”

He was right. Without the diamond, the ring was perfect for her. There was just one major problem. One that they needed to figure out before tomorrow’s party, ‘cause there was no way they could do the engagement party without a ring. Everyone would want to see the type of ring a wealthy Peterson brother would give.

“That’s if I could get it on.” She held up her hand, showing how the ring wasn’t fitting.

“Shit—” Petey cut himself off, which meant a server must have been approaching, but she had her back to them. He quickly asked, “Would a sushi boat be too much food? I feel like I should really treat you tonight.”

Maddy nodded in agreement. “As long as you can eat more than your fair share, sure.”

With that, they ordered a sushi boat and some tea. Once their order was placed, Petey shifted the topic back to the status of the ring. “So, I can pick you up in the morning and we can go to the jewelers before my tee off time.”

“No way. Enjoy the golf outing and sleep in. I’ll get the ring fitted. Just tell me where I need to go for that.”

She could tell that Petey wasn’t in love with the idea by the way he closed his eyes like he was being forced to give in. Thankfully, he told her the name of the jeweler.

“Don’t worry about a thing. Besides, it’s silly for you to go to the jeweler’s if you’re planning on going golfing with the boys. By the way, do you want me to call up Jenna and see if she wants to go shopping? I don’t want her to be bored.”

The toothy grin that broke out on his face told her she’d made the right suggestion. But she’d known it would be nice to ask the wife of his best friend to hang out some so she could

get to know her. Plus, if all the boys were going golfing, it would save her from being alone at the manor.

Petey

The closer they got to the night of the engagement party, the more stressful everything became. It seemed like it was more about impressing their business connections than it was about anything personal. He knew it would be that way, but it put pressure on him and Maddy to make sure they spoke to all the right people. She had so few guests there to support her.

Hell, if it wasn't for Corey and Scotty, it would have just been his brother there for him, and he was obligated to be there.

At least he was going to play some golf while they made the last minute preparations at the house. It was going to be a zoo at the house, and it was easier to stay out of the way while they did the set up. Besides, it was fun to show off the fact that you could actually play golf in Vancouver all year round.

He wished he had more time to take the guys over to Victoria for some of the best courses, but they needed to keep it local. Hopefully, the grass wouldn't be wet.

He heard a knock on his door and opened it to find one of the most ridiculous looks he'd ever seen. It was as if Corey was trying to look like a clown: mismatched socks, tie-dyed pants, and a golf hat with a pom pom on it. The only thing that was halfway respectable was the white polo shirt.

At least Scotty looked the part with a burgundy polo shirt and grey slacks.

Petey guffawed at the contrast in looks. "What the hell are you wearing, Cor?"

"Isn't this what everyone wears to a golf course?"

He and Scotty just looked at each other. Petey was dressed just like Scotty, with a simple polo shirt and slacks.

Scotty took the words out of his mouth. "No!"

"What's wrong with my outfit?"

“Everything, but especially the hat.” With a shake of his head, Petey said, “You know, you don’t have to be the center of attention all the time.”

Corey ditched the hat and placed it on Petey’s head. “You’re right; you need it. You’re starting to become too uptight again.”

The smile on the two guys’ faces made Petey leave the silly hat on. It would give Corey some joy, and it would make him stand out less. The hat was actually oddly comfortable on Petey’s head. They didn’t have the same hat size, so Corey had probably wanted him to wear it the whole time.

“What do you expect? You know even I think it’s fucking weird being called Aaron and waited on hand and foot all day. Come on, let’s go.”

The guys just smiled. Lucas came out of his suite. “So, how much of a handicap is Aaron giving me by having me paired up with Scotty?”

It was nice that Lucas could join them. They had a real foursome like they had in Cleveland. The only sad thing was that Lucas was a better golfer than Lager, so Petey and Corey had their work cut out for them.

Arriving at the course, he was surprised to see Jared working at the pro-shop where they rented their clubs. The guy was being a bit of a dick by making comments under his breath about Petey and the guys. It seemed like he just never grew up. It didn’t help that he’d always hated how close Petey was with Maddy. Why couldn’t he be friends with a girl without dating her?

Once they got the bags loaded into the carts, they headed out to the course. Right as they were starting to tee up, Scotty asked, “What was that guy’s problem in the shop? Seems like you have some history.”

“Oh, we went to school together and he’s Maddy’s ex.” Petey aimed his shot.

Corey pulled up to the starting tee and chimed in, “The one that scared her last week?”

“Yup. I won’t lie. I wanted to punch that creep in the face for scaring her, but that would have created too many issues.” Petey bent over and pulled the club back, then whacked the ball with all his might. It was a clean shot.

Scotty came up to the line. As he set up the shot, he said, “Can’t blame you for that. But speaking of Maddy, how was your date last night?”

Corey lined up his shot. He appeared to be of the ‘Tee it high, let it fly’ club, but his stance looked like he was just going to try and take a clapper. Golf still wasn’t Corey’s sport, but he enjoyed trying.

After he took the swing, Petey said, “Could have been better.”

“What happened?”

“The ring didn’t fit.” Maddy wasn’t mad at all about it. She laughed it off like a champ, but he felt like a jerk. He felt awful for not knowing her ring size and just taking a guess. “Thankfully, they said it wouldn’t be an issue to get it fixed before tonight. I just feel like a jerk for not picking it up for her.”

“So, why don’t you?”

“Because she insisted she would do it. I tried to do it.”

“Then that’s all you can do. Are you ready for tonight?”

“Yeah. I picked up the new suit earlier today.”

“You’re really going all out for her, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I guess so. But you guys have been giving me shit about my suits lately, so why not get a new one made up?”

“Please tell me you had some help getting a suit so we never have to see that brown plaid one again,” Corey said. That was the one suit he really hated. Petey had to agree, it was pretty bad. He was just waiting to get some others made.

“Yes. Lager helped to pick it out.”

“Him? Are you sure you wanted his advice?”

“Well, I sure as hell wasn’t going to get it from you.” Petey let go of the golf cart wheel and waved in his general direction. “Unlike you, I don’t like to stand out in the crowd.”

Scotty pulled his cart beside them. “Don’t worry. I saw it earlier today. It’s good. You would think he’s still trying to impress the girl.”

Corey smiled. He knew the truth: Petey still needed to win the girl. She may have agreed to be his fiancée for a bit, but it was just for show. He kept circling back to the conversation with Lucas. Lucas was right, he should marry his best friend, and that was Maddy.

“It’s new love,” said Corey. “Of course, he wants to impress the hell out of her.”

Maddy

It was bizarre to come to the manor for a party she wasn't working at. Instead, it was in honor of her and Petey.

As she pulled up to park, she was surprised that Petey was waiting for her outside. He looked exquisite in the midnight blue suit. It showed off his hockey butt and his shoulder muscles. He had a super wide smile on his face and immediately came over and opened up her car door. He held out a hand to help her out of the car.

"You look great today," he said as he placed a hand on the small of her back. He led her to the party area.

They looked like the perfect couple. His suit matched her gown perfectly. Her hair was swept to the side with waves, harking back to the glamour of old Hollywood. Even the dress was long and sleek with simple lines.

"Did you have any more issues with the ring?"

"Nope." She raised up her hand so he could inspect the ring closely. On her finger sat the rather large diamond. It was a beautiful ring, but it didn't really feel like either of them. It was a ring that screamed they were engaged, but that was the whole purpose of it.

"Ready for tonight?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Are you sure I look okay?" She looked down at the dress. It had been so much more expensive than she normally would consider.

He paused and gave her a kiss on the ear. "You are beautiful. I'm the one who looks like a schmuck standing next to you."

When he gave her little kisses like that, it confused the shit out of her. It was like he cared about her as a real girlfriend but then wouldn't go any further. "You aren't a schmuck; you look very handsome. How was your golf outing today?"

“It was good, although I ran into one of your favorite people.”

“Oh, you went there.” When Petey said they were going golfing, she never thought to warn him that Jared worked at one of the local clubs. The two of them were never good friends, but they didn’t seem to have any problems. As Jared started to get more erratic, it was hard to guess if things would be okay between them or if he would even still be employed at the club. “Did it go okay?”

“Yeah. He didn’t give me a full set of clubs and said a few things under his breath, but other than that, it was fine.”

They walked into the main hall. It had been transformed into an elegant ballroom. It was nice to have Petey by her side. It made her feel good. She had a protector, although at this rate, she probably knew the people here better than him. Although, she only knew them in terms of what type of canapés they preferred.

She whispered to him, “Is it just me, or is this party for your dad only? It feels like there are only a handful of people truly here for the two of us.”

“Why do you think I told you to invite a couple of your closest friends and I made sure a couple of the guys were here?”

Petey didn’t realize that she’d cut out so many of her friends, thanks to Jared. He made her feel like her friends didn’t care or didn’t matter. Petey was one of the few friends she couldn’t cut out of her life. Now, even with being on her own, it was hard to rebuild relationships quickly. She just said, “I have you.”

He smiled but didn’t say anything more, just leaving it hanging there. It was times like these that flat out infuriated her. Despite his casual flirting, he most likely had her in the friend zone and there was no moving away from it. Maybe this whole arrangement would be a nightmare for her heart.

Petey’s dad came up to them. “You two look perfect together. But if you don’t mind, I’m going to borrow Madison

for a short time. Then I want you to do your speech, Aaron. Pay attention to my signal.”

With that, Maddy walked off with his dad. He started to introduce her to several of his business partners. It was the first time his dad seemed to be trying to talk her up with his friends and help set up some new internships. It was nice to have a few introductions, and his dad was giving her so much praise for her legal mind. She had no idea he had been following her academic career all that closely. It was refreshing.

They made polite conversation with each of his guests. His dad headed over to where the musicians were playing string music in the background for ambiance. So that meant it was about to be show time.

Lucas came up to her and said, “You two look adorable together.” She forced a smile, and he continued, “No, really. He’s so relaxed around you. You seem to be the only one to get him to relax when he isn’t playing hockey or hanging out with those guys.”

“But we barely spent any time together today since he was hanging out with his hockey buddies instead of wanting to hang out with me.”

He shot her a look. “He loves the crap out of you. He thought he was being respectful by giving you time to get ready. He didn’t want to pressure you today.”

She was back to being confused about what Petey actually felt for her. She should probably just talk to him about it, but it scared her to ask. What if Lucas had read it wrong?

Mr. Peterson spoke into a microphone. “Today is a momentous day and something we have hoped for, for a long time. So let me bring up my son, Aaron, so he can give a few words.”

She heard Corey try to whistle. Everyone turned to him, and it was clear that both Scotty and Jenna had elbowed him on both sides, so he stopped. But he gave them a look like he

didn't know he was being rude. Then again, he probably thought he was just being all chill.

Petey walked up next to his father and took the mic from his hand. He scanned the crowd, and his eyes settled on Maddy. Everything about him just warmed her up. "I hate to do this to you, Maddy, but can you come up here?"

She walked up to the stairs and stood next to the two Peterson men. If love was palpable, it was there. Petey grabbed her hand and looked directly into her eyes. None of the crowd existed in that moment.

He continued, "The two of us have been friends for a long time. I can't imagine not having you in my life. I was so grateful when you gave me the chance of a lifetime by going on a date with me. I was glad it was just perfect and you made everything so easy. Then you made me the happiest man in the world by accepting my proposal. I love you, and I'm glad that you'll be by my side for the rest of time."

He then gave her a wonderful kiss.



Petey

He hated being so far apart from Maddy. Hearing that she thought someone had come into her place while she was gone was the worst thing ever. He wanted nothing more than to protect her.

After the game in Florida, he was exhausted. He was glad that Corey didn't give him crap about wanting to head straight back to the room like he used to. Thankfully, he'd calmed down with the post-game celebrations since his cancer battle and meeting Jenna. It wasn't unusual for the two of them to head back to the room.

As they walked there, Corey asked, "So, when are you going to see Maddy again?"

"We are still working that out."

Corey arched a brow. While Corey wouldn't cop to it, he was a terrible romantic. He'd been dying for more information about whether Maddy and Petey would get together for real. He could be as bad as Lager when it came to telling people any news. Corey punched his shoulder. "How hard is it to ask her to come to your place? Just fly her out."

"It's not like she doesn't have school or anything."

"Are you seriously letting school get in the way of love? We all know that you guys are totally into each other."

Petey couldn't deny that. He loved Maddy, even if he wasn't brave enough to tell her.

God, he missed having her around again. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to have sex with her. More than that, he wanted to be with her. "Dude, I'm not going to tell her that law school doesn't matter. She's wanted that law degree forever."

"I still think you're making a mistake, but I'll stop harassing you tonight. I'm going to order some food. Want any?"

"Sure, get me my normal."

Ordering food post-game wasn't uncommon now. Cor had so many food issues, especially pre-game, and he needed to eat after the game as well. Petey normally got any appetizer that would fit in their meal plan.

As Corey phoned in an order, Petey pulled up the footage of the cameras at Maddy's place. If he was being honest with himself, he did it to get a look at her, but he knew her class often ran late and he told himself he was doing it for her protection.

At first, nothing was amiss. Then Petey saw her creepy ex-boyfriend looking into the windows. "Son of a bitch!"

Petey took a screenshot of him. Thankfully, he was just peering into each window. That was until he tried to push up a couple of the windows. So Petey kept taking screenshots.

Petey was so fucking glad that the windows didn't budge at all. He wasn't sure what happened next, but Jared fled.

"What's going on?" Corey wasn't used to hearing Petey curse off the ice.

"Can't say."

Petey called Maddy. She needed to be warned about the creeper. She picked up. "You need to go to my dad's or Lucas' place ASAP."

"What? Why?"

He wasn't doing a good job of not alarming her, and he was going to sound like a stalker himself. Maybe this was a bad idea, but it was too late. "I was checking the cameras at your place to make sure they were working. I spotted Jared trying to break in and looking around."

"While it's not good, it'll be okay. Did he get in, or did he stay out?" She was surprisingly not alarmed. She was being matter of fact. "Are you sure it was him?"

There was no doubt in his mind that it was her ex. None. "Yeah. I took some screenshots."

"Great. Send them to me."

How the hell was that great? This was not a good situation. She could be in serious danger. It was clear that she wasn't telling him everything. "Madison, what's going on? I mean really going on?"

"We both know Jared is a creep. Well, I didn't tell you how he was also a tad controlling and he hasn't taken the break up well."

Petey didn't want to hear any more. Why didn't she tell him? He would have taken care of Jared himself and gotten her better security so much sooner.

The worst part was that he was stuck in Florida and couldn't help. He was so damn far away from her. The only consolation was that he had the screenshots of Jared trying to break in.

"Mads, why didn't you say anything?" She was quiet. He could hear her breathing. She must be scared of his reaction. There was no reason for her to be afraid of him. Maintaining a soft but steady tone to make sure she knew he wasn't trying to control her but wanted to help protect her, he said, "I'm not mad. I'm just worried about you. I can't help you when I don't know what's going on."

"I know," she said with a deep breath. "I've been handling it. I just haven't been able to get a peace bond, because there wasn't any proof. I think you got me that."

The fact that she was trying to get a restraining order from the criminal court in the first place was telling. She was in danger and hadn't said anything.

He wanted to scold her for holding back secrets from him. Knowing her, she wasn't trying to worry him. Sadly, he was way more worried now than before. Given how freaking calm she was acting, almost like it was just another occurrence, Petey realized there was no way she was going to his dad's or even his brother's place. "You're staying at your place tonight, I take it."

"Yeah. I have too much work, and I don't want to be a bother."

“Oh, Maddy. You’re not.” He rubbed his fist into his forehead. He couldn’t handle it anymore. She could be so damn stubborn, and there was no reasoning with her. He was so tempted to pile on the guilt or bribe her to go stay at his dad’s place with their family library, just for his own peace of mind. But he wasn’t that guy, especially not after hearing how Jared had been controlling. No matter how frustrating, he wouldn’t make her do anything she didn’t want to do. “Can you do me a favor and take those screenshots straight to the authorities and make sure you keep things locked up?”

“That’s the plan. I should let you get to sleep. I know you had a rough game.”

He couldn’t believe she knew that about his game. She should have been in class, and she was too straight-laced to be watching it on the sly while taking notes. “Didn’t you have class tonight? Don’t tell me you were naughty tonight.”

“Not nearly as naughty as I want to be.”

“Oh?”

“There is something super appealing about the idea of showing up naked on your doorstep.”

Christ, where did that come from? He went hard at the very idea. But she’d never do that. At least not here at a hotel in Florida. “Even if Cor is sitting next to me?”

As he said that, his boner deflated some. There was no way he would ever want to share Maddy. While he didn’t think Corey would be interested in a threesome anymore, before he got married to Jenna, he would have been all for it. But if Petey ever had Maddy to himself, she would be his alone.

She busted out with a giggle. “Oh, hell no. Not with him there.”

While it was probably a dick move, Petey said, “Oh, there’s someone else you would consider?”

“No.” That was a relief and the words that he needed to hear from her. She then said, “Well, I’ll let you go. Get some sleep.”

“Please promise me that you’ll be safe.” He wished he could do more to get her to go to the manor, but he was in a better mood after the crazy sidebar from Maddy about wanting to be naughty. He would be fantasizing about that all night long.

“Of course. Don’t worry so much, Petey Bear.”

He was so close to saying ‘I love you,’ but that would freak her out. So he said, “Fine, Maddy. Study well.”

He hung up the phone and sent her the photos of her ex trying to get into her place.

He didn’t even look up from the phone when Corey asked, “What the hell is going on? Is everything okay at home?”

“Not a hundred percent sure.” He was brushing off Corey, but it was the easiest way to keep his composure.

“Come on. What happened?” Corey never left things alone.

As long as he didn’t have to tell him that Maddy came on to him out of nowhere and he had no idea how to take it. “Apparently, Maddy’s mysterious stalker is her ex, and I caught him trying to break into her place.”

His jaw dropped. “Shit. No wonder you wanted her to go to your family’s place.”

“Seriously. I wish she would go there, but nope. She wants to handle it on her own, and I hate it.”

Maddy

Getting that call from Petey only served to prove two things: Jared was literally capable of anything, and it was a good thing that Petey got those security cameras.

While she had been detached and business-like on the phone with Petey, she did feel like a bit of a wreck now that her worst suspicions about Jared were confirmed. She needed to talk to the police and get that peace bond fully secured. Up until that moment, she hadn't fully believed that Jared might try to do anything. She'd been hoping the break-in was anyone but him.

The severity of the situation was setting in. Jared wasn't going to give up easily, and the peace bond might not be enough. Maybe Petey was right and she should call up the Petersons or her mom, stay away from the apartment for the night since there was no way she would get the peace bond before then.

But she was winding herself up and the anxiety wouldn't help her. She took a few deep breaths, and she felt her heartbeat slow. She was thinking clearer again.

It was unlikely that Jared would try anything more that night. So she was safe. She could upgrade her locks and make sure she always used the buddy system.

Her phone buzzed again. She immediately picked it up and said, "Hello."

"Don't think your engagement to Vancouver's wealthiest family will protect you. You're only a charity case to them and a solution to some bad press." Hostility seeped through the phone, and it seemed like Jared might have been drinking as well.

She twisted the huge rock on her finger, but she knew that ring did give her protection. Even with Petey being so far away, his first instinct was for her to get to safety. There was no truth to Jared's statements, but there was no reasoning with

him. “Jared. Get it a rest. I’m happy with my new fiancé. I’m moving on, and I hope you can do the same.”

She thumbed off the phone.

Meditation wasn’t going to work. While she hated doing it, because she’d told Petey she was fine only a few minutes earlier, she rang him.

Petey picked up on the first ring. “You okay, Mads?”

“Yeah. Do you have some time to speak?”

“Sure thing. Corey and I are still waiting for our dinner. What’s happened now?”

“Oh, Jared called and it just shook me.”

“Awwww. Mads. Are you sure you’re okay there? I know you don’t want to leave and are on top of things by investigating getting that restraining order. You just needed that proof. But what’s really going on?”

She knew that was coming. It was a minor miracle he hadn’t pressed her for more information when he caught Jared breaking in. But there was no way he was going to let it slide again. He was going to push for details, and she couldn’t blame him. If the roles were reversed, she would do the same.

She took a deep breath to steel herself. It wasn’t going to be a fun conversation, but Petey deserved to know everything. “Well, you know that it wasn’t a pretty break up with Jared.”

“Yeah. I also know he showed up at school asking to get back together.” Naturally, he would bring up that day, probably hoping she would tell him more about it. But she knew he was pissed about the whole situation. When she didn’t say anything else, he continued, “And you got scared when we saw him together in Vancouver. Has he threatened you?”

“Tonight was the closest to a real threat.” Petey went silent, which meant he was trying to control himself. She couldn’t blame him. “He said your money couldn’t protect me and I was just your charity case.”

“Mads. I want to call our lawyer now. That’s a threat. Add in the fact that he was breaking into your place, and you really shouldn’t be alone. Let me help you. Please.”

She wanted to fight against his urge to throw money and prestige at the problem. That was what actually made her feel like a charity case, and she didn’t want that. Hearing his voice and even his reason was making her feel stronger. “You are helping. I need to hear your voice and maybe even be close to you. But no to the lawyer. I have it under control. I was pretty sure it was Jared who tried to break in before.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Maddy?”

“Cause I wasn’t sure. You got me the cameras. That was enough, and now we know it’s him. I’ve already taken steps by making sure I’m not coming and going to school alone. “

“Are you sure that’s enough and you don’t want to use our lawyer?”

“Yeah. But thanks. Can we just talk about hockey and forget about that asshole for a bit?”

“Sure.”

They talked about his last couple of games. By the time there was a knock on the door with his room service order, she already felt so much better. She missed Petey, but she was glad she could always turn to him.



Maddy

She'd been looking forward to the trip to Cleveland for a couple of weeks now. She didn't care if this trip was only to make a show of dating Petey. Quite frankly, she needed the time off and away from the law books.

Coming through the airport, she almost immediately spotted Petey. He was a little short for some hockey players, even though he was 5'11. What he lacked in height, he made up for in being solidly built. He was wearing a hoodie and jeans. She wished he was wearing a t-shirt so she could see his muscles.

His lips turned upwards and his eyes sparkled when he caught her eye. It was surprising that he seemed so happy she'd arrived. He didn't always seem to be a romantic.

She casually walked up to him. He surrounded her in a bear grip. That hug was everything she needed. Her back got so stiff in the airplane seats. His hugs would crack her back. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Me too." He placed a hand on the small of her back. "Do you need to pick up a bag?"

She shook her head from side to side. "Nope. I'm all set."

Petey took her over to his car. It was a nice BMW. As the car door shut, he said, "Still want to go to Cedar Point today?"

Going to the land of rollercoaster parks seemed like it would be a lot of fun. She was glad he had the day off so they could go on all the rides. "Yup. Are you sure it's not a problem?"

"Absolutely. Plus, by going today, we won't have to take Klaus."

Then she felt guilty. Every kid should go to an amusement park. "Are you sure that's okay? He'll be missing out."

"Yup. Klaus is with his mom today. Besides, with the little guy, we would be doing only the kiddie rides. He's not quite

big enough for the coasters.”

She felt reassured, and it was nice to know they could do the rides they wanted. There were some of the fastest and tallest rollercoasters in the world there. “Okay.”

One of the best things about going to the amusement park was it gave Petey and her a chance to relax. There was rap music playing in the background and every so often, he would start singing along to the music. As he was halfway through ‘We Ready,’ she busted out laughing. She couldn’t hold it back anymore.

He looked her way and went, “What?”

“It’s just funny to see you let go like this. It’s like summer.”

Anytime she’d seen him play in Vancouver, he’d been a giant stress ball. He put on a great show on the ice and played his heart out. It wasn’t surprising that he was one of the best defenders in the league. He really worked so hard to be the best.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He almost sounded offended.

She quickly said, “You are either tired or stressed out about playing when I see you in season. So it’s nice to see you so relaxed and singing along to the music.”

He shrugged. “I guess you bring out the best in me.” It was so sweet to hear that. She didn’t believe it for a moment, but sometimes you needed to be told that.

Petey

Once they got to park, he knew his easygoing nature evaporated some, since they had to be on display. He had to show off the fact that they were truly boyfriend and girlfriend, even though Maddy was one of his best friends.

He grabbed her hand. It was so soft compared to his callused hands.

She interlaced her fingers with his and looked up. “Relax, Petey.”

Contrary to his natural instinct to stiffen up, the tension seeped away. Her voice was so relaxing to his ears.

She was looking at the map to pick out the best route. It was so typical. This was her vacation, and he was along for the ride. Although, after about ten minutes of standing at the same spot almost in the middle of the main foot traffic exiting the metal detectors and the ticket lines, he said, “Hey, Maddy, we need to decide on a ride or something. I think I had seven people nearly walk into me already.”

She laughed, and her hair shook in the wind. “Don’t rush me, mister.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying we need to pick something or at least walk over to the side so we aren’t creating a trip hazard.” He pulled her out of the way. Once they were away from all the foot traffic, he said, “See, I’m not trying to interfere with your plan. I’m literally making sure we don’t get run into.”

She muttered something, but it was practically inaudible. He took it as thanks. Then she folded up the map, stuck it into her back pocket, and laced her fingers around his. They were off to the far end of the park.

He should have known she would pick one of the inverted rollercoasters to ride first. She had a love-hate relationship with them. She loved how her feet could hang freely. He didn’t care for them. His frame was too big to fit comfortably in the

seat. But he fit, and that was the important thing. It would have been truly embarrassing if he couldn't fit in the seat at all.

There was a camera on the ride somewhere—he saw a souvenir shop as they entered the line. He paid attention to where the camera was since he wanted a cute keepsake if it worked out.

The ride was quick. They spun through the air and went into loops. The worst part of the ride was waiting. They were in line for a solid twenty minutes for a two-minute ride. At least it wasn't super busy.

They got to the shop. Of course, the photos were waiting for them to see when they arrived. He nearly pissed himself with laughter when he saw their photo. They were the typical odd couple. He had a wide smile, and Maddy sat beside him with a look of abject terror on her face: closed eyes, scream, and all.

The moment she saw the photo, she said, "Oh, hell no. You aren't going to get that photo."

"Why not?" He probably wasn't going to get the photo, despite it being hysterical. But the fact that she didn't want the image to last made him want it more.

"Cause it looks like I'm about to wet myself. No. There's no way you can get that one." She pushed him to the side with a laugh.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Seriously. There's several ways I can get it. They accept all my cards, and I have cash."

"You asshole. That's not what I meant when I said there's no way you can get it," she said with a laugh. She was definitely done with putting up with his shit. But it made her look so sweet, and he loved how she was unafraid of making him laugh.

The craziest thought came into his head. He wanted to kiss her. The fact she was laughing yet was so clearly annoyed with him was a turn on. They'd always been close friends, but she'd never turned him on like she did in that very moment.

But as quickly as the thought entered his head, he realized the major flaw with that idea. She was just doing him a favor by being his ‘fake girlfriend’ until he could get things to settle down on the bunny front. That’s all.

He needed to control himself. He couldn’t act on his urges. Well, he could, but that would be a major disaster. She needed to not look so damn good and kissable. While his next words were probably a dick move, he had to distract himself from doing anything dumb. “What are you going to do to stop me?”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. He couldn’t believe she’d just done that. Sure, it was a girlfriend move, but he was wholly unprepared for it. Feeling the warmth of her body and smelling the slightest bit of citrus shampoo in her hair, he gave her a little salute in his trousers. But he reminded himself she wasn’t actually trying to hug him, let alone trying to turn him on. She was making a play for his wallet that was chilling in his pocket.

He’d never been glad for those stupid pocket zippers before. It gave him enough time to grab her wrist and give her a disapproving look. “What do you think you are doing?”

“Trying to stop you from getting that awful picture of us.” They looked into each other’s eyes. Hers were playful. They looked so purple today. “Please.”

That did it. She was going to get her way. Her plea was all he needed to prevent him from being a dick. He leaned down and gave her a soft peck on the cheek as he said, “Alright then.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. She gave him a soft, tender kiss. They separated from their kiss, but their heads were still close to each other. She whispered, “That’s quite a boyfriend move you just pulled.”

He didn’t know what to say. He was taken aback and so hungry for more. But could they even be more than fake boyfriend and girlfriend?

He backed away from her. Not too quickly. He couldn’t make it look like they were having a fight. Just enough so he

didn't do anything to jeopardize their friendship. In a calm voice, he said, "Let's go to the next ride."

"Okay." She seemed so relaxed and casual. "Maybe I'll even pose like a pro like you did."

She'd obviously realized he was looking for the camera. But if she was thinking she might pose for a photo, that meant it would be more of a normal rollercoaster next: fast, tall, and with proper cars to sit in.

From there on out, they pulled off the boyfriend/girlfriend moves pretty easily. They flirted, held hands, and even had a few more kisses.

Maddy

It was so weird to see their friendship blur and change. If only for a few minutes, Maddy believed he had deeper feelings for her than just friendship. That first kiss was tender and sweet, and man did she want more. But they also posed for a few picture perfect kisses for social media that had no feeling.

The ride back to Cleveland felt too long after a day of traveling and being out in the sun. She was exhausted. But most importantly, she was trying to figure out if Petey meant anything by that kiss. She wanted to chat with a friend. Normally, she would talk to Petey.

He asked her, “What’s going on in your mind?”

“It’s nothing.” She tried to dismiss his questions. She wasn’t ready to tell him what was really on her mind. Her thoughts had been lingering on it since the engagement party. She couldn’t be stuck in the friend zone.

While he didn’t stop staring at the road, his hand reached towards hers. “I don’t buy that for a minute, Maddy.”

“Well, it’s true.” She knew her voice wasn’t all that convincing, but she hoped he was going to let it drop since he went silent.

“It must be about me, then. I hope I didn’t screw anything up today.”

It was shocking for him to even think he might have screwed up. Sure, things were muddled by the kiss, but he didn’t mess up. “You didn’t. Today was really nice. I promise.”

“Okay.” He seemed less than satisfied with that answer. “But if I overstepped what you’re comfortable with, you’ll tell me, right?”

“Of course.” The crazy thing was, she never thought he would do anything that would make her uncomfortable. He might confuse her, but that was the worst thing possible. It

seemed easier to say he would be the perfect boyfriend rather than ask him to be her real boyfriend. “We can just have some fun this week. I don’t think you realize you’re the perfect boyfriend, if the right woman ever catches your eye.”

“Yeah, right.” He scoffed. He never did see how he had it all. It had nothing to do with his money or the fact he was hot as sin. He had the whole package. Sweet, caring, and so protective. He always asked before taking things.

“Seriously. I know you don’t see it, but you are the stud in the movies that the girls want. They would see it if they just got to know you.” She stopped herself short of saying she wanted him.

“That’s the problem. Nobody wants to really get to know me. They either want a one-night stand or the bank account. I like how you see me for who I am.” Was this his way of going to the next level?

Still not ready to tell him she loved him for who he was, she deflected. “Everyone else is so dumb. If they only knew how to see you. But you don’t put yourself out there nearly as much as you could.”

“Like you are any different, Maddy,” he shot back.

“I never said I was different. But can you blame me for being a little gun shy after Jared?” She hated that she’d brought up Jared. He still scared her from time to time, although the engagement plan did keep people from asking why she wasn’t dating.

“No. Just saying.” She realized they had to be getting close to Petey’s place when he stopped at a gate. He punched some numbers into a box, and the gate immediately opened. “Oh, heads up, Lager might be a bit cranky.” Petey knew her all too well. Before she could even think about trying to find another place to stay in Cleveland, he said, “It has nothing to do with you. He’s going to be cranky one way or another. He’s been struggling with the whole break up with his girlfriend. He didn’t want us to change our plans. I promised this week would be good for you, and I’m a man of my word.”

They pulled into a lovely development with beautiful houses that also had a down to earth quality about them. She was just curious about what would happen next.



Petey

Today they were supposed to have their double date. But that wasn't to be, since Lager had broken up with the good doctor and was an emotional wreck. Lager had busted up Petey's shoulder in practice due to his emotions.

Petey didn't care about any of that. He was just so damn glad that Maddy had spent the night in his bed. They didn't have sex. But it was hard to get out of bed with her snuggled up to him all night long.

She touched his shoulder. He flinched as if a nerve ending had fired. She said, "Holy shit. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," he said on instinct. The shoulder was fine as long as he used ice. There were times at Cedar Point amusement park that it had hurt, but he'd been having so much fun with Maddy that it was easy to hide from her. Most importantly, he could still play. A few more days and it would be fine.

"Nope. I know you better than that. What happened?" It was both incredibly sweet and caring that she even asked. It made him want to kiss her, but she was only his fake girlfriend, not his real one, even if that line was getting blurred.

He rolled over onto his back. "Lager and I were having some board battles in practice before you arrived. It's nothing."

The side eye came out. She didn't believe him. Then again, he'd flinched pretty good. She seldom saw him injured. "Can I get you anything?"

He wanted to scream that she could make all his dreams come true and take advantage of his morning wood. No way that was going to happen. It was just fantasy. "Some ice wouldn't be a bad idea."

With a tilt of her head, Maddy moved out of the bed. He tried to get himself under control. Maddy didn't need to see

him so aroused. She was his best friend. There was no way she could see him wanting her so much.

Maybe it was an awful idea to have Maddy as his fake girlfriend. It made him want her so much more than before. It was torture to have her sleep beside him every night and only being able to cuddle.

Besides, what if she met a guy she really wanted to date? It was probably too big an ask. Before he could get lost in his doubts, Maddy came back with a bag of ice.

Maddy

It had been so much fun to hang out with Petey the day before, even if she was confused about the status of their relationship.

Waking up next to him was so unreal. He was like a furnace with his arms wrapped around her. She could barely move, but she didn't want to. Her only concern in the moment was how long it would actually last. He'd already snuck out once for his morning practice, but he came straight back to bed as soon as he was done.

She heard the doorbell go off. Figuring that Lager would get the door, she relished her comfortable spot. The doorbell rang again. That meant Petey or she should answer it. Given how he hadn't moved, it was on her. She peeled Petey's arm from her, then she ran down the stairs to open the door.

As soon as the door opened, a little blond boy rushed in. From what she saw, he looked like a much younger version of Lager. The kid went upstairs with a little suitcase.

There was a very pissed-off woman at the door who yelled, "What the hell are you staring at, and who the hell are you? What do you think you are doing in my house?"

Maddy put her hands up, and her heart rate ramped up. She'd only opened the door so Petey could get some rest and she had no clue where Lager was. Now she wished she was still in Petey's arms. This was absurd. "I'm Maddy, and the last I knew, this isn't your house."

The fact the woman said it was her house was just crazy. This was Lager's place, and there hadn't been a woman living there in almost a year. But then it dawned on Maddy that this woman had to be Lager's ex-wife. If she hadn't been taken off guard, she would have thought of it sooner, especially since she was dropping off Klaus.

"Oh, I swear you puck bunnies get dumber every year."

What the fuck? A puck bunny? Her? She didn't hang out at hockey rinks trying to get a quick lay. She was hardly at the

hockey rink at all. She needed to get away.

She grabbed the edge of the door, needing to close it. Unfortunately, the ex used her hand to block the door from shutting. “You aren’t going to shut the door in my face.”

Maddy needed to get out of there, but she didn’t know the best way without escalating the problem further. She thought she heard some footsteps coming towards her. At this point, she didn’t care who it was.

“You shouldn’t be here at this house,” Bridge said. “It’s bad enough that I got rid of the last bunny and he brought in another one.”

It took every ounce of strength in Maddy not to attack the woman. Instead, she tried to maintain a stoic and calm exterior.

Thankfully, Lager came and he was pissed. He shouted, “Enough.”

Almost at the same time, Petey was at the top of the stairs. “Maddy, where are you?”

She took her leave and ran up to Petey’s arms. She wasn’t a cheap whore who deserved to be attacked for simply opening the door. She wanted some protection, and she knew Petey would give that.



Petey

Maddy was a wreck when she came upstairs. She was crying so hard that all he could do was wrap his arms around her. He pulled her back to his bed.

It broke his heart to see her cry. He had no idea anything was going down until he heard Lager shouting. It had been so lovely not hearing raised angry voices in the house all season. For a change, he was glad that Lager did. If he hadn't yelled, Petey wouldn't have known Maddy needed his protection.

He kept rubbing circles around her back. "I'm so sorry, Maddy. I had no idea what was happening."

It was so ridiculous for Bridge to be hostile to Maddy. She was the sweetest person around, as long as you didn't engage her in a legal debate. Then she got fiery. But she wouldn't have just launched into legal debates when opening up the door. This was all on Bridge.

Maddy broke out into more tears and buried her head in his torso. It crushed him to see her cry. She'd broken her arm when they were kids and didn't even flinch. He admired her strength, so the fact she was crying now hit him hard.

He couldn't even look at her face, let alone her eyes. He'd failed her today. This was supposed to be a trip where she could relax and forget about her issues with Jared showing up at her school. Instead, it was the most upset he'd ever seen Maddy. She still wasn't talking, but at least the sobs declined.

It was a little bit crazy, but all he could think was he wanted to do everything in his power to make her feel better and forget about everything. It was probably an epically bad idea, but he pressed his lips to hers.

They were as soft as he'd always hoped and tasted like cherry. The most perfect part was how her lips just accepted his and she opened up. Her tongue slipped into his mouth. This was something he wanted to do with no boundaries, just living

in the moment. Even more so than the kisses he gave Maddy at the theme park.

He had to have all of her in that moment. He'd waited so damn long, and the fact that she opened too gave him more than he ever thought possible. It seemed like she had the same desire as him. His hand snaked around her neck and pulled her even closer so that they were one.

He slowly pulled back. He wanted to taste her as long as physically possible. His eyes were closed. He wanted to savor her as much as he could. The moment he opened up his eyes and she had a moment to speak, it could all change. She might have hated the kiss and not want to take away the pretend label.

"Nope." She reached up around his neck and started another kiss. It was heaven. It was longer than the first one. When they broke the kiss this time, she said, "I've wanted you."

That was magic to him. He pulled back so they could see each other clearly. Her eyes were bright despite her lips being swollen and a bit of puffiness about the eyes from her tears. "You did?"

"Oh, yes." Her head bobbed vigorously. Her head stilled, and her eyes pierced his. "Why didn't you say anything?"

He laughed. "I could ask you the same thing, Maddy."

He'd flirted with her dozens of times, but she never reacted. Why hadn't she reacted? Maybe he should have realized there might be something more between them when she agreed to be his fake girlfriend so easily.

The two of them stared at each other. He rubbed his thumb along her jawline before kissing her one more time. He wanted to just keep kissing her. After the kiss, he asked, "Is it safe to assume that you aren't my fake girlfriend anymore?"

Maddy

Her emotions had been a giant rollercoaster over the past thirty minutes. Between the attack on her character and Petey, she'd hit the lowest moment only to be elevated so high.

He was still waiting on her answer with his thumb rubbing her jaw.

“Yeah. I’m not your fake girlfriend anymore.”

He pressed her into his bed, and his whole body crowded over hers. She stared into his eyes. They were so damn wide and tender, searching hers too. He continued to bore into her soul as if he doubted her intentions. “For real?”

She didn’t understand why he was questioning so much. It seemed so unreal. Didn’t he know she felt the same?

She just smiled up at him. She rubbed his arms, trying to show how much she cared. “Yeah. Absolutely.”

His lips came to hers. The two of them had been holding back so much for so long, and they were finally willing to let go of their doubts.

While there was a huge part of her that wanted to remove all his clothing and really explore Petey’s body the way they were exploring each other’s mouths, they were okay with kissing, so she pulled his head closer to her and gave him a deep kiss.

He slowly pulled his lips away from hers. She was disappointed, since she loved getting to finally kiss him.

He stayed so damn close to her, and it was fabulous. He kissed right behind her ear. His voice husky, he said, “Would you be upset if we did more than kiss?”

It turned her on so much. She knew there was no way they could just explore each other’s mouths. She wasn’t sure if she was capable of words anymore. But she wanted to do so much more than kiss. She vigorously nodded her head as she pulled at his shirt.

The shirt gave way to show off even better abs and that mythical ditch pointing to his crotch she'd read about in romance novels. He looked perfectly strong, and she wanted to lick her way down his abs and do all the naughty things she'd dreamt about. Words came back to her. "Holy ..."

She was going to finish the thought with "fuck," but Petey captured her mouth with his for an ever deeper kiss. Her hand reached up and rubbed the back of his head. She loved the feel of his hair trying to poke through. He kept it buzzed pretty short. It was practically the antithesis of the classic hockey haircut.

His hands worked off her shirt and bra. While he was on top of her, she felt so damn protected and safe. He took care to keep his full weight off her while at the same time lavishing so much loving on her. He sucked her breasts. The way he massaged and licked them, she was in heaven.

Her hands moved down southward. He lifted himself up just enough so she had easy access to his belt and pants. She started to work towards getting them off. She wanted to see every last part of Petey's body. He seemed to read her mind and allowed himself to be stripped bare.

While she was surprised by how incredibly large he was, he said, "Mads, you're truly something to behold. Just as valuable as any jewel."

"What?" She wasn't expecting to be looked at like that. He was the prize, not her.

He pushed her hair off to the side, and his finger traced its way down her side. There was nothing but love in his eyes. "You're beautiful and so damn precious. Thanks for making me feel so damn lucky that you did me this favor. Now let me show you how you should protect and relish a gem."

She couldn't believe Petey. He took care to remove her remaining clothes. Then he went down on her. His hands both held her waist, cradling her torso. His mouth knew exactly what it was doing. He sucked her pussy, and his scruff created the perfect amount of friction.

She clawed at his back as she arched and her orgasm came through. She felt as if she would shatter apart with the orgasm, but the way Petey held her, there was no way that was going to happen. She was safe to let the pleasure just ripple through her.

He pulled away, and she moaned in displeasure. She was impatient. His right hand trailed down her jawline. “Don’t worry. I’m ready for more. Are you?”

She nodded as she stared into his shining orbs. “Yeah.”

He sheathed himself, but almost as quickly as he rolled on the condom, he used his fingers to spread her apart. In a moment, he was inside her. She couldn’t believe he actually fit, and it was so easy for him to hit her g-spot. He had the perfect rhythm, and she found herself going into another orgasm. Yet again, Petey braced her and held her throughout. It was perfect.

She couldn’t believe how good everything was. He cradled her, and it was nice to cuddle, to feel his warmth and love.

He whispered, “I’m sorry, but I’ll be right back.”

She smiled. He had to remove the condom and get cleaned up. It was utter bliss to lie there and wait for him.

She knew in that moment they weren’t ever going back to just friends. Their relationship had completely transcended, and it was perfect. Now she waited for her Petey to get back to bed and cuddle her again. Plus, she knew they would have some more activities this weekend.



Petey

At the beginning of the year, he'd told the realtor he was most interested in homes in Lager and Scotty's neighborhood. At the time, none were available, so even after he said he wasn't going to look for a house right away, he wanted to be notified if anything went up for sale. So he was excited to get an email from the realtor saying that Lager's next door neighbor just listed with him. Finding out that the house next to Lager's was on the market seemed perfect.

He loved the neighborhood that Lager and Scotty lived in. It was luxurious, but at the same time, it was family friendly. It was close to the rink and the rest of the city.

The downside was, he might have to drag Maddy to the showing with him since he knew the house was likely to sell quickly, and it wasn't the ideal day for her. Then, if he got the house, he would have to break it to Klaus, and he hated breaking promises, even if it would make him happy in the long run.

He brushed some hair away from her face, and she looked up. "Time for you to wake up already?"

"Sorta. Would you hate it if we look at a house together?"

"No, but I thought you promised Klaus that you won't move out until the end of the season." He loved that she remembered that little detail, especially when he'd told her months ago.

He nodded. "Yeah, I did, but it's the house next door. It's one of my dream homes, so I want to take a look to see if I love the inside as much as the outside. If we end up moving in there, I'll still be close enough to hang out with Klaus."

"Okay. No harm in looking at it."

Instinctively, he kissed her. He was so grateful that she was willing to go along with the change of plans and didn't care

about looking at a house. He texted his realtor to tell him to set up the viewing for as soon as possible.

She had a sleepy smile on her face. Knowing they'd stayed up super late with the extracurriculars, he said, "Go back to sleep."

Her eyes flitted shut, and he wrapped her up in a hug. His eyes closed so he too could give in to sleep again, since they didn't have morning skate. Then he heard the bedroom door open and the pitter patter of feet coming their way. His head burrowed into Maddy's shoulder to give the illusion of sleep. He hoped Klaus didn't notice he was awake since he wanted more cuddling time with Maddy. The kid normally woke up his dad, so he should probably find out what was going on.

Surprisingly, Klaus didn't say anything or shake them awake. He hoped it was because he thought they were asleep. Then it dawned on him that, since Klaus came into the room not making noise, he was up to mischief.

Petey turned in Klaus' direction. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I was hoping that Aunt Maddy could make me breakfast this morning."

Klaus liked Maddy thus far. Then again, there weren't many people who he didn't like. Maddy rolled and draped her body over Petey's so she could get a good look at the little kid.

Before she could say anything, Petey asked, "Did you just call her Aunt Maddy?"

"Uh-huh," Klaus said with a nod. "Was I not supposed to call her that? I know Aunt Alice said it was okay to call her Aunt Alice after I learned that she shared a bed with Uncle Scotty. You are sharing a bed with Maddy. So shouldn't I be calling her Aunt Maddy now?"

Petey bit his tongue to keep himself from either cursing or laughing. It was so absurd yet so cute. Maddy was barely his girlfriend. Klaus was completely jumping the gun. But they were sharing a bed, and that Petey couldn't deny.

Maddy's sweet giggle erupted. "I think you might have missed a step."

Klaus' head cocked to the side as he scrunched up his face, clearly trying to figure out what step he'd missed. Petey was tempted to help the kid out and give him the answer when he said, "I think I did everything right ... Oh wait, I forgot to ask you if that's okay, Maddy." His smile came out. "Can I please call you Aunt Maddy? You are sharing a bed with Uncle Petey, which means you must like him a whole lot."

Her lips brushed Petey's pec, and he got so hard from that brief kiss. He chastised himself for being turned on, but his body loved it when Maddy touched him.

"That is true. I do like your Uncle Petey a whole lot. So I guess it's okay for you to call me Aunt Maddy."

"Yay. Next, Uncle Petey needs to get married to you and make babies. Although, can you please make me breakfast first?"

This time, Petey couldn't keep the laughter in. He loved that Klaus laid out the whole plan for their lives, while at the same time, he was really only concerned about getting his tummy fed. Maddy laughed softly too and shot him a look saying, "is this kid for real?" Petey nodded.

"I'll go start breakfast." Maddy got up from the bed, looking all cute in her grey camisole and pink PJ pants with little grey, jumping sheep.

Petey reached out for Klaus to prevent him from running off with Maddy. "We need to talk, bud." Klaus' face dropped. The kid hated being in trouble and was usually a good kid. Petey pulled the little guy into his lap. "You're aren't in trouble."

"So you aren't mad at me for calling her Aunt Maddy or waking you guys up?" His puppy dog eyes looked hopeful.

"Yeah. Can you let the two of us sleep in tomorrow?" The kid quickly nodded his head in agreement. "Good. But I wanted to let you know about something else."

The kid cocked his head to the side. "What, Uncle Petey?"

"I wanted to tell you that Maddy and I are going to look at a house today."

As soon as the words left his mouth, the kid's face dropped. "Noooo. You promised me that you would live here all season. You can't leave. I want to hang out with you more. While you can't cook, you are so much fun to be with."

He knew the kid was going to take it hard and felt bad. But that's why he wanted to talk to him about even looking at the house. "I know. That's why I wanted to let you know that I was looking at my dream home. I don't want to miss the opportunity by waiting."

"But I won't get to see you anymore. I never see the guys who stayed here after they moved out."

Petey wondered why Klaus didn't want him to move. He knew Lager had opened up his house a couple of times before, but those were always short-term stays. Some bounced back to Hamilton, and others moved closer to where Corey lived on the other side of town.

He and Klaus had really bonded over the years. Klaus always liked playing hockey with him, even if they had fresh blood to play with. Petey wouldn't just leave him behind. Although it would be nice not to be the built-in babysitter all the time.

"It's literally the house next door," said Petey.

"Really?" Klaus asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Petey was glad the little guy was so excited to hear he wasn't going far. "I really like the neighborhood here. Besides, you can't get rid of me that easily."

"Yay!" Klaus practically shouted. Then he put his hands up to his mouth in dismay. "Oh no! I might have woken up Papa, and he's been so sad lately. I wanted to let him sleep in some. So I figured it was better to ask you and Maddy to help me make my breakfast."

"Let's be really quiet. Maybe your dad didn't hear anything." There was the kid that Petey loved, trying to give back to his dad. Lager had been a wreck the past few weeks, trying to figure out what went wrong with his relationship with Dr. Leah Koenig. At least he knew what had happened now

and had decided to woo back the good doctor. “Let’s go help Maddy.”

Maddy

It didn't take too long for Petey and Klaus to come downstairs. The two guys were both smiling, so the conversation they'd had in private must have gone well. The kid went over to the couch while Petey wrapped an arm around Maddy's waist and nuzzled her neck.

She stirred the eggs and tried not to give into the comforting feeling Petey gave her.

He whispered into her ear, "That smells really good."

She laughed. It was just scrambled eggs and toast. It wasn't anything fancy. Then again, she'd only been here a few days and noticed that the guys weren't comfortable cooks. Petey had never really cooked before coming to Lager's, but she did expect Lager to be a little bit more proficient himself. "It's nothing special."

He turned her and took the spoon out of her hand. He had a look of disapproval. "None of that. You are amazing." It was nice to have a boyfriend who was so damn caring about everyone and would build her up always. It was such a change from how Jared had treated her. He was always criticizing her cooking or her outfits.

Petey leaned down and kissed her one more time. They broke away when they heard Klaus say, "Ewwww."

She cracked up laughing at that response. A large belly laugh came into the room. Lager was up and must have overheard Klaus' disdain. Lager leaned down and smoothed out his son's blond hair. "What have I told you about kissing, Klaus?"

"That it's fun." The kid clearly didn't believe what he was saying. At least he was told not to get grossed out by adults kissing.

Petey said, "Trust me, you will know what we are talking about one day when you're older." He kissed Maddy one more time for good measure. She loved how open he was with her.

It was as if everyone around them just faded away and it was just the two of them in the room. It seemed perfect. He pulled away and said, "I'll let you get back to cooking."

He went to the living room and played some mini sticks with Klaus. She finished making breakfast and put some food on the plate. "Alright breakfast is ready."

Petey and Klaus came up to the kitchen and eagerly grabbed their plates. She sat down next to Petey while Lager stood at the island. She thought about the perfection of the morning. She loved seeing how playful Petey was with Klaus, and it made her want kids with him one day.

He must have seen something in her expression because he whispered, "What are you thinking about?"

She looked up into his eyes. "How it would be fun to have kids together. You are so awesome with Klaus."

He slung an arm over her shoulder and gave her another smooch. "I completely agree."

"Okay, enough lovey dovey stuff in front of the kid. Besides, we need to get going for school and practice," Lager teased.



Petey

He woke up with Maddy in his arms, and unlike the previous morning, she was truly his girlfriend. It was magical and every dream come true. If they weren't already engaged, he would announce their relationship to the world.

He stared at her contentedly, just taking it all in. With her hair in loose waves cascading down her back and shoulders, she looked like an angel. He leaned his head on her shoulder, cursing the fact he had to get out of bed and get ready for the day. He brushed his lips across her shoulder.

She turned and with lazy eyes looked up at him. Her smile was pleasant and serene. "Don't tell me you have to leave."

"Unfortunately, I do." She wrapped her arms around him. She loved the lazy hug. "Sleep in. Rest. I'll be back soon enough."

She withdrew her arms slowly, and it seemed to be in tandem with her lids closing.

He slowly got out of the bed, letting his hand linger on her hair and shoulder. He got dressed and walked downstairs. He heard the chatter of Klaus from the foot of the stairs. While he couldn't quite hear what he was saying, it was clear the little guy was in a great mood.

As he entered the kitchen, Klaus looked up to him and said, "Petey, I like your girlfriend. I'm glad you brought her here."

"I'm glad she wanted to come," Petey said quietly. He grabbed a yogurt from the fridge. She made him feel so light and happy.

"Come on Klaus," Lager said. "You need to finish eating. You have school soon."

The room turned quiet as the kid shoveled yogurt into his face. Lager left the kitchen to get the kid's bookbag.

As soon as Klaus was dropped off at school, Lager got back into the SUV and said, “It seems like things have changed between you and Maddy.”

Petey almost hated hearing that. It meant they might not have been doing a great job of selling their relationship before. Then again, Lager was one of the few people who knew the true nature of their relationship. “I guess you can say that.”

“It’s a good thing, Petey. You guys are good together. The only bad thing really is how you guys got that final push. Bridge never should have attacked her that way. “

“Hey, quit apologizing for her. She’s a vindictive bitch.” Lager lifted an eyebrow. Petey instantly regretted his choice of words. He knew he shouldn’t call her that. “It’s true, and Klaus isn’t in the car. So let’s call a spade a spade.” Lager continued driving. “Now that you know why Dr. Leah broke up with you, are you going to try and win her back?”

“Of course. Klaus and I were talking about it last night. Now quit changing the subject. We were talking about you and Maddy.”

“I didn’t change the subject. You brought Bridge up, and I was just reminding you that you can’t control her actions.” Petey looked out the window. “But it’s like a dream come true with Maddy. It’s just weird that she’s already my fiancée. So, while I feel like I need to prove to her and maybe myself that I love her, there’s no pressure on if I’ll propose to her or when we will get married. That’s all been taken care of already.”

Maddy

Showing up for Petey's game was weird. Unlike in Vancouver, she didn't know anyone. Well, that wasn't totally true—she was a chaperone to Klaus.

She held his hand as he led the way to the family box. "Come on, Aunt Maddy. Let's go see Lexi."

Thankfully, she recognized Jenna from the engagement party. She was standing next to a woman holding a baby, presumably Alice. Stifling a laugh, she let the kid lead the way over to Lexi. Petey had been telling her how obsessed the kid was with the baby. This was the first time she got to see it in action, but it was adorable. At least he was making it easy to meet people.

Klaus asked if he could be lifted up so he could see the baby better. If he was any bigger, there was no way she could lift him. But she lifted the kid to about shoulder level. He immediately went, "Awww. She's asleep. She won't get to watch our papas' play." Then he squirmed, and she put him down on the ground. Klaus went up to a couple of older boys.

Maddy was about to apologize for him running away, but the woman holding the baby said, "You must be Maddy." She nodded as Alice continued, "I'm Alice."

"Nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you." Maddy smiled as she said, "Hey, Jenna."

"Cor said that I should look out for you tonight and help to make things comfortable."

That got Maddy smiling. Petey and Corey had been roommates for years. When she came out to Vancouver, Maddy hadn't had a good chance to talk to and hang out with Jenna as much as she would have liked.

Alice immediately jumped in. "Don't let her fool you. We are just as interested in you as the guys are."

Maddy laughed. "I'm nothing special."

“Sure you are,” Jenna said right away. “You aren’t awful like Petey’s last girlfriend. Besides, Petey popped the question to you awfully quick. We all know that Petey doesn’t pay attention to many girls.”

Jenna had no idea how awful his last girlfriend was. Maddy couldn’t stand how fake and mean-spirited Aubrey had been in high school, and she’d only gotten worse. On top of that, she totally used Petey for his money and his connections. Something that he completely tried to forget about.

Maddy was sure the next questions were going to be related to the engagement and the wedding. The problem was, until the other day, they weren’t even actually dating and definitely not planning a wedding yet. That was something they would have to do, but she was hoping to avoid any questions about nuptials. She wanted to date Petey for real a bit longer.

There seemed to be a reprieve when the baby started to cry a little bit. The three of them took some of the open seats. Maddy was surprised when Klaus climbed up on her lap. She didn’t expect him to stop playing with the older kids, but he came to her the moment he realized the kid was awake.

Klaus whispered, “Aunt Alice and Uncle Scotty are going to help Papa win back Dr Leah.”

That was a cute and unexpected confession. She whispered, “So, I take it you like Dr. Leah.”

The kid nodded big time. He reached over to smooth out the baby’s hair. Alice leaned over. “Klaus. If you get off Maddy’s lap, you can hold Lex if you like.”

Klaus scurried off her lap and moved to the other side of her. Alice handed over the baby to Maddy so she could give the tot to Klaus. He already had his arms ready to accept the baby.

She was struck by how much of a happy family they had all been. Petey told her it was like a family, but she never believed it. The fact that everyone seemed to welcome her was even nicer.

Maddy turned towards Alice. “So, you’re going to help with getting Lager and Dr. Leah back together?”

“Yeah. I know you only know Lager thus far, but those two are meant for each other. I understand why Leah broke things off. I just hope she’ll see the light at the party and talk to Lager.”

Maddy smiled. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say to that. “So, when are you going to set everything up?”

Alice said, “We’re going to do it after the Texas road trip.”

“That’s a couple weeks from now.” Petey would be going to Dallas after she flew back to Vancouver, so she would miss the party.



Petey

Petey was enjoying his pre-game nap when he heard his cell phone go off.

Corey threw a pillow at him and said, “Answer your damn phone.”

Petey reached over and grabbed the phone that was charging on the nightstand with one hand as he pulled the newly acquired pillow under his back. He answered the phone with a hushed voice. “Hey. Everything okay?”

“Everything is fine, Aaron. I’m just curious to find out how things are progressing with Madison.”

This was not going to be a quick phone call with his father. With Corey trying to nap too, he moved off the bed. He slid on a pair of flip flops and grabbed his room key. “Everything is fine. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, given the last time we spoke, you told me that your engagement to her was fake and you still hadn’t acted on your feelings for her.”

“Why is this so important to you? I thought you said everything was secured once we had the engagement.”

“With the company and the bad press, everything is, but Madison isn’t just any girl in your life. Her mom is one of my best employees, and they are family friends. I don’t want Madison’s emotions to get messed up because you are too much of a coward to act on your own emotions.”

He took a deep breath and went to the hospitality suite set up for the team. He used the key card to open it up. As expected, it was empty, as all the other guys were either napping or working out downstairs. He grabbed water from the fridge.

He wanted to keep a measured tone. He was frustrated with having to explain himself to his father, yet he had a responsibility to do so. He was expected to succeed his father,

and he wanted to do that after he retired from hockey. He didn't care about being cut off financially if he failed his father, but he wanted to keep the family business going. He made millions, and he didn't need billions, but it would make things nice.

"Things went really well with Maddy when she came out here. We are dating for real now."

"Good, good." That probably meant his father didn't have long to talk, which was for the best. "I hear that the two of you looked at a house together."

"We did, and I put an offer in for it." He smiled, thinking of the new house he was getting. It was so perfect. Sure, it was only next door and he didn't really own anything in Cleveland, but it would be a home for himself.

"Does that mean that Madison will be moving in with you?"

Petey rubbed his head. Those discussions with Maddy had been disappointing thus far. "I hope so. But nothing is decided and I'm not pressuring her about it."

Petey wished he could see her sooner rather than later. He desperately missed her. He craved being able to hold her and wake up beside her every morning again. It was something he never expected to miss when she went back home after the visit. If he even had a definite date for when he would be seeing her again, it would be better. Instead, he had their daily calls.

"Sounds like you started to fix things with her. I'm proud of you, Aaron. Well, I have to get going. Keep lighting the NHL on fire. I'll talk to you soon." He clicked off.

Petey knew he should get back to the room and take a nap so he'd be ready for the game, but he couldn't shake the call from his dad, especially his last words. He so rarely got praise, and he wanted to celebrate.

He dialed Maddy, and she picked up the phone on the first ring. "Hey, Petey. Everything all right?"

"Yeah. It's great."

“Okay, what’s the deal? You never call me before a game.” Maddy was right and so smart.

“I know, but between a call with my dad and missing you, I figured I should call.”

“Uh-oh. Did that go alright?” Maddy knew how much Petey wanted to please his father. Hell, they wouldn’t be together if he hadn’t been trying to please his father.

“Yeah. He actually praised my play and was pleased with the way things were going. It was a pleasant call.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. But he has to work really hard to find something to critique right now.”

He laughed. He was playing better than ever, but he felt free on the ice and in life in general. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but you really help with that part.”

“Me? How do I help you out on the ice?”

“You keep me relaxed and happy. So damn happy that everything else just falls into place.”

“Awww. That’s so sweet. But I bet you weren’t saying that the other night.” She referenced their ill-fated phone call where they couldn’t come to an agreement about her next visit.

“Minor inconvenience.” They both knew he wanted to see her and the major hang up was the fact that she had school. “So, have you given that any more thought? You haven’t seen the new house now that I’m in.”

“Yeah. If it’s not too much, I’ll do a weekend trip next week. Then I’ll come back out for the rest of your season once I finish finals. We’ll go back to BC together. Just don’t ask me about the next season.”

He pumped a fist into the air but tried to play it cool with Maddy, despite it being exactly what he’d hoped for. “No problem.”

“Only no problem?”

He imagined the smirk on Maddy’s face with that raised brow. She didn’t believe him. He always thought she looked

sexy when she questioned him on his bullshit. “You made my day, baby. I’ll book everything once I get back to the room.”

“You’re not there now?”

“Nah. Cor is still napping. Didn’t want to be an asshole when I was talking to my dad. So I came to the hospitality suite.”

“Nice. Well. I should let you get back to your normal routine. Don’t want to screw up your mojo.”

“If I thought you would, I wouldn’t have called. Although, be warned: I might be calling you before every game if I play well.” He wasn’t all that superstitious, but it would be nice to have an excuse to call his favorite beam of sunshine.

Maddy

The first time coming to Petey's new house, she was underwhelmed. When they had first looked at the home together, they both fell in love with it. It was a great house, but he had done literally nothing with it.

Literally nothing.

Most of the house had no furniture. At least he'd sprung for a king-size bed and a headboard. As she put her suitcase into the closet, she busted out laughing.

Petey came up to her for a snuggle. "What's so damn funny?"

"You." She leaned up to see his beautiful face. He arched his eyebrow to urge her on. "If I didn't know you better, I would think you got robbed."

"Really? Is it that bad?" He sounded surprised by the assessment. He had to realize that most people didn't live without furniture and it was weird.

The man liked to live simply and could be damn frugal when it came to himself. When it came to his friends, he was the opposite. Especially with her. It wasn't that long ago that he'd sent her a bunch of video cameras to keep her place secure, and nobody had actually broken in.

She giggled. "Yes. You have a bed, a couple chairs, a TV, and an Xbox. There are like nine rooms that are completely empty."

He turned her and placed his lips on hers. She loved the taste of his lips. She slipped her tongue into his mouth. They were melting into each other.

"Have you thought that I might have wanted you to pick out the decor?" he asked.

That was shocking. Yeah, she was his real girlfriend now and was going to be living with him for the summer, but she never expected to have that much of a say in the design of his

house. It wasn't like they would be able to spend a ton of time there, not for a couple more years. "Really?"

He looked at her like she was crazy. She knew he loved her. She'd applied for a prestigious internship in Cleveland rather than Vancouver just so they could live together in domestic bliss, but they didn't have a forever relationship established, even though they were betrothed. They were no closer to moving forward with their relationship, despite the urging of their parents.

He said, "Yup. Come on. Put your stuff away. Then we can go to a couple of stores."

She nodded. She looked in the closet, and there were no hangers. There was no dresser. How was he expecting her to put anything away?

She turned to Petey. "Um, I think we need to go to the store now. I can't really put anything away since you have nothing for me to put it in."

As they headed downstairs, he said, "So, I guess I should ask. Do you want to hit Value City Furniture or go to a variety of stores like Arhaus, the Container Store, and others?"

While it might be nice to hit up Arhaus and some other stores, he'd already proven he didn't need fancy furniture. But she did want to get a good organizational system. So that meant going to one of her favorite stores. "Would you hate me if I say both the Container Store and Value City Furniture?"

He pushed her hair behind her ear. "Not hate you. But we won't be able to do both today. They are in opposite directions. Since you think we got robbed, let's go to the furniture store first."



Petey

It was great to have Maddy back again. He wasn't surprised that she wanted to hit both Value City Furniture and the Container Store. She loved her organization. Hell, that was the reason he wanted to wait for her before getting more furniture.

It was a short drive to the furniture store. It was nice she'd chosen the furniture store that wasn't the most expensive in the city.

As they walked into the store, she asked, "What do you want to look for first?"

He looked around the store. "Umm. I guess we can start with the living room space."

It was in front of their eyes, and they needed a good sectional. He liked to relax on the sofa after practice. There had been a couple of days when he'd gone next door just to have a comfortable sofa to sit on.

Maddy giggled. "I'm sure having it all up front helped with that decision."

She wasn't wrong, but he also had a second excuse. "Well, that and I love a good sofa."

They wandered around the various mock rooms and picked out several pieces. It was refreshing that they were on the same page about the furniture. They had similar taste, so it was easy to pick out some oversized sectionals, a coffee table, a dining room table, and chairs.

By the time they got to the kitchen area, Maddy punched him, "You need to pick out things too, Petey. It's your house."

"What? I was okay with no furniture, and I like what you like thus far."

She paused in the aisle. "Nope. I'm not picking out your entire house decor. You have to pick out the next item with no initial input from me."

Her hands were tucked into her armpits. She refused to move any farther. She looked so damn kissable in that moment, trying to make a point that he should be picking out more things for his own house without her input.

He pulled her towards him. He nuzzled her neck and gave her a nip behind her ear. “I like it when you take a stance, but why must I pick out stuff?”

“Cause it’s your house. You need to like it.”

She’d completely missed the point of him waiting to decorate. It was her home too, and he wanted her to live there permanently. One way for that to happen was for her to be in love with the house. “Babe. I like everything so far.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Mads, you got wonderful taste. It’s just as much your house as it is mine.” He took a deep breath. He needed to deflect what she was bound to say next. “I know that you got school and a life in BC, but I want you to feel like this is your place when you’re here.”

She kissed him right behind his ear, making him want to find a quiet corner at the very least but preferably to run home. “You still need to pick out the next item.”

Looking at the different kitchen things, he was at a total loss about what they could use. It was quite possibly the worst place to find a piece of furniture, but Maddy had her mind made up.

As he was scanning for anything that seemed practical or at the very least useful, he swore he saw Jared in the background. That seemed crazy. Jared lived in Vancouver, so what the hell was he doing here in Cleveland? Was he following Maddy? He wouldn’t put it past the creep, since he’d suspected it was Jared who’d broken into her place a couple of months back. That killed his desire to stay there.

He didn’t want to freak out Maddy or raise a false alarm. It was most likely just a guy who looked like Jared, especially since he was too far away for Petey to make a good determination. Regardless, he wanted to get the hell out of the

furniture store and get Maddy far away. “Why don’t we order everything? It’s getting late, and I wanted to take you to dinner.” Maddy wrinkled her nose in disgust. She probably thought he was trying to get out of making any decisions. “I promise I’ll pick out the next thing, but it’s late now.”

“Fine.” She was placated but not happy.

He refused to tell her his suspicions about Jared. He wanted to get her out of there as quickly as possible.

“And it won’t be hangers,” he said with a smile. He wrapped an arm around Maddy. He wanted to comfort her without making her fear anything more than she already did. He noticed a wooden dowel wine rack and some potted plants near a fake kitchen window. “How about that wine rack and those plants? Wait, does the wine rack make sense since the house has a wine fridge?”

“I like the wine rack and plants. It’s not overkill. We won’t put everything into the fridge.”

“See, I picked out a couple things so let’s get out of here, babe.”

Maddy

Maddy knew something had happened at the furniture store. She wasn't sure what it was, but Petey's demeanor had changed. If they hadn't been such amazing friends, she might not have picked up on it. She was tempted to call him out on it, but she had a feeling he would deny that anything had happened.

She looked around to see if she could spot anything weird at the store, but everything seemed normal. Just people browsing and clerks trying to get sales.

When they got into the SUV, she played with the engagement ring. It was so large and easy to play with when she was thinking. She was still trying to figure out what caused Petey to stiffen up and basically rush them out of the store, even though it was going to be open for another thirty minutes.

Petey looked over at her and asked, "What's going on, Mads?"

She wanted to roll her eyes. He shouldn't be asking her what was going on. He was the one holding out on her. But Petey could be like a dog with a bone. He would continue to push her until she said what was on her mind. So she had to give him something. With the ring digging into her finger, she said, "Would you hate me if I didn't always wear the engagement ring when we are in private? We don't have to worry about the society page stuff around here."

He reached over and pulled her close. Well, as close as you could get with a console between them. He gave her a subtle kiss. "I don't care. It's a prop, and the stone is too big to be natural for you. I almost feel like we screwed things up in some ways by getting engaged before we started dating and having Lucas pick out the diamond itself. If you don't want to wear it, I don't care."

He was making it too easy on her, at least in that sense. He had always been so apologetic about their whole arrangement. He never seemed to realize she liked it, even before they actually got together. Now they were properly dating, the arrangement didn't bother her at all. She was tentatively moving in with him.

She gave him a kiss. "Petey. It's okay if you do care. You don't have to make everything easy on me. You can tell me no."

"I did veto those plates you wanted for being too girly. I'm so happy you're here, Maddy. That's all I want. If you don't want to wear the ring, that's fine." He grabbed her hand and pulled the ring off. He did it so quickly that she didn't even realize what he was doing. He then gave her hand a kiss before he kissed her lips one more time. "See, it's fine if you don't want to wear it."

All thoughts about what had distracted Petey were gone. Instead, she was touched by his caring side. She reached for the ring. "I better keep that. I'm going to need it when we have those events in BC."

"Alright." He let her have the ring again. "Let's get dinner and then go home. I've missed you so much, and we need to break in the house."

She laughed. Between her getting bolder with stating her sexual desires and the last trip to Cleveland, they'd had a bit of a one-track mind. They wanted to enjoy each other's company as much as they could. Besides, until the furniture started to get delivered over the next few weeks, sex was one of the few things they could do at his new place.



Petey

It was nice that instead of a typical practice, the coaches decided to do just a scrimmage today. They'd been playing well, and today was just a day to have some fun. For a change, the teams were split up pond-hockey style rather than by their normal groupings. It was surprising when it was decided that Scotty and Dykstman would be team captains. Petey was so used to having Lager be the second captain. It also meant that if Scotty picked first, he would be for sure picking his favorite partner out on the ice.

While standing near Corey as they waited to get assigned a team, Corey bumped his back and asked, "Things good at home?"

"Yeah." Petey didn't want to say too much, but he loved how much time he had with Maddy. It had been so perfect.

"Why do I sense there is a little 'but' coming?"

Of course, Corey picked up on the one thing that wasn't perfect: seeing her stalker at the furniture store. He was having a hard time getting Maddy to buy into getting a security system, but she didn't think they needed it and he was hesitant to tell her he saw her stalker.

Thankfully, Scotty said, "Petey."

He skated over to the team. It wasn't too surprising when Dykst said, "Time to break up the other bro-mance on the team. I'm taking Cor."

Petey gave a sigh of relief. That meant they didn't have to go over his security concerns and how he was being an idiot since there was no way he'd actually seen Jared. It was just a dude who looked like him.

Petey liked the team that Scotty assembled. It was a well-balanced team. Dykst's team was a little fast for his taste—some of those guys were all speed and no control. Petey also liked being able to work with Smithy. Over the course of the past year, he'd started to come into his arm.

They lined up for their 3-on-3 play. The first line wasn't surprising on either side: Scotty, Lager, and Petey for team Wine and Dykst, Corey, and Hunter for team White.

Scotty didn't win the first faceoff, so it was straight to defense and blocking Cor from getting an angle on to goal. Petey was able to get a strong forecheck on to Cor, crushing him into the boards. He then chucked the puck over towards Scotty.

It was a legal hit, but Cor said, "Hey, no need to be so mean just because I asked if things were good at home."

Petey skated backwards and said, "Dude, it was a clean hit and had nothing to do with you prodding about Maddy."

"Yeah, yeah," Corey said as the two of them got back into the play. Petey made sure he covered Corey and was available for a one-timer from Scotty. Scotty flicked the puck back between his legs, and it landed on Petey's stick. He teed up his slapper, and somehow it went in.

It felt good to get the goal. He liked to score as much as any of the other guys did, but he knew his role on the team and loved it.

Corey pushed him slightly, saying, "Just because you scored, don't think that I'm going to lay off you today about the real deal with you and Maddy."

"It's nothing. Get off the scent."

"So tell me."

"I thought I saw her ex in town. But it was too far away to get a good look. Okay?"

"That creep from the golf course?" Petey shook his head. Corey continued, "There's no way it was him. Quit worrying. Does Mads know?"

Coach Berman yelled, "Come on, before we give both of you a delay of game penalty. Quit lollygagging."

Petey quickly hopped over the boards and switched places with PK. He was glad to get away from Cor so he could relax and not get harassed by him for a few minutes.

As he sat down, Scotty asked, “What’s going on with you and Cor? You’re chatting more than usual.”

“It’s just normal bullshit.”

“Alright. As long as you guys are cool and you keep scoring on him, I don’t care,” Scotty said. Couldn’t blame the guy. As captain, he was always concerned with how the guys were integrating with the team and making sure there wasn’t any real beef.

“I’ll do my best.”

Maddy

Maddy was surprised when the doorbell rang. Petey was at practice, and she wasn't expecting anyone.

She opened up to see Alice, Jenna, and Lexi at the door. That was a pleasant surprise. She hadn't had much company in Cleveland. Not that she was a party animal in Vancouver, but she had a few friends who would come to visit or celebrate the end of term with her.

The baby looked adorable in the stroller with a shirt that said 'Daddy's girl.' She immediately asked, "What are you guys doing here?" She led the way to the living room and was grateful for the furniture to have been delivered so there was a space for them to sit.

"Doing what we should have done a while ago and welcoming you to the neighborhood." Alice said it like it was obvious.

Maddy laughed. "Um. While I know you are a few houses away, Alice, aren't you on the other side of town, Jenna?"

"Yeah. But that doesn't mean I can't welcome you to Cleveland now that you are here full time."

Maddy had to put the kibosh on the talk that she was there full time. While she loved Petey and was in Cleveland for now, there was still so much to figure out. She had another year of school left and then sitting for the bar exam, and she still had to decide which bar she wanted to sit. "It's probably just the next few weeks. There's still a lot to work out long term."

"Girl, you're preaching to the choir. We both fell for our guys with the intention of keeping things light at one point. Next we knew, we were married," Jenna said with a laugh. But then she asked, "So, why do you think it's only a couple of weeks?"

"Well, we're going to be heading to Vancouver thanks to our previous commitments." Maddy could elaborate about

how Petey had to work for his father while she had her own internship lined up with a prestigious law firm after the Cleveland one fell through, but she didn't feel up to it. "Plus, I still have law school to finish up."

Alice lifted the baby from the stroller and pulled her into her lap. "Summers don't count. Scotty and I will be going to our lake house." She looked over towards Jenna and asked, "Did you and Cor decide where you'll be spending the summer?"

"Oh, it's still up in the air. Corey wants to go to Boston or even Vancouver for some training, but he still has a bunch of medical appointments, so I'm pushing for us to stay here." Jenna seemed casual about it, but knowing how Corey's cancer battle had gone, there was a chance it could be serious again.

"Everything okay with him?" Maddy asked.

"Yup. Just checkup stuff to make sure things are in remission, but he feels good. It's a hassle, but less so than during the season," Jenna said. That had to be a relief to know he felt okay.

Maddy nodded in agreement. She understood the need for treatment. "The crazy thing is that Petey hasn't even mentioned anything after summer."

"Well, that's nice. So the only pressure is what makes you guys happy and what's best for the future. It's such a romantic move."

Those weren't the words she was expecting from Alice, but the lack of pressure was great. It meant they could do what was right for them. "Romantic?"

"If they love you, they set you free. He wants to make sure you love it here and want to be with him without any strings. It's one of those subtle moves that really means everything in a relationship, and it will be the basis for your future."

When it was laid out like that, Alice was right. It was romantic. It also fitted Petey's personality. He wasn't flashy with his love. It was like his flirtation that she missed. He

would say the sweetest things, and she loved him with her whole heart. But she also realized one other thing: she would always go back to Petey. He was her endgame when it came to guys.



Petey

They were finally settling into a great routine. Maddy studied most of the day, except when she got together with Alice and Jenna. Petey was glad they'd taken her under their wing so she wasn't always alone when he was on the road.

Ever since he spotted Jared at the furniture shop, he was on edge. He never told her so she could live peacefully and have fun.

It was late when he got home from the latest road trip. The house was too dark for his liking. Even with being in a gated community and buying the house through an LLC, he worried that Jared might try something with Maddy.

Maddy looked so peaceful in their bed. She was an angel sleeping with her hands in prayer under her ear.

He quickly took off his suit, only keeping his briefs on, and slipped into bed. He was tempted to pull Maddy closer, but he didn't want to wake her.

She rolled over to face him and said with a sleepy voice, "Hey, you."

It warmed his heart. He pulled her closer and gave her a kiss. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"How was the trip?"

"It was fine ..." It was probably their worst road trip this season. It seemed like they were flat-footed the entire time, and he wanted to forget about the two losses as soon as possible. "How was being here by yourself?"

"Fine." He knew that voice. That wasn't her tired voice. Something had happened. If it wasn't so damn dark, he would have searched her eyes to see what she was hiding from him. "What happened?"

"It's nothing." She quickly looked away from him.

He wrapped her up in his arms as if he could just cocoon her up. “Talk to me, Mads. Please.”

“My mind is playing tricks on me. I could have sworn that I saw Jared at the grocery store. But it’s crazy. Why would he be here?”

He hated hearing that, but he wasn’t actually surprised that she’d seen him. “To be honest, I’ve seen him around town too. We might want to step up the security around here.”

“Maybe ...” She clearly hated the idea, but she was trying to be nice. Since she was too reserved to say it outright and it was his house, she wouldn’t say no. That “maybe” was all he needed to hear. If he didn’t know her so well, he might have thought she didn’t care if he invested in a security system.

The real question became how would he amp up their security so he could keep her safe when he was on the road while honoring the fact that she didn’t want an alarm system? He really didn’t know what to do.

“Alright. We’ll talk about it later.” He gave her a soft kiss. She returned it with a series of passionate kisses.

His dick rose, wanting to get into action. Man did he want to let it loose and do all the naughty things with Maddy that gave him so much pleasure. The only thing holding him back was the fact that Maddy was barely awake. He wouldn’t take advantage of her.

She pulled on the band of his briefs. He grabbed her hand. “Don’t start something if you are too tired to continue.”

She kissed his chin. Her lips had to hit some stubble, but that didn’t stop her. “Oh, I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Those were the magic words. He let go of her hand, and she pulled on his briefs. There was going to be no stopping him at this point.

He tugged her panties off with force. He could have ripped them and not cared. He tossed them across the room and flipped her so she was facing away from him.

“What are you doing?” She was shocked, and it was adorable.

“Reverse cowgirl.” He positioned her just right over him. He rubbed her clit to ensure that she was nice and wet so she could receive his penis. She was practically dripping. “You’re completely in control.”

He kissed the back of her neck and leaned into her body. It was so soft and perfect. He could smell her gentle shampoo.

She started to rock back and forth. The pace wasn’t all that different from their usual pace, and he was so glad she liked it. There had been times when he worried about going too fast and jack-hammering her. But this was steady.

The best bit was when she started to touch herself. Her hands moved to her breasts. Out of habit, his hands trailed up her body. He loved holding her torso and moving his hands up to her breasts.

He was going to blow his top soon due to her rocking. She always made him feel like a teenager with no self-control. When she leaned over and grabbed ahold of his legs, he was sure he was going to lose it. He was so deep into her that he was afraid of hurting her. But it was hot as fuck as well.

They continued to pick up the pace. He removed one of his hands from around her waist and brought it down so he could rub her clitoris.

Then she started to roll her hips around. He loved the sensation. That minuscule amount of control he had trying to make sure she got off first was gone, and he came. He hated himself for not giving her enough pleasure. He should have lasted longer.

He kept rubbing her clit. She moaned and screamed his name, so she was well on her way. He made sure to support her waist with his hands. She looked so damn sexy with the way her back arched towards him, her hair flowing down it. The only downside was he couldn’t see the pleasure on her face when she came.

When she finished, she leaned back into him. He wrapped his arms around her. He loved every chance to hold her when she was naked. It was pure bliss in his mind.

Maddy

Petey was on the last road trip of the regular season, so things had been pretty quiet at home. The house was nearly all set and actually looked like people lived there, now that the furniture had arrived, so she was excited to hear the doorbell ring and quickly answered it.

Jenna was on the other side of the door. She and Alice were becoming Maddy's closest friends since coming to Cleveland. It was such a pleasant surprise whenever she stopped by. "Hey. What's going on?"

"Well, I figured I would stop on by to see what was going on and keep you company some."

"Well, come on in. Are you finally feeling better?"

Jenna had missed the last couple of games since she hadn't been feeling well. "Um. Yes and no."

That was a cagey answer. "What's that supposed to mean?" Maddy led the way inside the house towards the kitchen, which was probably her favorite area after the bedroom. "Do you want anything to drink?"

"Some tea would be nice." Maddy nodded at Jenna's request and put on a kettle. Jenna leaned up against the island. "Promise not to tell anyone ... but Cor and I are expecting."

"Wait? You're expecting?" Jenna hadn't been sick sick—it was all morning sickness, which was why she wasn't exactly better yet.

"Yup. I confirmed it with Dr. Leah earlier today."

"Congrats." That was so surprising. Everyone knew about the cancer battle Corey had gone through. Maddy knew that Jenna was hoping to have a baby, but nobody knew if they could. It didn't even take long trying. "That's so exciting. I hope for your sake the morning sickness will end." She opted to grab a tea with some ginger in it so it could maybe sooth Jenna's stomach.

“You and me both.”

The tea was done steeping. They moved over towards her reading room so they could get comfy.

Jenna asked, “So, how’s things here?”

“Fine for the most part.”

“That doesn’t sound too good. Don’t tell me there’s trouble with you and Petey.”

“Oh, very much the opposite. He’s been perfect.”

“So, what’s the issue if things are good with your love life? You already got your grades.”

“It’s nothing really.” Jenna gave her a look that said she knew better. It was something that Maddy would have preferred not to have shared. “So, I think my stalker might have moved out here with me ...”

“You have a stalker?” Jenna seemed genuinely shocked. Until then, only Petey and her mom knew about Jared.

“Yeah. My ex is a piece of work. He apparently hates the fact that I broke up with him when he showed his true colors.” She nodded. It was easier to talk about the fact that Jared had been stalking her, but she still couldn’t talk about how he’d been abusive. She still hadn’t told Petey about it, but he seemed to suspect it.

“Ugh. But how sure are you that he’s here?”

That was the first time she’d been asked to answer a question in that way. It was hard to put into words. “Um. I’m like 85% sure I saw him. But it’s enough to freak me out, even if I can’t imagine him leaving Canada.”

“Well, I hope for your sake that he didn’t. You and Petey deserve to be happy and not have an ex screwing things up. Hell, it would be awesome if you could join us on the baby-making train.”

Wouldn’t that be something? Having a kid with Petey was appealing to her. She knew that he wanted to have a couple of

kids. If they did that soon, the kids could all grow up together and be about the same age. It would just be perfect.



Petey

He hated going on the road. He worried about not being there for Maddy. Sure, she was settling into Cleveland well, but he was still on edge after spotting Jared at the furniture store. He was trying to push that aside.

The best thing about the road trip was hanging out with Lucas. Lucas had delayed his trip back to Vancouver so they could hang out tonight and had even come to the game. Petey went straight to the bar that Lucas picked out after the game.

It was a swanky place, and he was surprised to see his father sitting next to Lucas. He was glad Corey had decided to hang out with Scotty and Lager instead of joining him like they initially discussed. He just hoped that Lucas hadn't set him up for another hard talk with their father.

He walked up to the bar and sat in the open chair next to Lucas. Before he had a chance to say hello, the bartender came up and asked for his order. He went with a gin and tonic although that was going to be his one drink for the evening.

As the bartender went to mix his drink, his dad said, "Great game tonight. Seems like you're still on pace to win the Norris trophy this year."

That seemed crazy. While he knew he was playing well and was the Sound's top defensive player, he hadn't even considered that he could be in the running to be named top defensive player in the league. "Thanks."

"Quit pretending like it's no big deal, Aaron. Even for you, you're playing amazing," Lucas said with a smile.

"Okay, fine. I'm playing well. I'm feeling the game."

"I think you are feeling something else too," Lucas said with a grin.

Unbelievable. Lucas was making sexual innuendos in front of their father.

“Don’t be crude, Lucas,” said his father. If Corey had been there, Petey was sure there would be a mocking echo to his father’s statement. His father added, “Although I have to agree, I think Madison is helping Aaron’s game.”

Pete just looked up to the sky and said, “Are we really having this conversation?”

Lucas put an arm around his shoulder and said, “Yup. It’s good to see you so relaxed and happy. You have your little slice of domestic heaven going on back in Cleveland.”

Petey nodded, but was glad when his drink arrived. He almost wished he’d ordered a double since this was going to be a long night. But Lucas was right. He loved his new house and having Maddy stay with him. He loved going to bed with Maddy every night and waking up with her in his arms. Plus, she would cook every night. It was divine. He didn’t know if she’d talked to the team nutritionist or what, but he felt better than ever. “Yeah. Things have been good. On the ice and off.”

“So, when are you and Madison coming back home?”

Petey rubbed the back of his head and took a swig of his drink. He knew he would have to think about coming back to Vancouver sooner rather than later. He still had to work at headquarters. It was a damn shame that he couldn’t just do his time over at the Vancouver Legacy. But it was too much of a conflict of interest, so he was slated to work at HQ, which would be better to prepare him for taking over from his father. “After the playoffs are done, and before you ask, I’m keeping up with the law degree. I enrolled in two courses over the summer already. So we are on track as promised.”

“Good good.” His father kept swirling his whiskey around the ice ball. “And what are your plans with Madison? What’s the status of your engagement?”

That was a loaded question. All three of them knew it. It was something that Petey hadn’t even thought about or discussed with Maddy. The party had been for show and fake, but now they were the real deal and she lived with him. Was that engagement still valid? Should they be planning a wedding? Did she even like the ring he got her, or did she

want his grandmother's ring? If it was a real engagement, he wanted to give her the antique ring, not the flashy diamond. It didn't seem like she liked the ring he'd bought, since she never wore it around the house.

"No idea," said Petey. "We haven't talked about it."

"Well, you better do it soon. You don't want to get her hopes up and leave her hanging."

Petey nodded. His father was right. It was something that needed to be dealt with.

Lucas chimed in. "Yeah, Aaron. You're going to want to talk to Maddy about that."

Petey elbowed his brother in his side. "Don't be a jerk. Besides, when are you going to settle down?"

"It would be nice to have both of you settle down, but I fear that your mother will only get her wish of grandchildren from one of you," Dad said with a smirk as he winked at Petey. They all knew that Lucas wouldn't settle down anytime soon.

Maddy

She stayed up reading a book, waiting for Petey's call. She was about to call it a night, figuring that he'd forgotten about calling since it was close to curfew, when she got a video call from him. She smiled. "Hey, Petey. Another great game."

"Yeah." He had that sheepish grin he got whenever he got praise that he agreed with. "I'm glad I didn't miss you tonight."

"Well, I was about to go to bed."

He smiled. "I like the PJs. I'm sorry, I ended up hanging out with Lucas and my dad after the game." He laid down on his bed, but his balance wasn't great, so he flopped onto it. It was clear he'd been drinking. As he got settled, he said, "So, I have to ask, what's the deal with our engagement?"

Shit. Since coming to Cleveland, she'd forgotten all about the fact they were engaged. They were just a newly formed couple and setting up a house. She'd taken off the engagement ring after he said it was no big deal not to wear it. "Do you still want me?"

"Of course, Mads. I'm mad about you." That relieved her, despite his words falling short of saying "I love you." His voice softened, "What makes you think I would ever not want you?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm surprised you asked what's going on with the engagement. I just assumed it was on but with less pressure." He winked at her, so she knew he was on the same wavelength. "Is it an issue that I don't wear the engagement ring in Cleveland?"

"Nope. Lucas and my dad were just asking what was going on with our wedding plans. I wasn't sure what your thoughts were, and I wanted to make sure we were on the same page. If you want, I can do a real proposal."

"That would be nice. While I promise to wear the ring in Vancouver and going out, it's not my style."

“I know it’s too showy. It was the best I could do on short notice. I should have picked out something better for you. Are we good if we tell people we are planning a long engagement?”

“Isn’t that what we have been telling people all along?”

He giggled and nearly fell off to the side. “Yup. I want you to know that I still want to marry you. I want to be with you always, but we don’t need to get married anytime soon. You make everything better, Mads. Everything is so damn good with you being in my life.”

Those words from Petey were perfect, but she was sure he was wasted. If he had been sober, he might have asked if their engagement was still on but he wouldn’t say he wanted to be with her.

“Ditto. Get some sleep.” She didn’t tell him she wanted him to get some sleep and sober up. She wished that his professing his feelings weren’t stemming from his drinking with his family. At least she heard those words. They meant everything to her, and she liked how they were still talking about getting married one day.



Petey

He loved that Maddy had decided to move out for the remainder of his season now that she was done with school and wasn't slated to start her internship until the summer. It would only be a couple of months, but he relished the time with her. Since they'd changed from friends to lovers, things just seemed to slot into place, and he hated when they were apart, even though they would talk daily.

Now that she was here, they had a great home. She was right: they'd needed to get the furniture and make it more livable beyond the bare essentials he'd had.

Thankfully, Klaus was adjusting to him living next door easily, although if Petey was in the yard or on the patio, Klaus tended to come over with a hockey stick in hand. He was still playing with the kid a fair amount.

When Klaus came bounding over, Petey picked him up. "What's going on?"

"Oh, I think Papa and Dr. Leah want some alone time."

That didn't sound good. The two of them had just reunited. Lager was back to pranking everyone and so damn happy. He'd been a wreck when they had their issues, so Petey hoped for his sake that everything was okay at home. He lifted an eyebrow as he asked, "Things okay at home?"

"Oh yeah. They're just painting your bedroom pink for the baby."

Well, damn, that was unexpected. He would have thought Lager would have told everyone about expecting a girl. It was crazy to think about. He texted Lager: *Sounds like congratulations are in order. I'll feed Klaus tonight since you guys are busy.*

Lager: *Thanks. I was going to tell you guys but Dr. Leah wants to wait a little longer.*

Petey: *No worries. I'll keep the secret but I can't say the same about your Mini-Me.*

He then quickly texted Maddy to expect him to be out in the backyard and that he was going to order pizza for dinner. "So, I'm assuming we should play some hockey."

"Of course. But I wish we had a goalie for a change."

Petey laughed. "Let's recruit one."

The look of delight on Klaus' face was all-encompassing. Petey immediately called up Smithy to see if he was available to come over to play and wanted to join them for some beer and pizza. Thankfully, he was happy to join them and knew to come out back.

Petey shook his head and said, "Goalies are crazy."

Klaus looked up at him and asked, "What?"

"Oh, Smithy is glad to come over. It saves him from parkour training." Klaus looked confused, but Petey knew that if he told him about parkour, the kid would think it was cool and try to do it everywhere. So it was best to keep it vague. "Oh, it's a form of training that I wouldn't do. Give me a sec to grab my stick and a few pucks."

He ran inside and grabbed his stick and a few balls from the mud room. He'd learned he had to keep them close at hand when Klaus came over.

As he walked outside again, he flung a ball towards Klaus, who immediately started to chase it and whack it around. He watched the kid play until the little one looked up towards him and said, "Come on, Petey. I can't play by myself."

Petey stole the puck away with his stick. That got the little one squealing as he tried to regain the puck. He eventually gave the kid the ball back by getting stripped.

Smithy showed up with some bare bones padding: a mask, shin pads, a blocker, and a glove.

Petey gave him a fist bump. "Thanks for joining. Remember the two rules we have?"

“Don’t swear in front of the kid, and take it easy on him,” Smithy said with a smile. The first rule was the most important one.

Klaus whined, “Nooo. Don’t take it easy on me. I won’t get good like Papa if you make it easy.”

The guys laughed. While they would challenge Klaus, they weren’t going to play hard. It was a day off. The two of them weren’t going to risk getting hurt or demoralizing a kid. What Klaus didn’t realize was that he was already playing a lot like his papa and was damn good for his age.

Smithy got into Petey’s backyard net, and Petey dropped the ball for a face off. Then the game started. After a few shots by Klaus on to Smithy, he said, “Jesus. He really is a mini Lager with the instincts of Scotty.”

Klaus snickered. “You said a bad word.” But that was the most the kid knew about swearing, which was amazing given how often he was around professional hockey players. It showed the respect everyone had for Lager by keeping their language clean around the kid.

Petey just nodded. He wished some of his defensive plays would have made more of a mark since he played with Klaus way more than Scotty, but the kid loved scoring goals. “Yeah. He’s definitely just like his dad, and you need to keep your eye on him.”

“So, is that a hint to keep an eye out on my water bottle and gear?” Petey nodded while Smithy grinned. “I should have known Lager raised a little prankster.”

They continued to play for about thirty minutes. The little guy was starting to look tired. Even as he eased up, the kid still struggled to keep up and slowed down. After he stole the puck with a lazy stick grab, Klaus looked up at him with a pained expression on his face. “Uncle Petey. Can we order the pizza now?”

That saved Petey from having to call off the game. Klaus didn’t always like it when Petey tried to end early for his sake,

so Petey was slow to end the games with him unless they had something to do or something else to occupy the tyke.

The three of them went into the house. Klaus immediately went to the fridge, pulled out a juice box, and passed out water bottles to Petey and Smithy. Petey had started to keep some juice boxes and applesauce pouches for Klaus since he came over so often. Klaus knew he could help himself to the juice boxes, just like he did at his house.

Smithy said, "Helpful little guy."

"Yup. But if you want beer, we got that too."

"The water is good for now. Do you care if we get pizza with pineapple on it?"

Maddy came up and gave Petey a hug around the waist. "Oh, I would love one with pineapple on it." She turned towards Petey and said, "I'm assuming you and Klaus want the usual."

"Sounds good." Petey couldn't help himself; he gave her a kiss. He was glad to show her off as his girlfriend to a teammate. It was something they didn't really do all that often, since she'd just moved in and hung out with the usual suspects. "This is my girlfriend, Maddy. Maddy, this is Colby Smith, but we all call him Smithy."

Klaus piped up, "If you guys keep kissing like that, you are going to end up with a baby like everyone else."

Smithy snickered as he leaned down to Klaus' height. "Those two have a long way to go before they end up with a baby. But would it be so bad if they did? I thought you liked babies."

Klaus thought for a moment before saying, "I do like babies, but there'll be a lot to look after soon. So it might be good if Uncle Petey and Aunt Maddy can hold off for a little bit."

Maddy leaned into Petey's shoulder, trying to suppress her laughter. She didn't know that the Lagers were apparently expecting.

Petey knew one thing: the more time he spent with Maddy, the more he wanted to have a future with her. To raise their own kids together after she got her degree and they were settled into their lives.

Maddy

The day had been wonderful. Petey's flirty nature in front of his teammates never ceased to amaze her. A hand was always touching her. Sometimes it was discreet and under the table, and other times it was just out in the open.

Best of all, in her eyes, his affection came from a place of love and understanding. He wasn't trying to control her or change her mind. He thought pineapple on pizza was disgusting, but he always ordered half for her that way and never once belittled her or tried to get her to change her opinions.

That's how a relationship was supposed to be. Her relationship with Jared had been toxic and dangerous.

She had to stop looking at Klaus while he was eating. It was so hard to keep a straight face, as the kid ate the pizza crust side up and would make funny faces anytime she looked over.

"Who taught you to eat pizza, kid?" Smithy wore a nonthreatening grin.

Maddy was just as curious. She'd never seen anyone eat pizza that way. She would fear having all the cheese fall off into her lap.

Klaus shrugged his shoulders and said, "Papa."

Smithy guffawed. "I should have known it was Lager."

Maddy was amazed that Klaus wasn't even curious as to why Smithy asked the question. Instead, Klaus glanced at her and Petey and asked, "Has Uncle Petey made dinner for you yet?"

"Nope, not yet." She knew that Petey planned to do it soon but was still working out the kinks of one of the dishes he wanted to do with Scotty. But he did tell her that he wanted to do a special night after he got back from the next mini road trip.

Klaus' face turned stern as he looked at Petey. "Why haven't you tried to do it yet? The last attempt at risotto wasn't that bad."

"I'm not ready yet. I want to impress Maddy, not poison her."

That got the kid giggling. Of all the people at the table, the little one had the most firsthand experience with Petey's lack of culinary skills. "Well, you haven't poisoned me. You just like to burn things. You need to learn to slow down."

It was too funny to see a six-year-old critique Petey. She was sure the kid was right. Petey often tried to cut corners, especially when it came to the amount of heat in the kitchen. "I'm trying. You know that. Besides, I thought you liked my grilled cheese sandwiches."

"I do, but when you order pizza, that's the bestest."

That got everyone laughing. It was such a cute statement. Thankfully, the kid didn't take a dramatic bite out of his pizza to punctuate his sentiment. If he had, it would have been too much and she wouldn't have been able to stop laughing.

Everyone seemed to be done, so Petey stood up and started clearing the table. She had planned to do it since they were his guests, but he beat her to it. It was such a sweet move.



Petey

Tonight was the night. It was time to take the lessons from Scotty and put them to use. Make a meal for Maddy that would knock her socks off. The first part of the plan was easy: get all the ingredients for crusted salmon fillets, roasted vegetables, and a risotto. Petey was confident about the roasted vegetables. The crusted salmon wasn't too hard, but he did burn it once. The risotto always gave him issues, even under Scotty's watchful eye.

He had Jenna take Maddy shopping. It took a fair amount of convincing for her to take his credit card, but they were still looking for things for the house. He secretly hoped she'd find the rest of the knickknacks they needed and they'd be done with the furnishing process.

He even took the time to get a candlelit dinner set up in their dining room with a linen tablecloth, a couple of taper candles, and the fanciest plates they had. It wasn't fine china, but it was good enough. He was tempted to either put some flower petals or glitter on the table but thought it would be too much. Besides, if he used glitter, it would likely get everywhere, and he didn't need the guys at the rink harassing him about things.

He had the broccolini, carrots, and cauliflower cut up and seasoned on a tray in the oven. On another tray, he was able to get the salmon perfectly crusted. Even the risotto was looking smoother than it had any other time he tried to do it. So things were on track to really wow Maddy.

He had a few minutes where everything was doing its thing and he didn't need to watch it like a hawk, so he took the time to clean up and went to take the trash out.

As soon as he heard the door between the house and garage click behind him, he said, "Fuck."

That door was supposed to stay open, and he knew it automatically locked when it closed. Since he was only taking

the trash out to the garage, he hadn't grabbed his keys or his cell phone. Hell, he was only in his socks and didn't even have shoes on.

Maddy would be home in about thirty minutes. Dinner was probably only going to be twenty minutes and he was going to let it stay warm until she got there. So all wasn't lost. Maybe he could call and have her come home early.

He thought about his options. He pushed the button to open the garage door so he could at least leave the garage. Maybe either the front door or back door was unlocked. That was unlikely, given the high alert both of them had been on since Jared tried to break into Maddy's place in Vancouver.

He tried the two doors, but they were locked. So that meant doing the walk of shame and getting a buddy to give Maddy a call. Well, more likely it would be to give Jenna a call. Maddy had a new American sim card, and he didn't remember her new number. Although, the girls might have her number. He thought about which of his two options were going to be best.

While Lager was closer, he would take the piss out of him for getting locked out. Plus, he would be less likely to have either Maddy's or Jenna's phone number. Leah probably wasn't home yet from work. He walked the short distance to Scotty's place.

Scotty was out in the yard with his two dogs. Almost immediately, the large dog, Backup, came straight to him looking for some love. Petey scratched the dog's ears, if only to settle the dog down some.

Scotty smiled. "What's going on? I thought you had that dinner date with Maddy tonight."

"I do." He rubbed the back of his head. "Unfortunately, I got myself locked out. Any chance you could give me an assist and call Maddy or Jenna to see if they are on their way home?"

"Of course." He led Petey into his house and handed over his phone.

Thankfully, Scotty didn't give him any shit about getting locked out as he waited for Maddy's return. Instead, the two of them just played with Scotty's little girl and watched some hockey on TV.

Maddy

Getting the call from Petey, Maddy felt awful. She was about half an hour away, and there was a long line at Crate and Barrel. Petey had said he could wait for her, which took the pressure off while she checked out with some of the organizers she wanted for their closets and the pantry.

She was glad he was okay hanging out at Scotty's place while they finished up their shopping trip in Beachwood.

It took forty-five minutes to get back to their gated community. She picked up Petey from Scotty's place. He was only in his socks, and somehow that made it all the more real that he'd got himself locked out.

As he hopped into the SUV, he said, "I hate to say this, but I think dinner is going to be beyond salvaging tonight."

"We can always order in. At least you tried." It was so rare that Petey offered to cook, and she was waiting to see if he could do anything halfway decent besides grilled cheese.

As she unlocked the door, they were overwhelmed by a fog of black smoke. Petey went straight into action and silenced the smoke alarm. Then he took things off the stove and turned off the oven. She opened up the windows. Both of them were hacking up a storm.

While she'd anticipated some charcoal-colored food, she'd never anticipated this much smoke or to be coughing up a storm. There was no salvaging the meal whatsoever.

After things were taken care of, the two of them took sanctuary on the patio outside so they could breathe some fresh air again. Once she was outside, she just cracked up. It was that or start crying. There were bad cooks and there was dismal failure. Petey definitely fell into the latter category.

He immediately pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry that tonight was such a fuck up. Getting locked out wasn't my idea."

“I know, babe.” She leaned up and gave him a kiss. His large frame was so comforting. “But that might be the last time I leave you alone to cook dinner.”

“Yeah. I can’t blame you for that.” He chuckled. “But I promise things were all in hand. I really did learn from Scotty. If I hadn’t gotten locked out, I would have impressed you.”

He might have. When he talked about the meal, it sounded wonderful and would have impressed her if he’d carried it off. Sadly, they couldn’t even spend time in their house, at least, not until some of the smoke cleared out.

“What are you thinking for dinner?”

“Anything quick?”

“Do you want to just hit the club?”

The two of them seldom went to the club at the end of the drive. But it would fit the bill. Plus, they could have a similar style meal with salmon and vegetables.

As they started to walk out the garage door, she suggested, “How about we keep this door unlocked? That way you don’t get locked out again. No one can get in if the garage door is down.”

Petey agreed and they headed to dinner.



Maddy

Maddy loved being with Petey all the time. The two of them had been settling into a nice little life together.

He gave her a huge law library. She had no excuse not to study hard for the exam. She had her nose stuck in a book whenever Petey came home from practice. It became her favorite place to be when she was home alone.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck. “Look at you reading like a good little law student.”

She turned so she could kiss his chin. “You should totally be doing the same now that you are done with practice, before your pregame nap.”

He smiled. “Some days, I swear my dad sent you here to keep me on track with my studies.”

While she was sure Mr. Peterson would be happy that she kept Petey on track with his law degree, Petey was the only reason that she was in Cleveland. Her being there also gave credence to the idea that they were a real item. Not just a couple on paper. “Oh, you are so off the mark and you know it.”

He kissed her ear and in a low husky voice said, “Oh, I know it and love the real reason why you are here.” That voice always turned her on. It turned her into putty. He pulled her up from the loveseat.

He wanted some sexy time before his game. He’d been turning it into his pregame routine instead of napping or studying. Since he’d been playing really well, she never felt guilty for indulging in some afternoon delight with him.

Petey carefully laid her on the bed as he covered her body in kisses. She pulled off his shirt. She reveled in his beautiful physique: his strong shoulders, cut torso, and defined biceps.

She was putty in his big hands. He could do anything to her, and she would be satisfied and safe. She was wet and craved for him to get inside her.

He pulled down her leggings and panties, immediately going to her clit. He stroked it and rubbed it with his calloused fingers, causing so much friction she nearly came before he did anything fun like go down on her or insert himself. She arched backward, and he braced the small of her back with one hand.

She leaned up. She wasn't ready to come just yet. She wanted to feel him and kiss him. Make him as crazy as she was. She gave his pants a slight tug, and they fell to the floor. She kissed from the center line of his abs down to his dick, which she swallowed up whole.

She always liked to give him a bit of head before a home game. She loved the way he responded to the sucking and pulling of her lips on his member. It wasn't until he sucked in air that she stopped and he pushed her onto the bed. "My turn again, sweet, sweet Maddy."

He pulled her towards the end of the bed. She wrapped a leg around his waist. He held her arms above her head and stared at her like she was the most beautiful woman in the world. He reached over for a condom and, as he rolled it on, nuzzled her neck. "Hard or soft, baby?"

"Hard."

He nodded and inserted himself with little fanfare. Then he started to pump so hard that she felt like she could burst into two at any moment. Yet at the same time, she felt so connected to him. Even so, he did little things to make sure she was comfortable. He made sure her neck was comfortable and she didn't go straight into the headboard. It was perfect.

They climaxed nearly in sync. He rolled the two of them onto their sides and cuddled her for a moment. Then he whispered, "I'm sorry, baby."

He always did that when he was going to get himself cleaned up and remove the condom. It was silly how he would

apologize for something that he had to do, but it was sweet that he didn't want to leave her. She lay still, waiting to see if they would have round two or if it would be just the one round.

When he came back, he snuggled close and nosed her neck, as if savoring everything. "So, ready for round two?"

She nodded her head.



"I DON'T WANT to get up," Petey said as he rolled off the bed when his alarm went off.

She smiled, just as tired from their sexcapades. "Whose fault is that?"

He chuckled before kissing her on the temple. "Oh, it's just as much your fault as it is mine. Get some rest. Don't worry about coming to the game if you don't want to."

"Don't be silly. I like watching you play."

"Music to my ears." His grin grew, and he headed into the closet to get into his suit. He gave her one more sweet smooch as he whispered, "Rest well, my sweet. I'll see you after the game."

Her eyes closed, and she gave into blissful sleep. She had a couple of hours until the puck dropped.

All of a sudden, she felt hands pull her torso. But for a change, they weren't warm and protective. They weren't Petey's hands. They felt very wrong and violently tugged her awake.

She opened her eyes and panicked. It was Jared who had woken her. His eyes were fixed on her, and they looked crazy.

Instead of screaming, she kicked him in the balls, and his hands went to protect his body. She took the opportunity to make a run for it.

Unfortunately, she wasn't quick enough and he was hot on her tail. In the fog of it all, she opened the wrong door. She was trapped in the freaking walk-in closet. She cursed herself for not running down the stairs and to safety.

"You shouldn't have done that, Maddy. Now you have to pay for it." He barely looked human. There was just so much rage erupting from every pore.

She needed to do something. She couldn't just submit and be attacked. She tried to smack him away. He caught her hand with one of his and then punched her with the other. She fell to the ground.

She kicked him again, but he was prepared for the shot this time. He crawled on top of her. He hit her, and she pulled her hands up towards her face so she could protect her head.

She used her legs to knee him and keep some distance between them. She hoped to stop whatever damage she could. She kicked his balls multiple times, but she took so many more shots than she gave. She was getting dizzy too.

The attack kept going on and on. She was getting exhausted, yet nothing stopped Jared. She thought he would kill her.

After one too many hits, everything went black.

Petey

It was a very tough game, losing in OT. His legs were dead from all the ice time and constant defense mode. In addition to the disappointment over the game outcome, Maddy didn't turn up in the family box as he'd hoped. He thought she'd gotten caught up in her studies and lost track of time.

Pulling into the driveway, he realized something awful must have happened. The front door was wide open, and there was no way Maddy would have left it like that.

Lager was pulling into his driveway at the same time, so Petey yelled across the yard. "Hey, can you back me up for a moment?"

"Sure. What's going on?" Lager looked up and then jogged over to his side.

"Not sure, but the door's open and I got a bad feeling." They carefully approached the house on high alert.

It was clear someone had broken into the house, but it didn't seem like anything had been taken. But every photo of him and Maddy had been destroyed and the frames smashed. Most of them had Maddy crossed out, but there were some with both of them scratched out.

Lager said, "I'm calling the police."

Petey nodded. His blood pressure kept rising. This wasn't good. He looked over his shoulder and said, "I think it's her crazy ex. Jared McCollum. She had the Canadian equivalent of a restraining order taken out on him."

Petey needed to find Maddy. He called out her name a few times and got no response. His anxiety continued to rise.

Petey rushed up the stairs. He went to their bedroom first. He could vaguely hear Lager talking in the background, but his voice sounded distant and was drowned out by the beating of his heart.

The bed was still unmade from earlier. He felt so guilty for leaving her there alone. On closer inspection, he noticed that the sheets had been slashed apart. He feared for Maddy big time, especially since she wasn't answering.

He didn't see her anywhere on the bedroom floor, so he looked in the en suite bathroom. Still no Maddy. He was about ready to search the library next when he realized he'd forgotten to check the closet. The moment he opened the closet door, his worst fear was realized.

She was slumped on the floor near the back wall. She looked so tiny and bloody. As Petey rushed towards her, he called to Lager, "Ambulance, NOW!"

Petey knelt behind her. She was so battered. He leaned down and took her pulse, looking for signs of breathing. Thankfully, she had both. But he was at a loss as to where to apply pressure to stop the bleeding. There was just too much blood.

Lager's hand was on Petey's shoulder to get his attention. "I need you to tell me if she's breathing or has a pulse." Petey nodded to indicate that she did, and Lager relayed the information to 911.

Petey was freaked out. Seeing Maddy swollen, bruised, and unconscious was too much.

Lager said, "They're on the way."

Petey didn't know what to do. He wanted to help Maddy, but he was so afraid to touch her. He held her hand and waited for the EMTs to arrive.

He couldn't understand how anyone could do this to her. It was clear she'd been left for dead, and if his suspicions were correct, it was by someone who claimed to love her. He knew he wouldn't dare harm anyone he loved.

After a few moments, Lager said, "I'm going to meet them downstairs."

Petey was left alone feeling helpless. There was literally nothing he could do but wait. It felt like forever before anyone arrived.

A voice he didn't recognize came from next to him. "Sir, we're going to need you to step away from her so we can do our examination."

Petey numbly moved aside. He wanted to stay close. They were asking all sorts of questions about Maddy. He knew most of the answers, but there were some things he wasn't as sure about, like whether she had any medical allergies. He knew her food allergies but not to medicine.

He realized he hadn't added her to his insurance, and he didn't know how it worked with Canadian healthcare. He would take care of her medical bills without any hesitation. He just hoped it wasn't too late.

Once she was strapped on to the gurney, he wanted to go with her to the hospital, but the police officers wouldn't let him. They needed to know all the details of the evening. While he understood why he needed to talk to them, he felt so useless.

Petey rehashed what little he knew. He regretted not installing more security cameras in their home when they first spotted Jared in town. Hell, they should have had a full-blown security system. Maddy only ever agreed to the door camera, so that's all they had. How after he got locked out, they started to keep the door from the garage to the house unlocked but the garage door was down when they came in.

Petey pulled up the camera footage. It was clear that Jared was the one who'd tried to kill Maddy. Petey just hoped the camera footage would be enough. It showed that he broke in, but there was no evidence that he attacked her. Knowing that asshole, he would attempt to say Petey did it to Maddy before going to the game.

God, how could I even think that? Why should I even care what type of defense he would use?

He hoped Maddy would be okay in the end. He answered all the police's questions as well as he could, but he hardly knew anything. Eventually, when it felt like he was repeating what he knew, Petey begged, "Can I please go to the hospital now?"

“Yeah, that should be fine. If you think of anything, you can talk to the officer on protective duty for Madison or call this number here.”

Petey ran to his car, but Lager stopped him in his tracks. It was impressive since Petey had so much more muscle than Lager, but his friend wasn't backing down. “You're *not* driving. Give me your keys.”

Petey knew he was right. He wasn't in any shape to drive to the hospital, so he passed over the keys.



Petey

There'd been no change in Maddy's status since they admitted her. Petey had been beside her battered body praying for her to wake up. They said it was a matter of time at this rate. Her vitals were stable, and the swelling had gone down. He hoped she didn't have any brain damage. There was a significant risk of it, but they wouldn't know anything until she was conscious.

He barely left her side. Thankfully, he was excused from team practices. That way, he could just sit beside her and wait for her to wake up. He was the closest thing to family that Maddy had here in Cleveland.

From the doorway, Petey heard Lager's voice. "We should send in the kid to get him out of there."

He couldn't let Klaus see Maddy like this. He could barely look at Maddy as it was, and at Klaus' age, it would be nightmare-inducing.

He brushed her cheek with his fingers. "Sorry, Mads, I'll be right back."

He rushed out the door to see who was with Lager. Klaus immediately charged towards him, saying, "Uncle Petey," and hugged his legs. Out of instinct, he scooped Klaus up, and Klaus hugged Petey's neck. "How's Maddy?"

In addition to Lager, Scotty, and Corey, Petey was surprised to see his brother and Maddy's mom. It was good that her mom was able to fly out, but Petey couldn't figure out why Lucas was there.

The twin intuition must have been stronger than usual, because Lucas answered the burning question on Petey's mind. "Who do you think piloted the plane to get Mary here?" He immediately went over to hug Petey. Lucas was always trying to use Dad's planes to get in more flight hours. It was probably the quickest way to get to Cleveland.

Petey briefed everyone. “Unfortunately, no change. She’s stable but not awake.” He looked over to Maddy’s mom. He felt guilty for not protecting Maddy. She should never have come to Cleveland under the circumstances, and he should have installed better security. He blurted out to her mom, “I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, Aaron. This wasn’t your fault.”

Corey snickered in the background as per usual whenever people called him Aaron. What was sad was, Corey knew better than anyone else that it was his name and what people from British Columbia always called him.

Then Petey realized that he’d never even thought to call Maddy’s mom or his family. Hell, he wasn’t even sure when he brought his phone to the hospital. All his attention had been on Maddy. He asked, “Who called you guys?”

Lager raised his hand. “I had your back, and before you ask, I didn’t have Maddy’s mom’s number, so I figured that Lucas would know. When he offered to come here, I figured you wouldn’t mind.”

Klaus said, “Uncle Petey, you smell a little bit.” The kid almost looked ashamed to say it, but it also got everyone laughing.

Corey came up and ruffled Klaus’ hair. “Remember, that’s why we wanted to get him out of the room. He needs to get some food and a shower.”

“Oh, right,” Klaus said as he remembered why they were there.

Petey balked at the idea of leaving the hospital. “Maddy hasn’t woken up yet. I don’t want to leave her alone.”

“Why do you think we’re all here?” Lucas said. “Mary and I’ll be here while you get a shower. She won’t even notice.” There was no way that could work. Even if Maddy was super groggy and not thinking straight, she would be able to tell the two of them apart. “Don’t even think about it. Just get a shower.”

Klaus leaned up and said, “Please ...”

It was always so damn hard to say no to that kid on a good day, and this wasn't a good day. Besides, he should be presentable to the love of his life when she woke up. “Maybe I should get one. But I don't have my car here.”

“Again, it's why you got me and Cor here,” Lager said.

“We'll drive you home,” Klaus said confidently.

“Alright.” He had no choice but to agree. Lucas and Maddy's mom went into the room. Petey headed home with Lager and Klaus. It was a set up, but it was probably necessary.

Maddy

Everything hurt, and that was a good thing. Pain meant she was still alive. So that was a win she didn't expect.

She was still really groggy as she felt a finger trace her jawline. Petey said something, but it sounded like the adults in the Snoopy cartoons. She was sure that was due to the drugs helping to heal her.

Eventually, she came to again. Things still hurt, but it wasn't as much and she wasn't so groggy. She could open her eyes.

The first thing she saw was so damn disappointing. It wasn't her love. She croaked out, "What the fuck are you doing here?" Damn, did her throat sound raw. Not her finest moment.

Immediately, her mother said, "Madison, proper young ladies don't use that language."

"Yeah. That's right, Madison," Lucas said with a grin. He always loved when she got scolded. Probably because he was usually the one getting in trouble. "He'll be happy to know that he was right."

Her mom said softly, "I still can't believe you can tell them apart so easily."

It was effortless to tell Lucas and Petey apart. They had so many tells that helped her know which one was which. But she'd heard that all her life, and she tried to shake her head as if to say, "how could you not tell them apart?" She regretted moving. It hurt too much. "Owwww."

"Don't move, honey."

There was a knock on the door. A ton of doctors and nurses came into the room, all the people she didn't want to see. On the plus side, everyone seemed to be pleased with her recovery and left her alone once she answered a bunch of questions.

Once the doctors left, she asked, “Where’s Petey?”

“He needed to get cleaned up. He’s on his way back,” her mom said softly.

That seemed so unlike Petey to leave when she wasn’t awake. He would want to protect her. She asked meekly, “You got him to leave?”

“Well, I had help. Some of his team came to make sure, and we might have used a little bit of a secret weapon,” said Lucas. “Don’t worry. He’s on his way back.”

Without Lucas saying it directly, she knew that the secret weapon was most likely Klaus. Petey had such a soft spot for the little guy. Knowing that Lager didn’t even allow any swearing in the house for Klaus’ sake, it was surprising he would allow the little boy to see the effects of violence.

Another knock on the door. She turned her head, which she regretted due to the pain but was also so damn glad she did. There was the guy she was dying to see. Her one true love. He looked tired and unkempt with a 5 o’clock shadow that almost classified as a beard at this point. She said, “There you are.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.” His eyes were downcast.

At first, she wondered if she looked that bad. Then it dawned on her: the attack wasn’t just an attack on her. It was an attack on his sense of self. He’d failed at protecting her. He wasn’t that perfect defender he always tried to be, and the reason he hadn’t been there was because he was playing. She wanted to reach out to him and touch him again.

He asked, “How are you feeling?”

“I hurt all over.” He stayed in the doorway and watched. She wanted him to come closer. She forced a smile. “Why are you staying all the way over there?”

His posture eased up some, but he didn’t budge from the door. “So, you aren’t upset with me?”

It was so preposterous. He was the last person she would be mad at. He’d literally done nothing wrong. “If you don’t

come in here, I will be.”

Lucas snickered beside her. “Yeah, bro, she’s been asking about you.”

She got that smile from him that she loved. He watched her with passionate eyes without eye-fucking her. It was subdued. It would probably be only a matter of time before Lucas started teasing Petey about not showing enough emotion. Petey came to her and started to play with a loose tress that was hanging by her shoulder.

She looked up at him. He wouldn’t lie to her and would tell her how badly Jared had beaten her up. She hadn’t been allowed to look in a mirror yet. “How bad do I look?”

He grimaced as he rubbed his chin, taking his time to find the perfect words. He kept telling her he had no tells when he played poker with the guys, but she thought he lost more money than he admitted.

She tried to take the pressure off him. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

He just nodded.

The police officer came into the room. It was almost hysterical when they said, “Oh dear God, there are two of you now.” It was clear they hadn’t been standing over her waiting for her to wake up.

It wasn’t like the twins hadn’t heard that most of their lives. She assumed Petey had failed to mention he had a twin brother, let alone warn the police that he was in town. “Well, I hate to do this, but I’m going to ask you gentleman to leave the room for a few minutes.”

The two brothers immediately left. It was nice that her mother didn’t have to leave the room with them.

The police officer sat next to her and took out a clipboard with some paper on it. She half expected it to be a notepad, but it looked more official so it must have been a witness statement. “So, I need to ask: what do you remember of the attack?”

She instantly became embarrassed that her mother was sitting on the other side of her. The last thing she wanted to do was discuss her sex life in front of her mother, but she wasn't going to have much of a choice. She took a calming breath and then realized she didn't have to include everything. "So, I was taking a nap before going to Petey's game."

"Petey is?" the police officer asked.

"Aaron Peterson, my boyfriend. We live together. He always leaves for games a couple hours early. But I was woken up when I felt someone's hands on me. I knew instantly it wasn't Petey, since they were way too rough and seemed to want to hurt me. It was my ex. I tried to get away, and I couldn't. He's stalked me in the past, but I never thought he would hurt me. That's all he wanted to do, though. I thought he was going to kill me."

"Have you had any run-ins with him before where he was violent?"

"Sort of. He grabbed my wrist and left a bruise while I was at my university, but my professor intervened. Then he tried to break into my flat there too. That's when I got the peace bond. But since moving here, nothing. I figured he'd given up until we spotted him around here. But there was no contact until this happened."

"Any threats?"

"None."

"Would Petey do anything in retaliation to your ex?"

"No. He's a protector. If it was in the moment and he saw me getting attacked, maybe. But I was alone when it happened. I couldn't imagine him doing anything bad."

That last question freaked her out. She wished she knew why they would think that about Petey. He was so damn ashamed that anything had even happened to her. What had happened to Jared if they were asking about retaliation? But if Petey saw her hurt, he would barely leave her side. He wouldn't go find Jared.

"Alright. Can you verify that this is correct and sign it?"

She read over the form he handed her. Everything looked correct, and she put her signature on it.

Thankfully, that was all the police officer needed from her. He let her be. She just hoped that Petey would come back to the room soon.



Petey

Lucas and Petey left the room. Petey hated leaving Maddy again, but he understood why. The police needed to know what had happened, and he couldn't be allowed to influence her statement, not that he would even try that.

As they walked out of the room, Lucas said, "Do you want to come help me check in at the hotel?"

Petey shook his head. It was crazy that he'd booked a hotel. His house was always open to his brother. Same thing for Maddy's mom. "Sure, but what's with the hotel?"

"You have enough on your plate. So why not book a couple of hotel rooms? Although, I want to see your house."

It was actually considerate, but Petey was sure Lucas wanted to take a girl or two up to the penthouse. It reminded Petey of the double standard between him and his brother. Although, if it wasn't for the pressure from his dad, he wouldn't have made a move on Maddy and now be in love. Seeing her hurt made him so damn afraid.

As they headed towards his rental car, Lucas said, "Seems like you two are finally on the same page and looking good. I'm glad I gave you guys a nudge. Just don't make me do another one."

"What makes you think we need another nudge?" Petey loved and cherished Maddy. It was why he was so gutted by the attack. He hadn't done enough to protect her. He wanted to find that asshat, but he couldn't interfere with the police's work. Lucas knew he would let the police do their work.

The only thing that could possibly need a nudge was their decision to marry, and he wasn't ready for that. He was in love with Maddy, but marriage needed more than that. They needed to figure out so many things before that step.

"I just have a feeling you might need a push when it's time for marriage. Today is one of the rare moments you've seemed

afraid. It's weird to see you both afraid for you to leave her, yet at the same time, when she was finally awake, you were afraid to be at her side. Why were you so afraid to be with her right now?"

Petey hated how Lucas could read him so well. But he should talk things out with him. "I feel like I should have done more. I knew Jared was an asshole, and when he showed up in Cleveland, I knew he was going to do something. But I didn't trust my gut and invest in a security system, because Maddy didn't want it. Add in the fact that I wanted to tell her how it nearly killed me to see her like that. I love that girl, you know?"

Lucas looked like he was going to shake Petey up. "You're an idiot. You're acting like it's hard, and it's not. She wants you. She asked for you the moment she woke up. Who cares that you didn't get more security set up? She didn't. She just wanted to see you again. You need to stop being such a twat with her. It's not that hard."

Petey scoffed. "Have you figured out how not to be a twat with girls yet?"

"Oh, I have a system. But this is where you and me are built differently. I make sure I'm not a twat in bed. But you want more than a good fuck. You just need to romance her."

"Yeah, that's completely not helpful." Petey scolded himself for expecting more from Lucas. He knew that if he romanced Maddy, things would be fine. But although he'd already wooed her at this stage, he'd also failed her. How did you romance someone you'd failed?

"Oh, you have this. Just tell her how you feel. You don't need to know everything now."

Petey wanted to strangle his brother for being so frustrating. But then he realized something. In his heart, he didn't want to lose Maddy. He wanted to marry her and have a future with her. That meant getting engaged again, but for real this time.

“Okay,” said Petey. “You might be right, but even that isn’t so simple. It’s romance city around here. I have to figure out a way to outdo all the freaking couples and make Maddy feel like she’s special.”

“What are you on about?” Lucas just looked over at him like he was crazy.

“Well, when Scotty proposed to Alice, he did this whole thing at the rink. It was a surprise party tailor made for Alice, since that’s where they met. They got married with the Cup that summer. And you know how Corey proposed to Jenna. Even Lager went all out when he wooed Leah back.”

“Wait, you’re thinking about properly proposing to her, aren’t you?” Lucas said in shock. For someone threatening to keep nudging Petey into a deeper relationship with Maddy, he was acting clueless. You’d think he’d understand that Petey wanted Maddy forever.

“Of course, I was thinking about a proper proposal for a while now. Seeing her so badly beaten, I thought I was going to lose her, and I absolutely can’t deal with the idea of not spending the rest of my life with her. So I want to do it just right for her and keep up with the guys’ romance standards.”

“There’s your problem. You need to do what feels right to you. It doesn’t need to be anything crazy or over the top. Neither of you are like that on any given day. I always thought you would do something small. Probably get down on one knee after you just did it.”

That was actually comforting. He was right. It should be a low-key affair. He shouldn’t pressure her with a big fancy night. Although, even he was too much of a romantic to propose after sex.

Petey asked the one burning question he had. “Are you still cool if I use Grandma’s ring to propose to her?”

It was an agreement the two of them had. Lucas was the one who technically inherited her jewelry and more of her estate. That was her way of trying to keep things fairly even between them, since Petey was slated to get a larger stake in

their dad's estate and company. Petey had always wanted a family and kids. He also loved the ring because it was art deco but fairly understated because, when his grandfather purchased it, they didn't have much money yet. So Lucas offered Petey her engagement ring if he found the right girl.

"I'll have Dad overnight it if you promise me you'll tell her how you feel."

"Thanks. It's a deal. I'll tell Maddy how I feel soon. But if you could get the ring sent over, that would be amazing."

Maddy

Maddy was finally feeling better and released from the hospital. It helped knowing that she wouldn't have to worry about Jared ever again. The police had finally found his body. Apparently, he'd decided to kill himself sometime after the attack.

She couldn't bear to look at her face in the mirror. She had been told there would be no lasting scarring, but the bruising and swelling was bad. She didn't know how Petey could bear to look at her, yet he was always watching her.

He was practically smothering her. The only time he left her alone was when he was at the rink. He even tried to bring her to his practices the first few days, but thankfully, his coach put a stop to that idea. Closed practice meant closed to everyone. She needed a few hours to herself without feeling like a caged animal anyway.

Petey was doing it out of love. He wanted her to be happy and healthy and protected. He would settle down as time went on.

She baked a sticky toffee loaf cake while he was at practice. It would be a nice treat for the two of them. She pulled out the loaf cake when she heard the beep of the new door alarm that meant Petey was home.

He said, "Damn, that smells good." He came in and hugged her as she flipped the cake upside down to release it onto the cooling rack. She leaned up to kiss the scruff on his chin, and he reached for the loaf.

She smacked his hand. "Don't you dare. I just pulled it out of the oven. You are going to burn yourself."

"Fine," he said with his hand up to indicate that he wouldn't steal any of the bread. He kissed her one more time. "Are you up for a small hike?"

"Sure."

They hadn't gone for a hike in ages. They used to hike all the time in British Columbia but hadn't had the time in Cleveland yet, despite it being one of her favorite pastimes. It didn't matter if it was still pretty chilly. That's what layers were for.

They went for the small hike. At first, she thought he might have been up to something since he never asked her to go on a hike, but instead, it seemed like he just wanted to spend time with her. It was times like this that made her wonder if he would actually propose to her for real in a setting that was more true to them without any family pressure.



Petey

It was overtime in game five of the Stanley Cup playoffs against Anaheim. If they won, the series would be complete and he'd have his second cup. If they lost, there would be an opportunity to close it in the next game. He seriously wanted to close it out now, though.

Maddy was out of the hospital and would be going to Vancouver after tonight. He wished she was coming with them to Anaheim instead, but her mom wanted her to come home. Quite frankly, he wanted to win the game for her.

She'd brought so much joy to his season by living with him. Seeing her attacked made him feel so damn small since he couldn't do much to protect her. More than a couple of times, he'd looked up to the family box where all the WAGs and kids sat. He loved knowing she was there, and he smiled up at her as he headed to get set for the latest face off after Anaheim iced the puck.

He felt a bump from behind.

Over his shoulder, Scotty said, "Get behind me." Then he looked towards Hunter and pointed to the side. "You get over there."

Petey nodded. It wasn't their usual set up, but he knew better than to question Scotty. Every once in a while, he would swap their pairing because he was feeling something. Petey got set for the puck drop.

The ref dropped the puck. Scotty won the face off and flipped the puck his way. Petey went for the slapper. It had the perfect angle and snuck by the goalie.

So seldom did they get the goal right off the face off, but when it worked, it was always awesome. But it was a whole different level when it happened in overtime for the Stanley Cup. He got head taps all around.

When Scotty came up to Petey, he put both hands on Petey's helmet and placed his forehead against it. "Way to get

MVP tonight.”

That hadn't even crossed his mind yet, but Scotty was right. He'd had a strong series throughout, but after getting the game winner, they would be giving him that award. There was one other feather he wanted in his cap, though.

They were all skating, laughing, and taking turns lifting up the cup. The party environment was expected. A few of them, including himself, kept getting pulled aside by the commentators to give on-air interviews.

Eventually, they made their way to the locker rooms where the party continued with beer and champagne. Corey made a big show of celebrating and spraying alcohol everywhere but didn't drink any. It was something he'd done before when his stomach was acting up but he didn't want people to realize he wasn't feeling good.

People started to migrate away from the locker rooms. He went to the family lounge to see Maddy. He hoped she wasn't too bored, but it seemed like she'd made some friends with the other WAGs.

A grin broke out on Maddy's face when she saw him come into the room, and he rushed towards her.

He nipped at her lips and said, “Ready to go?”

She nodded. Their fingers interlaced as they headed out of the arena.

Once inside their SUV, he popped the lid to the center console to pull out a ring box. Lucas had sent the ring over after he returned home. Petey was going to wait until they got back to Vancouver to propose to her, but he couldn't wait any longer. He wanted her to be his girl formally and forever.

Turning to her, he said, “I know we did the big proposal already as a show for my dad. But that was when we were going to break everything off after he took the pressure off me. Then I fell so completely for you. You showed me how utterly sweet things can be when I have everything. You gave me the world when you decided to give me some love. I was so scared that I might have lost you, and I don't want to ever lose you. I

was going to do something a bit grander back home, but I can't wait. Will you do me the honor of being my bride?"

Teardrops dripped from the corner of her eyes. He instinctively used his calloused thumbs to wipe them away. Thankfully, her eyes were bright and her head bobbed up and down.

It was perfect. Exactly what their first proposal should have been. Just the two of them. No fancy party. They didn't need to impress anyone but themselves.

Maddy kissed him. He gradually slipped the ring onto her delicate finger. Thankfully, it fit with no issues this time.

Maddy

Petey and Maddy were heading back to Vancouver. It had been such a whirlwind lately. They'd set up a home together, which seemed crazy enough. Add in the Stanley Cup win, and it had been hectic. Between the team-only celebrations, the parade, and the fan atmosphere, it was just a week-long party.

They sat next to each other in first class but were able to spread out.

She was surprised to see that Smithy was on the flight with them. She'd noticed the two of them had been training a lot together out on the ice, although Smithy didn't always join Petey's off-ice outings. She thought they might be trying to train together off-season, but she didn't ask Petey about it.

She laid her head on Petey's shoulder.

He leaned down. "What are you thinking about?"

"Hmmm." She looked up into his eyes.

"You look so peaceful, but I know you. Your mind is always going. What are you thinking about?"

"What it might be like going home."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He seemed concerned. If they weren't trapped in their airplane seats, she was sure he would have tried to place her in a position that allowed him to really look into her eyes.

"Well, going home ... it's a lot. I know you're coming to my apartment instead of living in the manor. But it's going to be a lot."

"Is it, though?" He brushed his hand along her jawline, then kissed her forehead. "We'll both be interning. I get to train my ass off in between the hours at the firm. It'll be fine."

"Why are you so calm? If anything, you have double the work now that it's the off-season."

“Cause every summer is a lot of work. But I got you and Smithy with me. The guys are coming out for the Cup fest. I’m just glad that I get to celebrate with you.”

She forced a smile because he was right. Other than moving in together, there wasn’t any additional pressure.

Petey’s big strong arms wrapped around her. He whispered, “Sorry. What’s got you so worried for real? I’ll do my best to protect you.”

“I know you will. It’s more being around our family as a couple. It’s still weird to me. I don’t want to let you down.”

The two of them hadn’t had the time to really digest the fact that they were going back to where the stalking all began. While Jared would never be an issue again, since he was gone, she was left with the idea of not being good enough. Now they’d actually be a couple in front of their families. She tried to push aside how she was afraid of not being able to live up to their expectations.

He kissed her temple one more time. “There’s literally nothing to worry about. My family is thrilled that we’re engaged. You said your mom was thrilled. Plus, for the first time in years, your mom won’t be slapping my hand with a wooden spoon anytime I try to cook.”

She laughed. It was so ridiculous that his last point was one of the bright spots of going home. She teased back, “Well, I promise I will smack you with more than a spoon if you try to burn down the house again.”

He laughed. They both knew he was still an awful cook. Despite trying to take lessons from Scotty, he was still a menace in the kitchen.

EPILOGUE



Maddy

The last year had been so awesome it flew by. They settled into life as husband and wife without any issues. Petey still hadn't eased up on the security measures after Jared. Then again, now that they were expecting, it was unlikely he would ease up for a while. But at least he gave her more space and wasn't always checking to see if she's okay.

She waited for Petey to come back from practice so they could go visit Dr. Leah. She was lying down on the couch when she heard the alarm go off, signaling that someone was home. She called out, "Hey, Petey."

"Hey, hon." He came over to her and kissed her on the forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted, but at least I haven't thrown up today."

His finger traced her jawline, and he stared into her eyes. He hated that she had morning sickness. If there was a way he could protect her from it, she was sure he would try to. "I'm sorry, babe." He kissed her and smiled. "You really didn't throw up today."

She laughed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your breath. It's not coated with Listerine for a change."

She giggled. It was true. She'd used a lot of Listerine and toothpaste lately, not that it always did good things to her stomach, but it was better than having horrid breath after throwing up.

He held out a hand, and she grabbed it so she could quickly get off the couch. "So, ready for your appointment?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

He kissed her on the forehead. It was a short drive to the hospital. The two of them stayed silent on the car ride over, and he rubbed her hand.

They were pulled into a patient room the moment they checked in. First, she had to give a urine sample. They wanted to check her levels and make sure everything was progressing as it should.

After peeing in the cup, she sat on the patient bed while Petey stood to her side. He kept rubbing her back with his right hand. Tilting her head his way, she said, “You know, you could sit down.”

“I’m good.” It was ridiculous for him to stand, but she wasn’t going to make him sit if he didn’t want to. It was nice that he was trying to keep her calm as they waited for Dr. Leah to come into the room.

There was a quick knock on the door before Dr. Leah Koenig opened it up. It was nice to know the doctor so well. “Hi, you two. How’s it going?”

“She’s been pretty tired and had a fair amount of morning sickness,” Petey supplied.

Maddy looked up at him to try to tell him to shut up. She was perfectly capable of telling Dr. Leah about her symptoms. He just rubbed her back. He wasn’t going to stop.

“That’s pretty normal at this stage of the game, unfortunately. So, let’s see if we can hear the heartbeat.”

Maddy nodded. She was excited at the prospect of hearing the heartbeat of their kid.

There was a subtle look of concern on Dr. Leah’s face.

“Everything okay?” asked Maddy.

“Yeah. Do you know if twins run in either of your families?” It was a reminder that Leah never got to meet Lucas when he came out after the attack. Lucas kept a low profile, and Lager was a lot better at keeping secrets than people gave him credit for.

Everything went silent. While she knew there was a chance they’d have twins, she wasn’t prepared to hear the news. She looked up towards Petey and teased him, “I thought you said it skips a generation.”

He kissed her forehead, but he looked damn happy at the prospect of twins. “I actually have a twin brother. Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Yup. I’m pretty sure I can hear two separate heartbeats. We need to wait until the first ultrasound to know for sure.”

She asked Dr. Leah, “Is everything good aside from the fact that you think we will be having two babies?”

“Yup. You guys got this. Just take a few deep breaths, keep up with your prenatal vitamins, and I’ll see you guys at the next appointment, if not sooner.” She walked out the door, leaving the two of them alone in the room.

“Come on, let’s get checked out of here,” said Petey. “I’ll treat you to some lunch.”

They finished up at the clinic without a word.

As they hopped into Petey’s SUV, he said, “Come on, Mads, you are killing me with the silence.”

“What?”

“Is it okay that we are going to have twins?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

He kissed her on the lips with a lot of passion and held her close to him. “‘Cause you’re so quiet. I don’t know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m all over the place. I’m both excited that they’ll have someone to grow up with but also so overwhelmed. I mean, seriously. You are on the road all the time, and then we both work for your dad. It’s going to be a lot on me.”

“Shh. We have so much time to plan for everything. I’ll make sure you’re not alone. I promise.” He kissed her one more time. “I love you so much, and I wouldn’t want to do this with anyone but you.”

Those were the words she needed to hear. While she didn’t say it, she didn’t want to be with anyone but him. He was her protector. Her best friend. Her lover. She knew they could do it.

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Sound captain Scotty Wheiland and his wife Alice are spending their first Christmas together, and excited to be expecting their first baby. Teammate Cory Corso and his fiancé Jenna are celebrating their first holiday together as an engaged couple. Only winger Lager is alone, trying to pick up the pieces after his marriage fell apart.

So it seemed like a great idea for Lager to host a holiday celebration, and include both couples, as well as teammates Petey and Klaus. There was good food, good friends and a great time to be had by all, until an unexpected surprise changes Christmas for everyone. This will be a party, and a holiday, no one will forget!

So put on your favorite jersey, get cozy, and settle in for what's sure to be your new favorite hockey series—holiday style.

If you love binge reading hockey romance, grab this collection today!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kat Obie is a passionate hockey fan. She plays, she watches, she dreams of hockey so she started to write hockey romances.